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Final Report on Board Gaming micro study

## **Introduction to board games**

People are generally familiar with board games as a relic from childhood, but it is also a hobby that extends much later in life. People who believe board gaming is only for kids can be introduced to the game K2, which is about being a mountain climber trying to climb K2 without dying in the process. It definitely is not a theme for kids. Board gaming presents puzzles which require adult minds to solve. I do not know any young children who are able to solve problems of prisoner's dilemma or managing a country's resources. And that is not to say that board gaming isn't for children at all. Everyone has a place in board gaming, regardless of how much time they have, or how much money they have, or what their interests are. Getting into board gaming is just a matter of finding the right game to be an introduction to the hobby. One of the participants in this study said it is similar to getting someone interested in reading. It just takes the right book for people to want to want more interesting books. This paper discusses some further background of the hobby, then discuss how board gamers go about choosing a game to play. Even if people say they'll play whatever, people take into account the attributes of games and the people they are playing with when deciding what game to play.

## **Writings on board games**

### *Golden Age of Board Gaming by Quintin Smith*

A profession that has become very popular in the board game community following the surge of production of games is the board game reviewer. Board games are expensive, generally costing around \$50 for a standard size box. Reviewers are important members of the community because they provide opinions on games, helping the community decide what games they want to purchase. One of the best board game reviewing websites is [shutupandsitdown.com](http://shutupandsitdown.com). One of the founders, Quintin Smith, did a talk at a games convention on the topic of the "Golden Age of Board Gaming". He discusses the rise of board games and how board games are bringing people together to socialize, as well as the demand for the continuation of board games improving. He cites the difference of "American Style" and "European Style" (Euro) games. Euro games in the past have been very dense in strategy have very interesting game mechanics, but do not have a very interesting theme. American games, on the other hand, are very interesting in theme but are not very interesting as puzzles to figure out. A specific case that describes the merging of American and Euro games is the game *Twilight Imperium*. This game started as more of a Euro game, having very interesting strategy and player interaction, but the part was quite strange and there wasn't very much story to go along with it. In later iterations of the game, it is said to have gained some American influence because of the improving artwork as well as the stories that are included in the game. *Twilight Imperium* is a game where players represent an alien race, and their goal is to colonize other parts of the galaxy through warfare and negotiation. The most American aspect of the game is the backstory that comes with each alien race, describing what their home is

like and the types of things their people value. The merging of these two styles is creating better games because players are better allowed to become immersed in the universe of the game.

### *Gaming for Understanding by Brenda Romero*

Brenda Romero is a prolific board game and video game designer. Her board games are not critically acclaimed as being “good” games, but the point of her games are to create a conversation about historical and social issues. In her talk, she discusses her game that she designed for her daughter about the middle passage, illuminating the atrocities of the slave trade. Her most famous game is called “Trains” and is about the holocaust. It isn’t marketed as a holocaust game, but players are given the instructions to move as many people from one point to another in the shortest amount of time. It becomes a very uncomfortable experience when players start to do awful things so that they can fit a few more people onto the trains. Creating understanding of our past can really help in looking forward to the future, especially in the recent political climate.

### **The board gaming community**

Participating in the hobby of board gaming requires community because it is not a hobby that can be done alone. While there are games that are meant for only one player, it is generally necessary to find a group of people in order to play board games. For this reason, the people who participate in the hobby are generally kind people who are welcoming. If a person is not very friendly, people are not going to want to let them participate any longer. One way to get around the need to find people in real life is through board gaming online. Some board game companies have converted their board games into phone and computer apps to allow people to play with people all over the world. One of the most popular online board gaming websites is [boardgamearena.net](http://boardgamearena.net). This starts to blur the lines of what it means to be a board game versus a video game.

### **Planning a board game night**

The hobby of board gaming is an extreme time commitment, considering that games that take around an hour are considered short games. Even more than the play time, hobbyists have to consider how much time it takes to set up/put away the game as well as teach the game to any people who are unfamiliar. Because of these factors, board game nights are best planned out instead of randomly started. The people who are the collectors of games are the most likely to plan the game nights. Planning game nights can be extremely laid back, only sending out a text message to individual people saying “board games” and giving a time and location. Some more formal ways to plan game nights are by sending invitations to Facebook events or creating groups on websites like [meetup.com](http://meetup.com). These are both ways to plan events and include new people outside of usual friend or gaming groups. With bigger events, like the ones the Board Games @ UW club puts on, a bit more planning is involved. One person is in charge of planning on a day, one person is in charge of inviting people, and one person is in charge of reserving a room. It is a process that requires a group of people working together, and it creates a welcoming environment for people who are looking forward to participating in the hobby. The room reservation process can sometimes be the most difficult because clubs want to find a room that will accommodate board gaming the best. This is further elaborated in the next section.

## Where to board game

While it is easiest to play board games while sitting at a table, board games are just as easily played on the floor or even in a car if there aren't too many components. An ideal place for board game meetups is an isolated room with lots of tables and lots of chairs. When board gaming takes place at conventions such as Board Game Geek Con, the gaming room is filled with giant rows of tables for people to sit and play games at. The atmosphere can be quite excited in gatherings like this, just because of the large number of people attending. In smaller meetups, where two or three games are being played, the atmosphere can also be excited if the games being played require a lot of socialization or are funny. Some games require intense thought, so not very much talking happens. This usually occurs in the middle of the day or at the beginning of a game night. It is ideal to be isolated because it is easiest to think about difficult games when there is not much background noise, and board gamers do not like to disturb the people around them when playing more social games.

## Financial commitment

Board gaming has traditionally been a large piece of cardboard that comes out of a box that has been purchased, and then people interact with the piece of cardboard. This includes games such as Monopoly, Clue, and Risk. Board games in recent times has also spread to include games without a central board, but all players have game materials to interact with. People have also started to look at games, then make their own versions of it. There is a game called Skull, where the only game components are circles of cardboard where one side is identical, and the other side either has a rose or a skull. People can make their own version of this game by using pieces of paper or drink coasters. Financially, this hobby can be very expensive or very cheap, depending on how frugal players want to be.

## Categorizing games to decide which game to play

Board gamers tend to categorize board games that they come across. These categories can be by genre, time commitment, or whether they're a classic or a favorite. Board game players tend to recognize the same separate categories, but prioritize different categories. One of the study participants prioritized genre, specifically preferring to play strategy games, and one of the participants prioritized the amount of time available when choosing a game to play. The category of game is the first level of deciding on a game to play, meaning that these categories are the first things people think of when they hear "What do you want to play?"

### *Genres*

Board games can be described in terms of how players interact with the game and other players. The types described by the interview participants are social (a lot of talking with other players), deceptive/lying (deceiving and lying to other players), and strategic (taking time to think out a strategy for future moves) games. A couple games which are considered social games by board gamers are Codenames and One Night Ultimate Werewolf. Both of these games hinge on people talking with each other to try to solve a problem. In Codenames, teams are trying to figure out what their team leader is trying to

communicate to them. Similarly, in One Night Ultimate Werewolf, players are trying to figure out who is on the villager team and who is one the werewolf team. Through communicating about these secret roles, players gain more information about what is happening in the game. Social games are really beneficial because they can very often allow large numbers of people to play one game at the same time. They are also a good way for people to communicate even if they do not already know each other. As one of the interviewees said, “You feel like you’ve known them for a while when though most of the time you do not know most of them”. Social are great to play with a group of people who would rather spend time chatting as opposed to thinking in-depth about how to win a game.

One category that fits in with social games are deception games. Deception games are often very social because players are lying to each other about information that is not available to everyone in the game. Sometimes deception games are referred to “social deception games”. Deception games that were brought up by interviewees are Coup, Masquerade, and Resistance/The Resistance: Avalon. In all of these games, players lie about what role they have been assigned in the game, and it is the duty of the other players to figure out who is lying and who is telling the truth. One of the interviewers said that they liked playing social deception games because it is new to them and it is lying without consequences. These types of games have also been used to deal with players who tend to cheat and lie in games. In this situation, cheating is an integral part of the game, so it doesn’t diminish the experiences of other board gamers.

One common attribute of a board game is whether it requires a large amount of strategy. Strategy games are great for people who like things to be planned out, rather than being random. One of the interviewees has a very organized way of scheduling their weeks, so that can be reflected in the fact that they like to play strategic games where they might have to plan out all the moves they are going to make in a game ahead of time. Another interviewee said that his mother is really interested in puzzles, so she was very integral in introducing him to strategic games where it is really a puzzle of the most optimal moves one can make to win the game. Games with high amount of strategy often take only up to five people and usually take a lot more time to play than the social games. Playing some strategy games require time to be set aside specifically to play the game. Not everyone who is a board gamer likes games really heavy in strategy, though, as seen by the interviewee who is more a fan of social games.

### *Time Commitment*

Speaking to time commitment of board games in general, one of the interviewees said that if board games required a set amount of time every week to be allowed to participate, they would not be able to join. A benefit to board games is the fact that some do not take a long time to play, so people who come late to board game meetups do not have to worry about completely missing out on participation.

The time it takes to play a game is another way board game players categorize games. Players generally want to play games that can finish in the time frame they have, taking into account how long it takes to set up the game and explain the instructions if necessary. Sometimes people decide that they want to play multiple rounds of a shorter

game rather than play a long game once. As mentioned earlier, the social games usually have a shorter game time, and the heavily strategic games can last much longer. Risk, which is a game frequently referenced by the interviewees, can take anywhere from one to eight hours, depending on how aggressive the players strategies are.

This time categorization can affect when game meetups are scheduled. During field work, I observed board game meetups that occurred in the evening after classes. For this reason, the board games played were shorter. Participants were uncertain of how long they would want to stay, so they didn't commit to longer games. Interviewees talked about late night or party meetups where the sorter games are generally used. If drinking is going to be involved in this type of meetup, it is definitely better to play shorter games. Especially long games are going to be scheduled, rather than an on the fly kind of game. They are also likely to be scheduled in the middle of the day, rather than in the evening when people may feel too tired to play a long game. When impromptu board game meetups are scheduled, it is best to have a variety of games with different lengths, so the group can decide on a game that will work with how much time they have.

#### *Favorites vs. Classics*

Even though there are hundreds of board games, it is easy to have a favorite board game. People often become really excited by a theme, genre, or mechanics in a game and they like to return to it as often as possible. People who are very logical in their day to day life often have heavy, strategic games as their favorite. In contrast, people who play board games as a way to hang out with friends will more likely have a social game as their favorite. After playing a game multiple times, it can still feel like a new experience when it is played with a different group of people. One of the benefits of playing old favorites is the fact that a person can explain the game, rather than needing to read through a manual to learn how to play the game.

Favorites rarely overlap with board games people consider to be classics. Some examples of classics are Monopoly and Clue. Both of these games have a "roll and move" mechanism, which people are generally familiar with. Most modern games do not have this mechanic because it creates a lot of chance in the game. The benefit of these modern games, however, is to make a bridge to modern board games for people who are being introduced to the hobby. One game that is in the middle of classic and old favorite is Catan. A lot of people are introduced to this game as a gateway to the larger world of modern board games. Catan (previously named Settlers of Catan) is an economic, trading-based board game which incorporates the random element of dice and the strategy of acquiring and trading goods. It is a game that is easy to learn and leads people into more complex games.

#### **Considering the people in the gaming group to decide which game to play**

Considering the people one plays board game with is a second level of how to choose a game. This is when the response to "What do you want to play?" is "Oh, I'll play whatever." Not all types of games will work with all types of people, so when there is a set group of people who are going to be playing a game, it is best to consider different attributes of the people to play with. This comes into account when a group is already set. This may be because it is a gaming group that has been playing together regularly, or

maybe it is just three or four people who are not currently playing a game at a larger meetup.

### *Recruiting new people*

It is important to bring people into the hobby because it is interesting to play games with different types of people. The keys to bringing people into the board game hobby are to be inviting and be able to share knowledge. Being inviting can be in the form of welcoming people to a board game and leaving space in games to allow other people to join in on the game. The Board Game Club at UW does this well because officers are available to talk to people who stumble upon meetings and be informative. As an interview participant stated about other clubs, it is easy to spot out who is new because they look like they do not know what they are doing. Often in clubs, the active members assume that the new people will figure out what to do on their own. In contrast, the Board Game Club makes sure to invite new people in and explain any game a person wants to play rather than making them read the manual.

Being welcoming also means to ask people what kinds of games they like to play or their experience with board gaming. This is where the sharing of knowledge comes in. As a board game hobbyist plays more games, they make connections between games, noting similarities in attributes like mechanics. For example, if someone said that they like games like Dominion, an experienced hobbyist can recommend other deck building games like Arctic Scavengers or Star Realms. Asking a person what kind of games they like is a way to choose a game because it is welcoming to play a game the new person will enjoy.

It is also important to identify if a person is not enjoying a game. Some people are not competitive, so they will not do as well in a competitive game, or they might be quiet, so they will just be told what to do in a cooperative game. Part of being welcoming is not to force board games onto people. If a new person really enjoys board games and wants to continue, that is great, but it is also okay if they do not want to continue playing board games. Similar to introduce someone to reading, it sometimes takes finding the right game to get a person interested in playing board games.

### *The people to choose*

In some situations, hobbyists are able to choose the people they play games with. These are usually the people who have a board game collection. The benefit to this is that they can choose a group of people who will enjoy a particular game. A board game collector may have a group of people he plays heavy strategic games with and a completely different group of people who he plays the social and party games with. If a person knows they like playing games with a certain group of people, they may choose to play a certain type of game to fit the group of people they have chosen.

People like to have fun with their friends, so people are going to often play board games with their friends. Even if a person is playing with complete strangers, “You feel like you’ve known them for a while...” People often play board games with their friends because it is easier to organize an event with the people who are contacted often

anyways. Another group of people to select from is family. Most people are introduced to board gaming by their parents or friends of parents. While most people play with their family when they begin board gaming, they're an option to play with later as well. It is easy to be selective in who to play with out of friends and family. A competitive player will want to invite their more competitive family members and friends to play a game. A social player will want to invite their funny and social friends and family.

Choosing people to play with changes a bit when in a group setting, such as the Board Game Club meetings. While sometimes people bring their friend to play with, there is usually more mixing of people who do not often play games together. One way to pick a group is to see where there is a spot to join. Another way is to join a group that is having fun. This can be seen through laughing, smiling and general chatter.

### *The people to avoid*

When a person has the opportunity to choose great people to have in a gaming group, they also have to consider who they do not want to include in their group. Some people are more troublesome to play board games with, and it does not mean that they're a bad person, but it is usually more fun or easier to avoid playing games with these people. Occasionally, there are problem players where the only solution is to avoid playing with them altogether. This includes people who hold a grudge or are unforgiving. These people will take previous games into account when starting a new game. This may mean targeting their aggression at one player in particular because they won the last game. These players may also let the events in a game affect personal relationships outside of the game. While board gamers joke that Risk ends friendships, it shouldn't actually do that. Feelings about a board game should end once the box closes.

There are some solutions when in a set group of people and one of those people is troublesome. This may be because when gaming with a friend group, it is rude and difficult to exclude one person because they are not fun to play games with. This may also be because when three or four people are available at the same time in a board game meetup, one of them may not be very fun to play with and they are impossible to avoid. The most common issue is when people do not play to the atmosphere of the game. Some examples of this are players who are over-competitive during games with high amounts of luck and players who do not pay attention during strategic games. A solution to this is identifying these people and then selecting a game accordingly. Some people are also likely to forget things that happen throughout the course of the game. There is a similar solution to this, by choosing a short game like Codenames, so they do not have to remember very much.

Some players are more actively troublesome. Some players are frequent cheaters, which is difficult to deal with. A somewhat aggressive solution to this is to make them sit out from the game until they decide they can play without cheating. Another solution, which is a lot more difficult to accomplish, is choose a game where all cheating is within the rules of the game. Dealing with problematic players may be the only case where considering the people playing comes before choosing a genre or theme. In other situations, people think about what kind of games they like to play and how much time is available first before thinking about the group of people they are playing with.

## Conclusion and further research

Board gaming is becoming a more popular and well-known hobby, even though it was once a hobby for the “hardcore nerds”. Board gaming is extremely varied and can be used to discuss difficult social topics or can just be a way to have fun after a hard day’s work. With hundreds of games being published each month, the most difficult part of the board gaming hobby can be deciding on what to play. People tend to play what they know they like, but are also willing to try new things if they know they like the genre of if it fits the amount of time they have available to play the game. More experienced players can also decide on games that will be good for the group of people they play with. Heavy strategy games are not going to work with a group of people who just want to chat, and the opposite is also true. Sometimes with problematic players, it is necessary to choose games just so that they don’t ruin the experience of other players.

In further research on this topic, I would like to do some contextual inquiry at a location where I could observe people choosing from a large library of games. This might be at a board game café, where I could observe people hired to have an intimate knowledge of games make recommendations to people, or this could be at a convention. I know events such as the Penny Arcade Expo and Board Game Geek Con have extremely large collections and I could get a lot of data from observing how people walk through all the games and decide on what to play.

I am also still interested in the aspect of acquiring knowledge. People who have been part of board gaming for a while are familiar with a large number of board game titles even though they may have not played them. How do people go about acquiring knowledge? Is it an intentional pursuit, or do people passively learn things while being part of the board gaming community? This is a topic I found some data on, but it was not nearly enough to write a full report on.