People@Meeple:
"it's a community thing"

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Boardgame hobbyists value the ability to control and configure the setting of play. In particular, they are concerned with the levels of light, temperature, and ambient noise. Moreover, they seek to control and customize their own games, both to protect the components from damage and to personalize the play experience, as well as to create optimal play environments within their own homes (Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith 2016).

In this paper, we examine the apparent contradiction in these hobbyists' attendance at a public boardgaming convention which fails to deliver the control and protection that they value. In doing so, we highlight the importance of participation in a community of players and hobbyists (Stebbins 2015), and identify key factors which drive that participation. Our contribution is an understanding of why and how the experience of attending an event supersedes or aligns with players' broader practices and enjoyment of play.

This paper follows on from an analysis of interview data about why hobbyist boardgamers travel to boardgaming events (Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith 2019). As expected, we found that hobbyists attend these events with the intention of *playing* games. However, we also found another category of events for which *attendance* is a goal in itself. These are particularly the larger, hobby-defining events such as *Spiel* in Germany or *Gen Con* in the USA. This aligns with similar research into media and sports tourism, which identifies attendance at events or places as a form of pilgrimage; it can represent a "defining moment" in a boardgamer's engagement with their hobby (Weed and Bull 2009, 95, Green and Jones 2005, 177, Griffith 2013, 2, Connell 2012, Parmett 2016). For others, visiting a place may indicate the depth of their engagement with a particular game, as was the case for a 'gacha' gamer who travelled from Japan to the UK to attempt to obtain a premium King Arthur character by visiting the King's grave (Lax and Mackenzie 2019).

This research explores the experience of attending *Meeplecon*, a small annual boardgame convention in Melbourne, Australia. Meeplecon attracts around 400 attendees, most of whom have attended previously. All three researchers attended Meeplecon on at least one day. One is a regular attendee at boardgaming events in Melbourne, interstate and internationally. Another has attended a number of gaming

events across tabletop, videogames, and miniatures gaming, more recently for research rather than for recreation. The third had not previously attended a gaming convention. This range of experiences allowed us to observe the event as both an insider and an (informed) outsider, providing valuable perspective.

This research comprised two distinct activities: observation and interviews. As well as observing the convention and taking photographs to document it, we interviewed 22 attendees (11M/11F, aged 28-64). Although there were non-binary attendees at the convention, none chose to participate in our interviews.

Through thematic analysis of both the interview data and our field notes and observations (Braun and Clarke 2006), we identified eight key themes within the data. **Playing games** was clearly important to all participants but we identified subthemes which included trying new games, playing long games, and sharing games with others. One participant specifically attended the convention to play a 12-hour game with friends; although they might have been more comfortable at home, they chose to come to the convention because "it might have ended in seven, eight hours and some people stayed afterwards". Further, though, participants talked about the importance of **setting time aside** for gaming – dedicating the weekend (or a single day) to games, without interference from mundane everyday tasks like laundry and childcare.

As we expected, the **community** of gamers was important. We were struck by the diversity of the group and the sense of welcome that it offered. Meeplecon appeared to attract a fairly even balance between men and women, with several non-binary attendees. Ages ranged from very young to over 60. In interviews, this was often realised as a concern with the **trajectories** of a gaming life and its intersections with other elements of the interviewee's life. People talked about meeting existing friends at boardgaming events but also about making new friends through their participation. Several attendees had attended boardgaming events with the explicit goal of finding new friends.

We were interested in the **game library** arrangements. Meeplecon offers a formal library of games, sourced from the organising club's collection and events' and members' libraries. Attendees can freely borrow games; there is no charge, and no formal borrowing process. The exception is two shelves of games which belong to club members. Their signs request that anyone borrowing one of their games send them a text message on a provided number. Many other attendees brought a bag of games, which they placed to the side of the room, with the expectation that others would borrow games from it. Several interviewees described deliberate selection of new or unusual games to bring, to share with the community.

Figure 1 The Meeplecon Game Library

Trust was another significant theme, particularly as it related to the library and to the ad-hoc sharing of games from personal collections. Even sales of snack food and drinks were managed on a trust system, with purchasers dropping coins into a jar as payment for selected items.
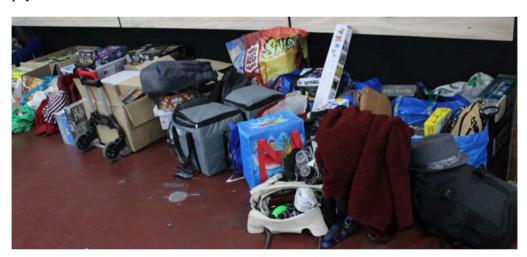

Figure 2 An array of games along one side of the playing room, stored in bags (some custom) and boxes. We also noted several open handbags and backpacks, often with valuable items inside, left at the side of the room.

We observed several examples of **personalisation and accessories** (Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith 2016). Two of our interviewees brought along tablecloths that they used for gaming, and one had a supply of low-value foreign coins that they used for currency in games. Finally, several people were observed to **quantify their plays** (Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith 2017); one attendee logged not only his own plays but all plays of his games.

This research presents a rich qualitative discussion of the behaviour of attendees at a small boardgame convention in Melbourne, Australia. It highlights the deep sense of community and commitment to the hobby that participants feel (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 12, Woods 2012, 129, Pearce and Artemesia 2011, 129), as well as the essential trust that underlies both organisation of and participation in such events. As

participation in the boardgaming hobby grows, it will be important to observe how these are maintained and enhanced.

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