A Space for Everyone: Gender Demographics and Board Gamers

Johnathan Harrington

Hong Kong Baptist University
224 Waterloo Rd, Kowloon Tong
john-h@hkbu.edu.hk

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Board game demographic research has found a very strong male skew in their participation. Famously, Woods' (2007) pioneering study found a 4% female participation rate. Since then, the numbers have become less skewed, but still male skewed, with different surveys consistently hovering around the 25% mark (Konieczny, 2017; Booth, 2021; Cross et. al, 2023).

However, I argue that having online first surveys gathered through BoardGameGeek (BGG), an online board gaming forum, or through board game publisher emails, skews results towards *hobbyists* rather than an average board game player. Physical surveys, such as Barbosa's study of a Portuguese board game café, had found a 56%/44% male / female split (Barbosa, 2021), which indicates a more diverse crowd in cafés than online surveys might indicate.

In this paper, I will present my data on 120 player surveys, and 40 board game café owner surveys to analyse how in-person results differ from online surveys simply because they're sampling a different type of board game player. Based on these results, I posit that gender demographics in board game interest is not inherently male-oriented, but rather becomes this way through segregated spaces and increased personal investment in the hobby.

Background and Methodology

Over a one-year period, we ran two sets of surveys.

1. **Owner Surveys:** The first survey was handed to board game café owners in Hong Kong and Taiwan, with 40 different café owners filling it in – amongst other questions, owners were asked about their customers' gender skew in percentage values.

2. **Player Surveys:** The second questionnaire had a printed QR-code physically placed in board game cafés across Hong Kong, asking visitors to not only share their personal demographics, but also to self-classify their board game expertise (from newbie to hardcore player), amongst further questions. We managed to gather 120 results across 12 different board game cafés.

Both café owners and participants were *heavily* encouraged to not share the survey online to get a better understanding of physical board game spaces' demographics. Moreover, despite the survey period ending, some cafés have not removed their QR codes, leading to a slow drip-feed of late results. Finally, owner surveys had an 88% completion rate, while player surveys had a 75% completion rate – only completed surveys have been counted. Finally, while "other" was presented as a gender option for player surveys, no one chose this.

Results

In the player survey, 81% of responses came from male participants, which gives credence to previous surveys' results on gender discrepancy across board game players. However, in the owner surveys, there was only a 68.3% male incidence which is lower than all previously conducted surveys. I argue that this discrepancy between player surveys and owner surveys happens because of two reasons: space reputation & personal belonging.

- **Space Reputation:** There was a high standard deviation of 16% across the owner surveys. More precisely, 25% of the shops reported a 50% or lower male ratio, while 27.5% of shops reported an 80% or higher male ratio, with the rest lying somewhere in between. Some spaces are simply male spaces, and female players somehow feel unwelcome - further supporting this, female players only recorded themselves in 3 of the 12 cafés represented in this data (while men were represented in all of them).

  It is not clear whether spaces start off or later become male-exclusive because of socialisation, vibes or interests. Trammell (2023) had argued for networked privilege, where certain spaces become accessible (and welcoming) through knowing people already within the network. Meanwhile, Barbosa (2021) argued that space layout, including seating and lighting, might influence player demographics.

- **Personal Belonging:** In the earlier cited surveys, we noted that the male skew emerges in hobbyist spaces such as on online forums including BGG. If 25% of physical spaces have no skew (or even a female skew), then this indicates that board game spaces might become skewed because of hobbyism, rather than inherent qualities within board games.

  Our data somewhat confirms this – while casual players are equally represented, with 29% for both male and female players, mid-core players skew male (49% to 42%), and hardcore players skew even more male (15% to 4%). As board games become more of a character trait, then the spaces become more unwelcoming and start shed their female participation.

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