

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MODERN BOARD GAMES

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ABSTRACT

Board games have been relevant throughout history, as cultural artifacts with a significant role in shaping social imaginaries and providing a unique social experience. Because of this, their production is affected by the same symbolic discrimination that affects any human cultural production. This paper presents a gender perspective study of modern board games of international renown published in Spain, in Spanish language. The aim is to discern whether they constitute a cultural element that perpetuates sexist dynamics and stereotypes. Preliminary results show that, despite some recent advances, their production process is still far away from being a truly inclusive and egalitarian space.

Keywords

Feminism, Game Studies, Cultural Studies, analog games, board games

INTRODUCTION

Games are legitimate forms of human communication and expression, of cultural relevance (Flanagan, 2024), and serve us to understand the historical moment and the society in which they were created, since they are a reflection of their values and conventions. Board games have always been historically relevant, humans have played them for thousands of years. The most ancient known game is The Royal Game of Ur, dated 4.500 years ago (Comas, 2023). Games have been present throughout the history of mankind in different cultures, and from their beginnings they are understood as a pleasurable activity and means of socialization, as well as rituals and the training of life skills (Marín, 2018)

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Board games are a cultural medium, and their production is affected by the same symbolic discrimination that affects any human cultural production, since it is conveyed through codes and symbols necessary for life in society, such as language and image (Verdú and Briones, 2016). That is, although playing is a universal phenomenon, the game experience is intrinsically located in the place and society where it is played and, therefore, the analysis of games allows drawing conclusions about the cultural conventions of the moment and place of their creation. Board games are played in groups, therefore mostly imply physical and social interactions between the players (Martínez et al, 2023). In recent times, board games have regained their momentum as a cultural phenomenon of growing importance, both globally and locally. The sharp expansion of its production and its increasingly prominent presence, in domestic, educational, and social spaces, demonstrate their relevance as a cultural artifact. This evolution contrasts with the lack of academic attention they have received compared to other cultural media.

This study focuses on modern board games, which are those created at the end of the 20th century and during the 21st century, characterized by having rules, being carried out with material components within a certain time and space and not depending on physical skills (Catalan, 2023). Their most important differentiating element is that they have a recognized authorship and are made for commercial purposes (Sousa & Bernardo, 2019). Another characteristic is that they target an audience with specific interests, unlike other mass-market products (Scoats & Maloney, 2024). Woods (2012) proposes the name "*hobby games*", in order to differentiate them from classic games and those intended for the mass market, and within this category he identifies four major genres: wargames, role-playing games, collectible card games, and Eurogames. Parlett (2018) highlights the importance of people and game dynamics, considering that the point of interest of modern board games is their gradual shift of emphasis away from the board and towards the circle of the player. There are three milestones in the 20th century considered key to understanding modern board games: the publication of Monopoly, the work of Sid Sackson, one of the great game creators of the mid-twentieth century consider the founding father of the German style game (Wallis, 2022, Woods 2012), and the game Catan (Comas, 2023)

Board games are not neutral artifacts; they are cultural productions that reflect and model social imaginaries through their theme, narrative, visual design, mechanics and rules. Gerbner's (1998) theory of cultivation states that media (TV, specifically) configures social imaginaries and values. Recent studies have shown that different media, not only TV, such as video games and music, play an important role in the way people see the world. There are findings that media contents are related to the formation of social reality beliefs (Lai et al. 2015)

This theory provides a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing representation in a board game, and its implications (Oliviander, 2019). From this perspective, board games can be considered a "gender technology" (De Lauretis, 1989), that is, one of the discursive techniques and strategies by

which gender is built. This influence that games exert is given to the whole process, when they are created, when they are played, and also when analyzed (Flanagan, 2024). Generally speaking, games can also be an ideal space to change points of view and break patriarchal hegemonies (Chess, 2020), as it is said about language, which can be considered a mirror of reality, or as a tool of the system (Lledó, 2005)

This work focuses on the material aspects of board games, since Begy (2017) argues that games can be cultural memory objectifications, analyzing them with a gender perspective to answer the following question: *“Are board games today a cultural mechanism that serves to perpetuate patriarchal imaginaries?”*. For this purpose, three axes are addressed: who creates them, whom they represent, and to whom they are addressed, framed with the following specific research questions:

- RQ1: Is the creation of board games a mostly male sector?
- RQ2: Do board games mostly represent male figures?
- RQ3: Are female figures sexualized or stereotyped?
- RQ4: Are board games (components and rules) written in inclusive language?

To answer these questions, 68 board games of international renown, published in Spain in the Spanish language, were selected for analysis according to sales, reputation, and popularity criteria. The composition of the creation team and the presence of female and male figures in the game components was assessed using content analysis methodology, with the help of a data collection sheet that facilitated systematization. The study of games published in Spanish, being a gendered language among other qualities, provided additional insights on language inclusivity during the publication process (e.g. rule book translation) and the current state of the Spanish board game sector and its social and cultural importance. This vision can be used to extrapolate or compare publishing practices in other countries.

This paper is structured as follows. First, a brief state of the art on academic studies on board games and feminism is presented. Then, the methodology section details the selection criteria of the games to be analyzed and the details on how data was collected and processed. The results and discussion sections try to provide an answer to the research questions. Finally, the main findings are summarized in the conclusions section, proving some future lines of research.

STATE OF ART

Board games have become an increasingly present element in our modern society. The global board games market was valued at \$11.88 billion in 2022 and, as of 2024, more than 150,000 board games and related titles are listed on BoardGameGeek¹ (BGG), the leading online community on the topic (Talbot, 2024). In the specific case of Spain, it is still a young sector, but with a clear growing trend. In 2019, more than 1,300 games were published, leading

¹ <https://boardgamegeek.com>

to a growth of 7% in sales in 2023, a number above the average in the global sector. Despite this resurgence of the interest in board games, their role within Game Studies is still considered symbolic (Torner et al, 2016; Sousa & Bernardo, 2019), but it is slowly being incorporated into its corpus of research in recent years (Dhamelia & Dalvi, 2024, Deramond & Zabban, 2024, Calleja, 2022, Altice, 2019, Eladhari, 2018).

When framing board games in the specific context of feminist studies, the definition by Huntemann (2012) is worth considering: *"Feminist game studies examines how gender, and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, etc., is produced, represented, consumed and practiced in and through digital games"*. It must be noted that this approach focuses on video games, where most of the studies with a gender perspective can be found, covering different areas, such as studies on the community, analysis of games as cultural artifacts, or as a perpetrator of sexist structures (Amores, 2023, Chess, 2020, Gray et al, 2018, Amores, 2018). However, it could be argued that the principles also apply to board games.

Research that explores the role of gender within the culture of board games is still a minority field (Scoats & Malony, 2024). However, some cases do exist, such as the identification of recurring patterns of female underrepresentation and stereotyping, the most relevant studies being by Olivander (2019) and Pobuda (2018, 2020, 2022). Generally speaking, there is a predominance of white cis men of working age, and the rest of social groups are underrepresented, both on the covers and the rules and components. Regarding the composition of the authoring teams, the results from the successive studies by Pobuda suggest that white male designers have a much higher predominance than that corresponding to the demographics of the population of the United States and Canada.

Pobuda also studied the importance of representativeness in board games for the group of women, non-binary people and BIPOC people (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and concluded that the limited, recursive and derivative nature of the game design process, together with the lack of diversity in creative dynamics, and the presence of less inclusive play spaces, constitute both visible and invisible barriers for all of them when participating in the field of board games. This absence of representation is not only reduced to the images or the language used, but also extends to the themes and mechanics prevalent in these games. This aspect is summarized with the term *"Eurocentric lore"*, a narrative framework focused on Eurocentric perspectives that excludes other cultural and social visions.

More recent to the time of this writing, a study by Scoats and Maloney (2024) explored the culture of board play from the perspective of female players. The results show that it is a space that is still perceived as associated with *geek masculinity*², with a minor female presence. Authors suggest that there are several barriers hindering the participation of women (e.g. reduced

² Geek masculinity describes a technologically-fused form of masculine subjectivity that requires, for its coherence, the maintenance of gendered stereotypes about male technological skill and female ineptitude (Murray, 1993)

levels of experience, awareness, and integration). However, the study identifies that there is a change, and that new, more inclusive cultures are being built, challenging this stereotype.

To sum up, even when the board game industry is thriving in creativity and numbers, the role of board game feminist studies is still minor within the Game Studies at large, at least compared to the field of video games, thus presenting many interesting research opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a mixed methodology that integrates quantitative data collection and qualitative content analysis methods to examine the connection between modern board games and gender dynamics. As for the treatment of figures and language, content analysis was used, that is, the study of content with reference to the meanings, contexts and intentions contained in messages (Prasad, 2008), which can be used with a wide variety of data sources, including textual and images, as is done here (Stemler, 2015).

The main objective of the study was to determine whether the subjects of study, board games, reinforce sexist imaginaries or, on the contrary, favor a more inclusive vision of society. An explanation of criteria used for the selection of the sample, the analysis dimensions, and the processing process of the collected data, follows.

Games Selection

The selection of games pursued the goal of analyzing quality games that are known by a large part of the recreational community object of study (games published in Spain), and therefore, present in the collective imagination. In order to guarantee its representativeness and relevance, three main selection criteria were established: Sales, Prestige, and Popularity.

Sales: Games with a high volume of sales were considered representative of the predominant playful imaginary, since they have a significant presence in homes and social spaces, beyond those known by the fans of the enthusiast tabletop game (TTG) hobbyists (Kankainen, 2023). To cover a wide and heterogeneous audience, sales information was requested in different types of both online and physical stores with presence in different cities and aimed at varied targets, finally data was collected that correspond to the ten best-selling games in 73 physical stores located in Spain and 4 online in the period 2018-2023 in Spain. Based on this criteria, 25 games were selected.

Prestige: International awards, such as the “*As d’Or*” and the “*Spiel des Jahres*”, are considered indicators of quality and innovation within the sector. The winning games serve as benchmarks, not only to assess innovations at the mechanical level, but also on topics and social sensitivities. For this reason, these two awards were selected, in their two most important categories in the period encompassing the years 2014-2023

Popularity: The recreational community offers key indicators on the most

valued and commented games through the public online resource BoardGameGeek (BGG), which includes search for information and social space (Kankainen, 2023), and the largest and most updated board game database, fed by thousands of people (professional or not) from the recreational world. In 2023, it had 49 million visitors with 2.1 billion page views. The 20 board games with the most votes were included in the BGG ranking, drawn in December 2023.

Based on these three criteria, a sample of 68 board games were analyzed. They are enumerated in Annex 1 (Table 5). Out of this total, 7 games were originally made in Spanish, and the rest are from other countries around the world, translated to Spanish.

Analysis dimensions

The collection and analysis of data was structured according to three dimensions: creation, representativity, and language.

Creation: This dimension examines the composition of creative authorship and illustration teams to identify possible gender inequalities. Gender information was collected based on the information that appears in games, on BGG and other sources, such as social networks. Three categories were considered: women, men and non-binary, which were determined on the basis of name, photograph and pronouns used in BGG or in other personal resources.

Representativity: This dimension examines the human figures present in the boxes (cover and sides), components (e.g. cards and boards) and rule books, encoding them as masculine, feminine or non-binary / unidentified. In addition, it was evaluated whether these figures showed stereotyped characteristics, associated with traditional gender roles, or sexualized representations that reinforce an objectified view of the body.

Language: This dimension examines whether the language used in both the rule books and game components take into account inclusive communication. This is understood as a form of communication, both textual and visual, that seeks that all human groups feel equally represented, and that such representation is dignified (Moyano, 2023). It is worth remarking that the analyzed games were written in Spanish, which is a language with grammatical gender. Therefore, this information was encoded based on the following categories,

- *Generic model:* In those cases where the masculine is used as a formula to encompass everyone. There are many voices (Moyano, 2023, Martín, 2021, Pera, 2021) that consider that it hides women in discourse, and favors androcentric thinking.
- *Double up:* Including both grammatical genders in the same sentence to encompass both men and women, for instance, always saying “*traductor o traductora*” (translator) , “*chico o chica*” (boy or girl). Therefore, referring to people or professions without using a preferred a gender, by using a neutral form or alternating their use.

This strategy is often considered a feminist victory, although many voices question it because it leaves out non-binary people.

- *Indirect inclusive (non-binary) language*: The different strategies to eliminate gender marks by choosing words that do not have gender inflection (i.e. epicene language) and/or using alternative structures without gender mark (imperative, relative pronouns...)
- *Generic feminine*: Using the female form as an unmarked gender.
- *Direct non-binary language*: The use of neomorphs -e in Spanish, creating a new grammatical genre that can be considered neutral.

It is important to highlight that some of the selected games were originally published in Spanish, whereas others were translated from other languages. This aspect was taken into account, since it may have ideological implications, especially when discussing the translation of a specific work in a specific period of time (Seva, 2020). The issue of inclusive language generates a debate of its own where there are voices that defend that this look must be incorporated in order not to harm, considering that language must be a tool to empower, not a cage (Martínez, 2020).

Data collection and processing

First, the authorship and illustration data were systematically coded by cross-verifying the information available in the game boxes with the BoardGameGeek (BGG) database. Subsequently, to decide on gender category, an analysis of pictures and personal details (pronouns) was conducted. To gather data on representativeness, an exhaustive count was conducted of all the images present on game boxes, components, and manuals, which were subsequently categorized into themes of sexualization or stereotyping. For the game rules, a systematic reading was performed with a dual objective: identifying the type of language used and examining the representation of example individuals. To determine gender associations, the names included in the examples were cross-referenced with databases to identify the gender most commonly linked to each name.

Once the data collection was complete, an analysis was conducted following a structured methodological approach. This process combined numerical aggregation, categorical classification, and cross-tabulation techniques to derive meaningful insights from the data. The initial step involved numerical aggregation, wherein raw data was processed to obtain counts for individual variables. This procedure facilitated a quantitative understanding of the dataset and ensured completeness and consistency by addressing missing or duplicated entries. Subsequently, the variables were categorized into the predefined groups based on their attributes. This categorization allowed for the transformation of raw numerical data into proportions that represented the distribution of responses across various categories. Finally, cross-tabulation was employed to explore the relationships between selected categorical variables. This step aimed to identify patterns and correlations that were not evident in isolation. Cross-tabulation enabled a comparative analysis between categories, offering insights into potential interactions or dependencies among variables. Quantitative analyses were conducted using statistical software, ensuring the reliability and reproducibility of the results.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study, that can help provide an answer to the research questions, later, in the discussion section. Results are presented according to the three previously stated dimensions of the study. The data analysis is articulated around the three axes mentioned above: creation, representation and target audience (language and people who appear in the rules' examples).

Creation: authorship and illustration

The first topic to analyze is creation, focusing on two aspects: the authorship of games, and illustration.

Authorship

This section refers specifically to who designs the games. The total number of designers who worked on all the chosen games was 91, of which, 5 are women, compared to 86 men. No non-binary person was identified in the process. Figure 1 presents the distribution by years of authors according to gender:

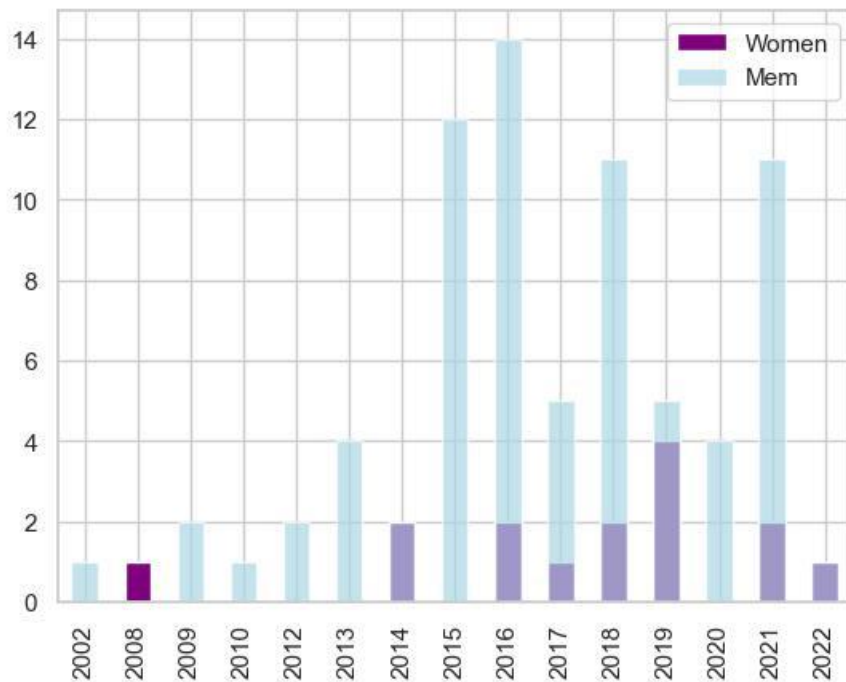


Figure 1: Number of women and men who have designed the games by year

A more detailed view of team composition is shown in Table 1. Only 7.35% of the games analyzed were created by women. It is observed that only in one of the games, Wingspan, a woman, Elizabeth Hargrave (2019), is the only author. A relevant fact is that women are co-authors in 80% of the games in which they participate, while men are co-authors in only 26.86% of the

games. There is only one woman (1.47%) in contrast with of 49 men (72.06%) who are solo creators of a game.

	Games	%
Single Woman	1	1,47%
Single Man	49	72,06
Single Woman and Men	4	5,88
Men only team	14	20,59
Women only team	0	0

Table 1: Single and co-authorship scenarios, by gender.

Illustration

Of the 68 games, data about illustrators was available about 66, only. In total, 97 illustrators were identified, of which 19 are women, just below 20%, compared to 77 men, representing 79.38% of illustrators.

Reviewing the percentage and composition of the illustrator teams, it is observed that only 7 of the games (11.76% of the cases) are credited to a female only team. The revision of individual versus collective illustration offers great differences depending on gender. 44 of the 67 (65.67%) have been illustrated by a single man, while as discussed above, only 6 illustrators (8.96%) have worked alone.

Representation: who appears in the games

The boxes, components and rules of the game were analyzed to establish the percentage of people (men/women/non-binary or unidentified) that appear, as well as their treatment, and whether there is stereotyping and/or sexualization (see subsection "Dimensions of analysis").

As for the boxes, the cover and sides, were examined. It is important to highlight that, during this process, the presence of humane figures was taken into consideration without evaluating their importance, that is, neither the size of the figures nor the placement / preeminence of them. Assessing the boxes of the 68 games, images of people were found in 43 of them (63.24%), totaling 292 human figures, with 79 corresponding to women (26.96%) and 193 (65.87) to men. 21 (7.17%) corresponded to unspecified images (i.e. the gender could not be univocally concluded).

Analysing the type of illustrations by gender in the games, it can be found that there is an imbalance, as women appear in 62.79% of the games where there are human figures, and in 39.71% of all the games analysed. In Contrast, percentages are higher in the case of men, where male figures were

found in more than 90% of the games with human figures, and in 57.35% of the games.

Regarding the treatment they receive, two variables were considered: stereotyping and sexualization (see Table 2).

	Total	Stereotyped	%	Sexualized	%
Women	79	31	39,24	8	10,13
Men	193	33	17,10	0	0

Table 2 : Treatment of human figures by gender: stereotypes and sexualization

As an example, observing the box covers, it is possible to find two games with a central and unique female figure: Love Letter (2012), and Virus! Halloween (2020), both shown in Figure 2. In contrast, 10 covers that were identified with a sole central male figure.



Figure 2: Box covers of the games “Love Letter” (left) and “Virus! Halloween” (right).

Game Components

Components can be of various types, such as cards, boards and character tiles. 858 human figures were identified in 45 games out of the chosen 68. Results indicate that most figures are male, 651 (72.25%), compared to 201 (23.42%) that correspond to women, and 6 (0,69%) to figures without a clearly defined gender. Regarding the treatment of these figures, it was observed that most are not stereotyped. Actually, this indicator higher for male figures, in practically 21% of the games, compared to 12.5% for women, As for sexualization, a lower amount of cases was identified, but a higher degree of incidence was detected for women (9.45%), compared to men (0.31%), as is displayed in Table 3.

	Total	Stereotyped	%	Sexualized	%
Women	201	25	12,44	19	9,45
Men	651	136	20,89		0,31
NB/NI	6				

Table 3: Treatment of human figures in the components by gender: stereotypes and sexualization.

It is worth highlighting the game Challengers (2022) as a good example of positive representativeness in its components. It has a good degree of diversity, not only at gender level, but also of body types (for example, there is a lifeguard with a non-normative body, and a person in a wheelchair). In addition, it breaks stereotypes, since there are component showing characters such as a merman, a male make-up artist, a woman sailor, etc (see Figure 3)



Figure 3: Examples of cards with body diversity in Challengers (title translation from left to right: Lifeguard, Blacksmith, Merman and Superheroine)

Rules

Human figures were present in 27 of the games (39.7%). As in the case of boxes and components, a male majority in human figures were found, although in a lower percentage. In this case, more than half, 58.33%, whereas women represent 31.67% of human figures. In 10% of the occasions, figures with unmarked gender were found.

Language: to whom games are addressed

The analysis of the language was carried out taking into account two different categories: the components of the games, and the rules. Language was codified in the categories explained in the methodology section: generic masculine, double up, indirect non-binary language, generic feminine and direct non-binary language.

In the case of the components, such as cards or boards, 32 games include text in them. The results indicate that in the vast majority of them, 23 of the 32 (71.88%), the generic male was used. In 7 games, there was a doubling up

on genders, instead of the generic masculine only. In 2 cases, indirect forms without gender marking were used.

As far as the rules are concerned, all 68 games were analyzed using their versions published in Spanish, even though the vast majority (61 out of 68) were created in different countries, in different languages, and later translated. Therefore, it must be taken into account that the text in the Spanish version may not always perfectly coincide with the original version. The same coding system was used as in the case of the components. Results show that all games except one (98.5%) use the generic masculine.

Both in the case of components and rules, a trend can be observed in the sense that the proportion of women increased as more recent games were analyzed, although it is not possible to talk about significant differences at the statistical level.

Throughout the analysis, proportional, and non-absolute measurements were used to avoid the impact of non-uniformity in the game sample over the years. In other words, what is important is to analyze the proportion of data, not its absolute value, since what is evaluated is the proportion of women, not the absolute number. In this way, it is possible to avoid a sampling bias produced because the number of games analyzed each year is not homogeneous.

One aspect that conditions the results is the subject of translation, considering that nearly 90% of the games were not originally created in Spanish language, and translated elements may differ from their original version. An example that illustrates the problem of using masculine as a generic when translating to Spanish is found in the game *Wingspan* (Hargrave, 2019), a game significant at the inclusion level, but not at the language level. In the Spanish version, the manual uses generic male form, and at various times a clarification appears under the title "*Nota del diseñador*" ("Note from the designer", in male form). This is an obvious case of misgendering (and mistranslation), as the designer of the game, as mentioned above, is a woman, Elizabeth Hargrave. Therefore, using the male form not only hides female players, but also the designer herself.

DISCUSSION

After presenting the results, the initial research questions are reviewed in their original order, with the aim of providing a response to them.

RQ1: Is the creation of board games a mostly male sector?

The answer is overwhelmingly affirmative, since this is the section of the study with the strongest results. Only 5% of game authors are female (5 authors out of 91). These results are low, although slightly higher than the one presented by Pobuda in her studies (2020, 2022): 2.4% of female creators in the 200 BGG top games, and 3.3% of female creators in the 400 BGG top games, respectively. It therefore seems that there is an upward

trend in the presence of female authors, although more studies are needed to be able to confirm this and to draw conclusions about it.

As for the illustration of games, the results also show a low participation of women (20%), although higher than those of authorship. In games where the illustration teams are totally female, it can be observed that the percentage is just over 11%. It has not been analyzed whether the fact that there are women in the creative teams impacts other factors, because the sample of games where women intervene is too small.

In the entire sample analyzed a single totally female team was found: Wingspan, a game designed by Elizabeth Hargrave and illustrated by Ana Maria Martinez Jaramillo, Natalia Rojas and Beth Sobel. This game is considered, by its editor, responsible for the increase in women's participation in board games (Booth, 2021)

Therefore, the first finding is that creative teams tend to have an overwhelmingly male composition. Once the situation is identified, it is important to pinpoint the reasons for this situation, and on the basis of them, to develop strategies to reverse the situation, since female authorship is one of the key issues to increase representativeness. To explain the current context, it's necessary to understand that this is a multi-causal situation. Game creator Gil Hova uses the metaphor of invisible strings to explain why, despite game design not being an openly hostile sector for women, they work under patriarchal dynamics, often not visible, that prevent many women from enjoying the hobby (Booth, 2021).

First, modern board games have been commercialized and marketed to a very specific target population: young boys (Magalhães, 2023). This has consequences in terms of low presence in games, as confirmed by the data in this study. One conclusive aspect is that, in order to design you need to spend time playing games, and personal time is a scarce commodity for women. Specifically 97 minutes less daily, that are also characterized by being a contaminated time (e.g. leisure time with the presence of dependent children), implying a fragmentation of it (Closingap, 2019). Women would play more board games if they had the time, but they often don't have the time, nor the energy at the end of a long day, to engage with particularly complex or lengthy board games (Pobuda, 2022). Additionally, designing games requires a lot of time: ideation, prototyping and playtest. Once this process is completed, the production and distribution phase begins, where you it is necessary to find publishers, or think about distribution channels. Finally, sometimes, playful spaces are found to be unsafe spaces for women, who are underestimated, ignored or misgendered (Hargrave 2020)

In conclusion, a lack of time, fragmented and contaminated, is incompatible with game sessions; this, in addition to patriarchal dynamics in the professional game sector, leave out women of this playful creation wheel: play, network, and explore ideas to teach and test. Combining these aspects to structural aspects we jump to the same inference as Magalhães's: *"it is less surprising that so few women and non-binary people have designed games than the fact that some have done so at all"*. (Magalhães, 2023).

These are important issues to take into account, since diversifying the creator collective in board games will not only bring more diversity in terms of themes and types of games, but also expand the range of young people who will show interest in this world, by seeing similar people, according to Booth (2021).

RQ2: Do board games mostly represent male figures?

Results show that the answer is affirmative, women are a minority in all the categories analyzed: boxes, components, and rules. The presence of male figures in game boxes is more than double that of the female ones, and in the case of the components, the findings are higher, being masculine practically in 3 of every 4 human images with which a player interacts in the course of a game. The greatest amount of female presence was found in the rules, 32% of the total number of human figures represented.

These results are important, since representation is key at all times, not only at the moment of play. The box is the public image, the cover letter, that reaches the largest audience. It is the first impression of the game, even before playing it. Boxes are exposed in the stores, physical or online, and in news when games are announced, or reviewed. In the case of the components, they are present throughout the game time, and have a direct importance during the course of the game, affecting the dynamics of the player. They are continuously in the field of view, decisions have to be made, and sometimes, a personality must be adopted based on them. The rules become an essential component of board games, explaining not only the basic mechanics, but all aspects to consider to play, allowing the clarification of doubts or exceptional situations during the game. However, games have historically been made with a male audience in mind (Magalhães, 2023).

Games make up our imagination, as do the rest of the cultural and social day to day experiences. Games help understand the world and create new ones, therefore, if most of the characters in these universes are male, this means that the world is designed to be occupied by men.

RQ3: Are female figures sexualized and/or stereotyped?

To answer this question it is necessary to differentiate which element of the game is being referred to: box, physical components, or rules. In the former case, it can be found that almost four out of ten female figures are stereotyped (39.24%) whereas, in the case of men, it is in less than half of the cases than women's (17.20%). In the images of the rules, this proportion of twice as many stereotypical female figures is repeated, although with lower absolute numbers (15.8% of women vs 7.14% of men). As for the components, interestingly, the ratio is practically reversed, with almost double the number of stereotyped men than women (20.89% vs 12.24%).

As for the sexualization of women, similar percentages can be observed, around 10% in both boxes and components, whereas in the rules it's reduced to only 2,63%. The presence of sexualized male figures is anecdotal, since

only find a minimum number of figures can be found in components (0.31%) and none in the other two.

The percentage of male stereotyped figures is explained by the fact that many of these characters represent powerful figures, such as men in warlike attitudes, or power roles linked to stereotyped expressions of strength. The presence of stereotyped male and female figures, but more sexualized female ratios, responds to the same idea that Díez (2009) points in the world of video games: games are made by men, thus responding to their desires and interests.

RQ4: Are board games (components and rules) written in inclusive language?

The results would lean towards providing a negative answer. Games published in Spanish tend to rely on the masculine form in a majority of cases as a generic, contributing to the invisibilisation of women and non-binary people. It is also found in almost 72% of the game components, and in practically all regulations (with a single exception). As previously stated, some of the games were originally written in Spanish, but most were translated from different languages. Translation is often performed by bilingual people who are fond of board games, but, according to Mujica and Llancuvi (2021), this is a subject that has not been studied in depth.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis that there is no canon of board games, there is a general consensus within the gaming community regarding which games can be considered central and referential. A pattern consistent with other fields is observed, characterised by the pervasive influence of androcentrism. This paper aims to incorporate a critical look at the current situation of board games with regard to gender. This is an assertion that can be applied in general when referring to the creation process (design, illustration), or specifically to the Spanish-speaking sphere, when referring to the use of gendered language.

Given the answers to the research questions proposed at the start of this paper, it can be concluded that the creation of board games is still an overwhelming male sector, board games continue to depict mainly male characters, gender stereotypes are more prevalent in female characters and sexualised almost exclusively in them, and the terminology employed in board games in spanish version is characterised by a lack of inclusivity.

In light of the findings presented in response to the research questions, it can be posited that further investigation, addressing the limitations of the present study and extending the scope to encompass aspects not addressed in this one, would be beneficial. An area that has yet to be adequately addressed in the existing literature is the impact of the inclusion of women in the creative process as a potential factor influencing female representation. The absence of a deliberate focus on the gender of the creator within the selection process, results in a paucity of data pertaining to women, thereby

rendering any conclusions drawn from the sample untenable. To obtain a more representative and robust data set, it is imperative to conduct a study that incorporates the creator's gender in the selection sample. Only then will it be feasible to address the aforementioned questions with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

A comprehensive analysis is necessary. Where should we initiate? We can approach this from the perspectives of players, creators, and scholars. One potential strategy is to focus on players, based on the argument that increasing the number of women who engage in play will eventually lead to more women in game design. However, this approach entails two significant risks. Firstly, there are arguments emphasizing the necessity of diversity among authors, themes, and games to attract a broader audience. Secondly, this strategy might be used as an excuse to avoid addressing the issue directly, relying instead on a hypothetical spontaneous resolution over time. Consequently, it is essential to address all aspects in unison, rather than assuming a spontaneous and inevitable progression.

One potential avenue of research is to apply Barbara Zecchi's feminist perspective in cinema, *Gynocine* (2013), to the gaming field. Her approach proposes expanding the scope of its analysis by incorporating games created by individuals other than women. One notable example is *The Battle of Versailles* (2023) by Ferran Renalias and Eloi Pujadas, which has introduced new topics to the discussion. The game vindicates the figure of the first black model, or *Rebel Princess* (2023), created by an all-male team that subverts traditional gender roles. In this occasion, the objective of the princesses is to avoid the princes and their marriage proposals, challenging the traditional premise of the princess narrative. These games must be played and interpreted with a feminist perspective. All products created by women and non-binary people are subject to analysis, regardless of their intentionality and gender awareness, because they are creating from a place marked by their situation in the hetero-normative patriarchal world. The gaze must be opened and go beyond the authors. In this study, the importance of creators and illustrators has been analyzed, but it is necessary to expand the focus, and in the field of industry, to look at the composition of companies, and development teams and others. And look at playful outreach and clubs. And also in the academy. It is only through this approach that a comprehensive understanding of the playful world can be achieved with an intersectional gender perspective.

What initiatives can be undertaken within the academic community? Research with an intersectional feminist perspective. In this study, the focus is on gender, but, of course, it is necessary to address this issue from more prisms. Without a look that includes race and class, we have a picture, not only incomplete and unfair, but surely wrong.

To achieve an impact on society, work must go beyond the purely academic environment and provoke debates and actions throughout the community. A first step involves bringing these results and debates to a wide audience, to become one of the levers of change in the sector and change the rules of the game so that it stops being an asymmetric where women start with fewer

resources and play with rules that limit their moves. Reinterpreting the words of Shira Chess (2020), *“we have to play with a feminist perspective and we have to live with feminism with a playful attitude”*.

ANNEX 1

Table 5: Table of games analyzed by year, selection criteria and language
(all titles as written in the Spanish language version).

Game	Year	Selection criteria	Spanish /Translated
7 Wonders	2013	BGG	Translated
7 Wonders Duel	2016	BGG & Sales	Translated
7 wonders: Architects	2021	BGG	Translated
Agrícola	2009	BGG	Translated
Akrópolis	2022	Awards	Translated
Alta Tensión	2016	BGG	Translated
Ark nova	2021	Awards	Translated
Arre Unicornio	2018	BGG	Spanish
Aventureros al Tren	2015	BGG	Translated
Aventureros al Tren Europa	2013	BGG	Translated
Azul	2018	BGG & Awards	Translated
BRUXELLES 1893	2013	Awards	Translated
Camel Up	2015	Awards	Translated
Carcassonne	2014	BGG	Translated
Cascadia	2021	Awards	Translated
Catan	2015	BGG	Translated
Challengers!	2022	Awards	Translated
Código Secreto	2015	BGG, Awards & Sales	Translated
Colt Express	2016	Awards	Translated
Concept	2015	Awards	Translated
Coup + Reforma	2016	Sales	Translated
Cubirds	2018	Sales	Translated
Detective	2018	Sales	Translated
Dixit	2008	Sales	Translated
Dobble	2009	Sales	Translated
Dominion	2009	BGG	Translated
Dune imperium	2021	Awards	Translated
El Portero Baldomero	2017	Sales	Spanish

Everdell	2018	Sales	Translated
Exit	2017	Awards	Translated
Exploding Kittens	2015	Sales	Translated
Five Tribes	2014	Awards	Translated
Incómodos Invitados	2016	Sales	Translated
Isle de Skye: de líder a Rey	2015	Awards	Translated
Istanbul»	2016	Awards	Translated
Just One	2018	Awards	Translated
King of Tokyo	2021	BGG	Translated
Kingdomino	2016	Awards	Translated
La Tripulación	2018	Awards & Sales	Translated
Living Forest»	2021	Awards	Translated
Love Letter	2012	BGG	Translated
MicroMacro: Crime City	2020	Awards	Translated
Misión Cumplida	2019	Sales	Spanish
Mysterium	2016	Awards	Translated
Oriflamme	2019	Awards	Translated
Pajarracos	2018	Sales	Spanish
Paleo	2021	Awards	Translated
Pandemic	2013	BGG	Translated
Pandemic Legacy-Temporada 1	2018	Awards	Translated
Patchwork	2015	Sales	Translated
Pictures	2019	Awards	Translated
Pótimas y brebajes	2019	Awards	Translated
Puerto Rico	2002	BGG	Translated
Res Arcana	2019	Awards	Translated
Rhino Hero (Super Rino)	2017	Sales	Translated
Scythe	2015	BGG & Awards	Translated
Small World	2010	BGG	Translated
Splendor	2016	BGG	Translated
Sushi Go	2014	Sales	Translated
Terraforming Mars	2017	BGG, Awards & Sales	Translated

The Mind	2018	Awards i Sales	Translated
Tranvía Mortal	2019	Sales	Translated
Unánimo	2021	Sales	Spanish
Unlock	2016	Awards	Translated
Uno	2017	Sales	Translated
Virus	2016	Sales	Spanish
Virus! Halloween	2020	Sales	Spanish
Wingspan	2019	BGG, Awards & Sales	Translated

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