

## **Making Games: Playful Publics, Tabletop Products, and Crowdfunding**

In important ways, board gamers ‘make’ games every time they play them. Not only do the narratives and mechanics of games themselves compel players to make decisions within a game’s story-world, but gamers might also break away from ‘official’ rules to add ‘house rules’, change playing time, and even create their own complete variant or unique components. A crucial but very different facet of the participatory making of games is the unprecedented and highly contentious impact of online crowdfunding on board game design, production, and distribution. Setting aside the vexed and commonly cited issues of rushed design, limited playtesting, quality assurance, and slow delivery, the interactions between designers and (future) players constitute a significant phenomenon worthy of attention.

The crowdfunding of tabletop games can be situated neatly within the broader subject of the democratising potential of digital media, informing ongoing debates over how useful terms like ‘consumers’, ‘producers’, ‘producers’, or ‘prosumers’ really are in conceptualising online publics. Many practices and outcomes stemming from the so-called ‘gain-sharing’ and ‘fate-sharing’ of stakeholders do not gel neatly with the idealisation of crowdfunding as a ‘radical democratisation of capitalism’ (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2016, pp. 26-27). Arguing that popular ideas of ‘participatory culture’ and ‘prod-usage’ have ‘mythologized, rather than analysed’ contemporary digital media, Tobias Olsson points out that ‘it is important to emphasise that even within seemingly participatory environments, it is perfectly possible to both steer and format such practices’ (2013, p. 13). Yet the agency and influence of would-be players in determining (to varying degrees) the eventual production of an expanding number of games – as well as the nature of some of these games’ elements – cannot be judged as solely an exploitative trope of consumer capitalism too hastily.

Just as scholarship has marginalised tabletop culture as a whole, how it intersects with digital culture generally and crowdfunding specifically has only begun to be explored. Many tensions exist in the interactions of crowdfunding stakeholders, not least of all that between genuine entrepreneurs seeking to find an essential financial base and established companies utilising the system to guarantee widespread product awareness and ‘pre-sales’. The importance of ethically negotiating backer input is further underlined by Elizabeth Gerber and Julie Hui’s research into the multiple motivations and deterrents for taking part (or

otherwise) in crowdfunding, which range from creators' desires to successfully fund projects and 'connect with others', to backers' interests in not only collecting rewards, but also 'help[ing] others' and 'be[ing] part of a community' (8). Through a survey of several 'participatory moments' in Kickstarter board game projects and an analysis of user-generated comments on the Kickstarter site itself and other social media platforms, I aim to chart a path between the utopian and dystopian perspectives outlined above. Diverse perceptions of crowdfunding and implementations of different projects abound, highlighting the importance of understanding the potentialities and limitations of crowdfunding in the tabletop context.

## **Bio**

Dr Adam Brown is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Media at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *Judging 'Privileged' Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation and the 'Grey Zone'* (Berghahn, 2013) and co-author of *Communication, Digital Media and Everyday Life* (Oxford UP, 2015). Adam's interdisciplinary research has spanned Holocaust representation across various genres, women in film, surveillance cinema, mediations of rape, digital children's television, nonhuman animal ethics, transmedia storytelling, and gaming cultures. Further details can be found on his [website](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).

## **References**

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