

# Playing, winning, and the importance of the gamer

**Melissa J. Rogerson**

Interaction Design Lab  
School of Computing and Information Systems  
The University of Melbourne  
Parkville Victoria 3010  
Melissa.Rogerson@unimelb.edu.au

## Keywords

Boardgames, winning, expertise, player research

## INTRODUCTION

Studies of gamers have historically focused on gaming “experts” (Kirschner and Williams 2013). In research literature, expertise in a particular domain is linked to better decision outcomes, detection and recognition of elements that novices fail to see, better qualitative analysis and monitoring of variables, improved strategy selection, opportunistic use of information resources, and lower overall cognitive effort (Chi 2006). In this paper, I discuss the notions of expertise and of serious leisure (Stebbins 2012). Further, in the context of boardgaming, I identify three distinct groups of players and describe to what extent they have been studied or researched. While the study of serious leisure boardgame hobbyists is of broad interest, I identify two other player groups who, I argue, have been under-represented in the literature. I demonstrate that there are real differences between at least two of these player groups, and identify a significant research gap in exploring the experience of non- or novice boardgamers.

## SERIOUS LEISURE AND EXPERTISE

In an extensive discussion of the value of studying novices as well as experts, Kirschner and Williams (2013) define an “expert” as “a person with greater-than-average ability, talent or knowledge in a domain.” By contrast, Stebbins (2012, 70) describes serious leisure as a compelling engagement, where participants (or “buffs”) devote seemingly limitless time and energy to their hobby. Although he later argues that play itself cannot be serious (Stebbins 2015), I argue that the *pastime* of boardgaming – which encompasses not only play but also a wide range of other activities including researching games, logging and tracking plays, collecting games and curating the collection, cataloguing games, and discussing games (Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith Forthcoming 2017) – can and does constitute a serious leisure activity. Stewart Woods uses a similar concept when he positions expert gamers as “super fans” (Woods 2012, 129). These people are both knowledgeable about games and embedded within the culture – but they are not necessarily “expert” in any particular game, and they may not even be very good at the games that they play.

To be serious about leisure necessarily involves meaningful domain expertise. In our research, we have chosen specifically to study serious leisure boardgamers because of the level of domain expertise that they have accrued. Boardgames are an important part of these people’s lives in a way that is unfamiliar to non-initiates. But this does not mean that they have played every game – or even that they like every game. Even among experts, it is common to teach and learn new games. A review of the 88 gameplays I have participated in this year (of 54 distinct games) shows that 63 plays involved one or more players who were new to the game (30 games were new to me).

Nevertheless, these players shared the common language and understanding of the boardgaming hobbyist. Thus, it is important to distinguish between *domain expertise* of the type associated with serious leisure and the *expert ability* of the professional *Bridge*, *Chess* or *Go* player in playing a particular game.

## **TYPES OF BOARDGAME PLAYER**

The privileged position and engagement of the serious leisure boardgamer is highlighted in the release, earlier this year, of data from a Quantic Foundry study of over 90,000 people who play modern boardgames (Yee 2017). In contrast to Woods's research with members of boardgamegeek.com, which found that players' principal enjoyment of play came from social interaction, followed by strategic play and intellectual challenge (Woods 2012, 165), and our own ethnographic work with serious leisure boardgamers which adds materiality and variety to these two (Rogerson, Gibbs, and Smith 2016), the Quantic Foundry study suggested that men, women and people with non-binary genders primarily valued<sup>1</sup> Need to Win, Discovery, Accessibility and Strategy (men); Accessibility, Social Fun, Chance, Need to Win and Cooperation (women); and Accessibility, Immersion, Social Fun and Cooperation (Non-binary genders). Further discussion (Yee 2017) resulted in re-analysis of the original data, extracting data from the approximately 19,000 users who had supplied their boardgamegeek user name as part of the data collection process. These results highlighted the importance of Discovery (22.1%) as well as Strategy (9.9%) and Aesthetics (9.1%) to this group of respondents, although Social Fun was the lowest motivation (at 5.5%). Yee notes that "Apart from the Discovery stand-out, it's also worth pointing out that neither Strategy nor Aesthetics made it into the top 3 in any of the charts in this blog post, but they did here in the BGG sample." (Yee 2017). Serious leisure boardgamers were motivated by/attracted to different game elements than general respondents.

There is scope for further analysis of this data; we believe that some of the groupings adopted may not necessarily apply to serious leisure boardgamers. For example, the "Social Fun" category appears to be about one very specific type of social fun which does not necessarily include the forms of sociality that serious leisure boardgamers tell us they enjoy. Nevertheless, what we can take away from this data is that serious leisure boardgamers (the "buffs") appear to represent a very specific subgroup of people who play modern boardgames, and that the serious leisure hobbyist and the mainstream boardgame fan have quite disparate likes and – potentially – gaming practices.

Moreover, the people who are missing in this data – and, indeed, in research on modern boardgames in general – are those who have yet to play modern boardgames<sup>2</sup>. Although these people represent a difficult group for researchers to reach, there would be merit in understanding what the boardgame novice looks for in games. This work would have the potential – important to serious leisure boardgame buffs who tend to evangelise their hobby (Woods 2012, 140-144), as well as to publishers and retailers – to inform understanding of what draws novices to games. But novices are a notoriously difficult group to recruit for research, and the very interest that leads boardgame enthusiasts to participate in boardgame research is lacking in this group. Moreover, it is difficult to define precisely what is meant by a novice (Kirschner and Williams 2013, 3), particularly when the nuances of both domain expertise and expert ability are considered.

Another important distinction, perhaps, is the respondent's preferred genre of game. Eurogames tend to be dryer and more abstract, with little direct interaction and a focus on skill and luck mitigation, where American-style games are typically more luck dependent, highly thematic, and confrontational. "Eurosnoots" and

“Ameritrashers” have quite different expectations of a game’s aesthetic; American-style games frequently feature detailed painted miniatures whereas Eurogames typically use simple wooden cubes and shapes. Added to this is the question of where to situate mass-market games such as *Monopoly* (Magie and Darrow 1933), *Cluedo* (Pratt and Pratt 1944) and *Scrabble* (Butts 1948), as well as more traditional games like *Chess*, *Bridge*, and *Go*.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights a number of opportunities for further research. There is significant scope to further explore the relationship between domain expertise and expert ability. Moreover, there is a research gap in the study of novice boardgamers, as well as in the differences between the different groups of gamers we have identified here – the buffs and the fans, but potentially also other groups. This is compounded by challenges in identifying and describing expertise in this domain, as well as genres of expertise and ability.

## OPTIONAL BIO

Melissa Rogerson is a PhD candidate in the Microsoft Research Centre for Social Natural User Interfaces at The University of Melbourne, Australia. Her doctoral research examines the experience of playing board games in both physical and digital forms, as well as the characteristics and motivations of hobbyist board game players, designers, and developers. It applies techniques from human–computer interaction to the study of games and play.

Melissa is active in local and international boardgaming communities, is co-chair of Boardgames Australia, and is a member of the jury for the International Gamers’ Awards. She has translated award-winning boardgames from German to English and has co-designed expansions for the popular game *Agricola*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My doctoral research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship and by the Microsoft Research Centre for Social NUI.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Butts, A.M. 1948. *Scrabble*. James Brunot.
- Chi, M.T.H. 2006. "Two approaches to the study of experts’ characteristics." *The Cambridge handbook of expertise and expert performance*:21-30.
- Kirschner, D., and Williams, J.P. 2013. "Experts and novices or expertise? Positioning players through gameplay reviews." *Proc. DIGRA 2013*.
- Magie, E., and Darrow, C.B. 1933. *Monopoly*. Pawtucket, RI: Parker Brothers.
- Pratt, A.E., and Pratt, E. 1944. *Cluedo*. Hasbro.
- Rogerson, M.J., Gibbs, M., and Smith, W. 2016. "“I love all the bits”: the materiality of boardgames." CHI 2016, San Jose, CA, USA, May 07 - 12.
- Rogerson, M.J., Gibbs, M., and Smith, W. Forthcoming 2017. "Exploring the Digital Hinterland: Internet Practices surrounding the Pursuit of Offline Hobbies." AOIR, Tartu, Estonia.
- Stebbins, R.A. 2012. *The Idea of Leisure: First Principles*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Stebbins, R.A. 2015. *Hobbyist Play*. In *The Interrelationship of Leisure and Play: Play as Leisure, Leisure as Play*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

- Woods, S. 2012. *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games*. Jefferson, NC, and London, UK: McFarland & Company, Inc, Publishers.
- Yee, N. 2017. "Title." May 7.  
<https://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/1770825/primary-motivations-board-gamers-based-data-over-9/page/1>.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have listed motivations selected by at least 10% of respondents

<sup>2</sup> There is also some question about game players who do not engage with the hobby online in any form and who therefore did not participate in the Quantic Foundry survey.