



**HAL**  
open science

## A Taste of Boardgamers

Michael Freudenthal

► **To cite this version:**

Michael Freudenthal. A Taste of Boardgamers: tensions in norms surrounding play. Board Game Studies Colloquium, Tampere University, Apr 2024, Tampere, Finland. halshs-04567497

**HAL Id: halshs-04567497**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04567497>**

Submitted on 9 May 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

**To cite this presentation:** Freudenthal, M. (2024). A Taste of Boardgamers. Tensions in norms surrounding play. *Board Game Studies Colloquium*, Tampere University, 23-26 April 2024, Finland.

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

**Keywords:** board games, play culture, boardgamers, leisure, gender

### **Introduction**

A transformation in board game production during the 1980s marked a tighter connection between the material object, its prescribed rules and its fiction components (Brougère, 2021). As this market diversified and grew, social play practices followed, influencing common family and adult practices and leading to the constitution of a specific “play culture” (Brougère, 2024) surrounding some practices.

The “boardgamer” play culture relies on knowing, playing and discussing niche edited board games, known or played by a small fraction of the population (Rogerson et al. 2017 ; Berry, Coavoux, 2021). It regroups mostly men below 40 years old and educated, sharing an “habitus” (Berry, 2012) of tastes, roles and predispositions involved in board game play and discourse, acting as a local norm. This socially and culturally homogeneous group includes not only players but also authors and editors, who put forward their boardgamer play culture when discussing their career (Berry, Roucous, 2020).

Since then, market research reports show a growing adoption of board games by a wider audience. Our research on public board game encounters suggests that the play culture linked to boardgamers also spreads to frequent or occasional players less involved in boardgamer play culture. This brings the question of the processes by which the play culture is mediated, its norms enforced, and differences in preexisting norms that it might put into light.

### **Method**

This presentation features first results from a multi-sited case study using ethnography and interviews (Burawoy, 2009 ; Hamidi, 2012), that took place mostly in play encounters (Goffman, 1961) that were publicly held and had another focus than playing board games.

After identifying traveling boardgamer norms and discourses in players and professionals (Barbier, 2022 ; Messina et al., 2023), we focused on play interactions enforcing them that showed tensions or frictions in frame negotiations (Goffman,

1974), as well as on ambivalence in the discourses displayed in interviews (Darmon, 2019, 2023), and crossed them with sociodemographic information gathered.

## **Findings and conclusion**

We show that appropriation of the dominant boardgamer play culture is easier to some occasional players and that it can be explained through gendered cultural differences. Within boardgamer play culture, several norms and discourses are based on the games' technicity, that players with more boardgamer culture frame as logical and rational when enforcing it, matching with descriptions of techno-masculinities (Connell, 1995).

The tensions that arise are mostly from beginners of all genders, but also from frequent players and boardgamers, more of whom are women. During interviews, all players showed ambivalent discourses displaying the same tensions, but as boardgamers and men relied more on techno-masculine arguments, women of all experience showed more contradictions. This difference in interactions and discourse cannot be explained by experience in the play culture but gender (Bereni et al., 2008) provides a useful first perspective, as in other leisures (Court, 2010).

This research contributes to explain gender differences found in quantitative research (Berry, Coavoux, 2021), especially when it is based on surveys mostly spread online and in boardgamer spaces (Booth, 2021 ; Cross et al., 2023). It also provides a more microsociological understanding on women's experience of public board game spaces as male-dominated (Davis, 2013 ; Pobuda, 2023).

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Barbier, J.-E. (2022). *Jouer dans les soirées jeux. Modalités d'engagement chez les joueurs.euses passionnés.ées autour d'une partie de jeu*. [Doctorat d'Anthropologie]. EHESS.
- Bereni, L., Chauvin, S., Jaunait, A., & Revillard, A. (2008). *Introduction aux Gender Studies : Manuel des études sur le genre*. De Boeck Supérieur.
- Berry, V. (2022). *Le sens du jeu : Cultures et pratiques ludiques en France (1960-2020)* [HDR]. Université Grenoble Alpes.
- Berry, V., & Coavoux, S. (2021). « Qui veut jouer au Monopoly ? » Cultures et pratiques du jeu de société en France. *Sciences du jeu*, 14.
- Berry, V., & Roucoux, N. (2020). Conception et édition de jeux de société : Étude du secteur (de niche) et trajectoires professionnelles. *Sciences du jeu*, 13.
- Booth, P. (2021). *Board games as media*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Burawoy, M. (2009). *The Extended Case Method : Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition*. University of California Press.

- Brougère, G. (2024). Culture ludique. In G. Brougère & E. Savignac (Éds.), *Dictionnaire des Sciences du Jeu*. Eres, pp. 75-79.
- Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities*. University of California Press.
- Court, M. (2010). « Le corps prescrit. Sport et travail de l'apparence dans la presse pour filles », *Cahiers du Genre*, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 117-132.
- Cross, L., Piovesan, A., Sousa, M., Wright, P., & Atherton, G. (2023). Your Move : An Open Access Dataset of Over 1500 Board Gamer's Demographics, Preferences and Motivations. *Simulation & Gaming*.
- Darmon, M. (2019). Analyser empiriquement un inobservable : Comment 'attrape-t-on' une disposition? In S. Depoilly & S. Kakpo, *La différenciation sociale des enfants. Enquêter sur et dans les familles*, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, pp. 109-137.
- Darmon, M. (2023). *Socialization*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Davis, D. E. C. (2013). *Women and Gaming Preliminary Research Report*. BGG.Con 2013. [Link](#)
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Bobbs-Merrill.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harper & Row.
- Hamidi, C. (2012). De quoi un cas est-il le cas ? Penser les cas limites. *Politix*, 100(4), 85-98.
- Ludenquête. (2016). *Enquête « Cultures et pratiques ludiques en France : Le cas des jeux de société »*. ELIPSS/CDSP. [Dataset](#).
- Pobuda, T. (2023). Contested spaces, velvet ropes, exclusion zones The pleasures and dangers of face-to-face play in analogue gaming spaces. In C. Germaine & P. Wake (Éds.), *Material game studies: A philosophy of analogue play*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 165-186.
- Rogerson, M. J., Gibbs, M., & Smith, W. (2017). Exploring the Digital Hinterland : Internet Practices surrounding the Pursuit of « Offline » Hobbies.  *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*.

## AUTHOR

**Bio:** Michael Freudenthal is a PhD student at EXPERICE (university Sorbonne Paris Nord), supervised by Gilles Brougère and Vincent Berry, and partially funded by Asmodee through the Game in Lab program. They are researching the influence of fiction on participation and learning in leisurely board games, through an ethnographic methodology and a sociological perspective.

**E-mail:** [michael.freudenthal@gmail.com](mailto:michael.freudenthal@gmail.com)