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## A Taste of Boardgamers

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## **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).

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