

Towards a Hybrid Media Ecosystem of Tabletop Gaming

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

During the last twenty years we have seen a revolution of analog gaming (Trammel 2019), and it is said that we live in the “Golden Age” of tabletop gaming (Konieczny 2019), as the popularity of board, card, dice, miniature and role-playing games keeps on surging. Hobbyists often cite the tangible experience, face-to-face social interaction, and disconnectedness from the online media technologies as the main sources of enjoyment in the hobby (Rogerson et al. 2016; Woods 2012).

However, tabletop gaming is very much connected to digital culture. In addition to the emerging trend of hybrid board games (Kankainen and Paavilainen 2019), there exists a wide “digital hinterland” of online activities surrounding the offline play of tabletop games (Rogerson et al. 2017), and the growth in popularity of tabletop gaming is much due to the recent digital culture developments, especially the emergence of social media (Trammel 2019). In fact, it can be argued, that analog games are so inherently tied into the digital media technologies through digital labor practices, that they can only be understood in relation to digital cultures (ibid.).

Indeed, in the contemporary society the online media has become ubiquitous and pervasive – it is everywhere, and it cannot be turned off. We engage with other people, manage time and space, build our cultural and social status, and record our private lives through media. It can even be argued that it has become so inseparable part of our lives that instead of using media we are living in media. (Deuze 2012.) In this media life, tabletop-gaming is inherently connected to online media through various activities of tabletop-gamers as hobbyists engage increasingly in creation, circulation, and remixing of hobby related media contents instead of consuming predefined messages. These activities have turned the hobby into a lifestyle for many, and it is growingly defined by the spreadability of media: “A hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways” (Jenkins and Green 2013). Consequently, we are shifting towards post-digital culture of tabletop gaming where the focus has shifted from the technology as such towards the contents it allows (see Cramer 2014).

From this emerges a hybrid media ecosystem of tabletop gaming where the physical act of playing, and the game as an artifact, form the center of a complex network, similar to other material pastimes (see Gauntlett 2018; Rogerson et al. 2017). Participation through spreadability defines these ecosystems by supporting creativity, consequently allowing deeper connection to the community, building of gaming capital

(Consalvo 2007), and heightened identity building process through personal affection (see Belk 1988; 2013; 2014).

Considering above, I argue that online media has not merely increased the popularity of tabletop gaming but has also enabled the hobby cultures of tabletop gaming in their current form through a hybrid media ecosystem, where physical and digital activities negotiate. Mapping this understudied phenomenon is important for understanding the future developments of tabletop gaming culture and how it connects to other forms of popular culture. This offers new insights for game developers, but also for experts interested in other forms of hybrid media. Further, the study brings new information on the post-digital aesthetics of material hobby cultures in general.

A mixed method survey was conducted to learn about online tabletop gaming contents and practices. It was online six weeks during the Autumn 2019, and the link was posted to online tabletop gaming communities, namely to the *Board Game Geek*¹, various *Facebook* groups, and further shared via social media networks. Survey had nine open-ended questions asking respondents to describe tabletop gaming related online activities, contents, and discussions they had engaged with. The eleven quantitative questions focused on demographic information and frequencies of using online contents.

As most questions were non-mandatory, 191 out of 260 respondents filled in the full survey. Of these (n=191) 72,5% identified as male, 22,5% as female, 2,5% as non-binary or other, while 2,1% did not disclose their gender. Most respondents (n=191) lived in Finland (42,4%) and USA (25,6%), while Australia (5,8%), UK (3,7%), Germany (3,7%) and Sweden (3,2%) had over 5 respondents each. Of the rest, seven respondents (3,7%) lived outside Europe or North America. The year of birth varied between 1947 and 1998, with 75% (n=191) being born between 1970 and 1990. Demographics and distribution exclusively via online media both might affect the results, which is considered in the analysis.

On a weekly basis the five most used (n=195) categories of online tabletop gaming content out of 19 listed (based on previous research) were: forum discussions (75,4%), online news about tabletop gaming (60%), tabletop game reviews (49,2%), tabletop game rules, errata or clarifications (46,2%) and images of game elements like miniatures or dice (42,1%). Interestingly 11% of the respondents (n=195) self-reported using at least 60 hours for tabletop related online content during a typical week, three of them up to 100(!) hours, while 66,7% of all respondents used up to 30 hours.

The initial thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the open-ended responses clarifies the nature of the use. Some respondents report being connected to tabletop gaming content throughout their daily lives, as they use various media for example during coffee breaks, while cooking or travelling. Then again, others engage with it only while playing. Further, the online media seems to have both expanded and extended the hobby in various ways. For instance, some respondents mention that they would have quit the hobby without online media, or that they have found new games, communities, and creative practices through it. Some enjoy using it for the hobby, while for others it is a necessary evil for keeping in contact with their favorite past-time. For a younger generation there has never been a division between analog and digital to begin with:

“Online media and tabletop games have been intertwined since I've joined the world. I couldn't imagine tabletop games without the internet.” (R38)

ENDNOTES

¹ The largest and most popular online community and database on tabletop gaming which has been online since 2000. <https://boardgamegeek.com/>.

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