

# Meet Up for a Board Game?

## How Socialisation, Access, and Language Influence Community Formation

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Board games, meetup, community, language, crowdfunding, game access, hobbyist, kickstarter

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many board game communities are simply small groups of friends and family (Calleja, 2022), each of which move at their own beat. However, as interest grows, more and more players seek larger communities, both for a feeling of belonging but also to sustain their interest when their social groups might waver. Despite their physically focused components, board games' distribution, access, and even social organisation has become very heavily online platform dependant – an increasing trend across many hobbies (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

In this extended abstract, I argue that online play communities form organically and disparately from each other, responding directly to a larger board game landscape, mediated both online and offline. Various factors, such as game distribution and access, motivation for play, and language dependency play a significant part, as players treat these game communities as ad-hoc interest groups, with pre-established play cultures and interests. I will illustrate this by looking at board games played across two distinct board game communities, both hosted through Meetup – an event-focused social media website. I will show that even when there are shared community members, the larger circumstances that lead to individual events strongly influence the games being played, attendance, and even intentions behind the meetings.

I looked at the two largest board game communities on Meetup.com based in Hong Kong - Board Game Oasis, an English-speaking board game group; and BGHK, a Cantonese-speaking board game group. I analysed what games have been hosted over a six-month period in both these groups. I recorded player numbers, play time, perceived game difficulty, and reasons for joining these meetups. I also conducted preliminary interviews with local players, event organisers and other stakeholders (such as board game influencers. Through this approach, I found that these two board games groups have a relatively low common game incidence. Oasis tended to lean more towards mechanically heavy euro-style games such as *Terraforming Mars* (Fryxelius, 2016), while BGHK leaned more towards mechanically lighter social deduction games such as *Werewolf* (Davidoff & Plotkin, 1986). Additionally, when the game types being played did intersect, such as both groups playing heavy games, the actual games being played still oftentimes did not match.

I argue that while there are clear benefits behind replatformisation, such as ease of access and distinguishing counterfeits on e-commerce platforms, companies have also

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used this service issue to further create platform dependence. This platform dependency might already be felt by struggling board game cafés, hindering equitable access to board games for players that shy away from crowdfunding platforms, which largely occupy a hobbyist role rather than a mass-market consumer one.

Based on these preliminary results, I argue that while player preference forms a significant factor behind the board games being played, there are other factors which also strongly influence what games are being played. First, socialisation can be a large determiner for the chosen game (Liu, 2020) – when board games are secondary to socialisation, then the board games being played will reflect this. BGHK members prioritised mechanically lighter games were more likely to replay the same games over and over, to lessen the non-social load of the event. Second, language ability influences what is played. Hobbyist board gaming is still overwhelmingly anglophone – this means that players outside of this core language will either lean towards language independent games or games that have gone through the effort of being localised. This has a knock-on effect where anglophone players, such as Board Game Oasis players, become more likely to be up to date with the hobby as new releases match their target language, while non-anglophone players will tend to either wait for eventual localisation or stick to older releases. Finally, play location also influences the games played. Pragmatic reasons such as bigger spaces for bigger player groups play a part. Moreover, location reputation also plays a significant part – as a location often hosts certain subset of games, then players will start exclusively organising games within that subset in that specific location, which further perpetuates the location’s reputation (Lee et. al., 2016).

Through this study, I will hopefully show how diverse factors, such as importance of socialisation, game distribution and access, as well as core language significantly influence the growth of hobbyist board game groups, even when the players do not necessarily intend a particular group direction. Moreover, if two communities in the same city, founded at the same time, on the same online platform, with shared members can grow to be so distinct in such a short time, then there is a strong need for area studies within board games research at large. While there is already significant research in differences in board game design philosophies across Europe and the United States (Woods, 2012), this area specific research does not extend to board game communities or to design in other regions such as Asia, despite it possibly being the origins of the Board Game Café (Donovan, 2017).

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