

Me and My Shelfie: Hobbyists' domestication of boardgames

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Keywords

Boardgames, domestication, gaming

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we investigate the ways in which serious leisure hobbyist boardgamers have appropriated, objectified, incorporated and converted boardgames to “serve as “powerful reflections of [their] values and identity”” (De Schutter, Brown, & Vanden Abeele, 2015)¹. Specifically, we describe the value that hobbyist boardgamers place on storage and shelving of games, and identify the ways in which they ascribe meaning to their game shelves not only as furniture but also as metaphors for the game collection itself, as well as for play. Research has devoted considerable attention to the ways that we adopt and use technology in a domestic environment (Silverstone, 1991; Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1994), and we show that boardgamers follow a similar trajectory, with the sharing of photos playing a significant role in their appropriation of the games.

The “Shelfie”² is a specific type of online posting, where the boardgamer shares a photo of their game shelf or shelves³. These posts highlight the importance not only of the curated collection itself but also of the spectacle created when it is displayed. They present the poster as the owner of a collection to be proud of and of a commensurate place to store and play their games.

METHOD

This work builds on interviews with eleven hobbyist boardgamers. These are serious leisure boardgamers with collections which range from 40 to “about 1,000” games; the median collection size was 350⁴. Additionally, we conducted a review of the Boardgamegeek Facebook group⁵ in February-March 2017 and a separate review of “GeekLists”⁶ posted to Boardgamegeek.com before January 2016, specifically looking for references to game shelves in the lists’ titles. These are both significant venues for discussion of boardgames and boardgaming; Boardgamegeek is rated in the top 1500 websites in the US⁷, and its Facebook group has nearly 40,000 members.

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2017

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DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Across the discussions of shelves and shelfies, we have identified three distinct levels of meaning that are applied to the shelf. The first is that the shelf is an item of furniture; it has aesthetic appeal and functional requirements. It looks attractive, and it holds games. It may be built-in or free-standing, wooden or metal, temporary or permanent; it is a tangible thing that exists in the home and that others interact with. A 2015 video demonstrating three different kinds of IKEA shelf and discussing their suitability for game storage (Nicholson, 2015) has been watched nearly 22,000 times as at the time of writing; there is significant interest in the shelf-as-furniture.

Secondly, the shelf is a metaphor for the user's game collection, either in its entirety or for a specific part of it. "What do you think of my game shelf" doesn't simply ask about the aesthetic appeal of the furniture, but invites appraisal of the shelf owner's choice of games. In the GeekList "*Organising the Family Game Shelf*," the titular "shelf" stands for the items that the shelf itself contains and the place they hold within the poster's collection. In each of these examples, "shelf" stands not only for the shelf as furniture but also for the organization of the shelf, and/or for this particular curated subset of the user's collection.

Lastly, the game shelf is used as a metaphor for unplayed or unwanted games. This is seen in postings and GeekLists with titles like "*Forever on the shelf ... Games I just can't seem to get played.*" This is a very literal use of an older idiom meaning inactive or unemployed (Ammer, 2003) and highlights the importance that serious hobbyists place on *playing* boardgames as opposed to simply collecting them. A game's goal is to make it to the table, not to languish, unloved and unplayed, gathering dust on the shelf.

This research tells us about the very broad ways in which boardgamers engage with their hobby. Just as collecting may itself be a form of play (Woods, 2012, pp. 134-135), shelving and arranging games and presenting them to others is, for some, another aspect of their boardgaming hobby; another form of play. Like Pinterest posts, these posts invite viewers to "daydream out loud" (Jones, 2016) and plan their own game shelves and game room.

CONCLUSIONS

There are three key outputs from this research. First, we have observed and described the behaviour of "shelfie" sharing which represents a specific engagement with other boardgaming hobbyists. Second, we have described three ways in which the "shelf" is represented: as an item of furniture, as a metaphor for a game collection, and as a signifier for the unloved games within a collection. Finally, we argue that this sharing and representation demonstrates a domestication of the boardgames, a cultural redefinition of the games as "owned", paralleling the stages in the domestication of ICTs.

BIO

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

co-chair of Boardgames Australia, and is a member of the jury for the International Gamers' Awards. She has been known to share a Shelfie or three herself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Melissa Rogerson's work was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship and by the Microsoft Research Centre for Social NUI.

ENDNOTES

¹ Although this article was written about digital games, we believe its assertions hold true for other types of game.

² "Shelfie" is understood to have originated with author Rick Riordan, <https://twitter.com/camphalfblood/status/405004712711172096>, in reference to books.

³ For a collection of Shelfies, see "Shelf Pr0n Central" (Luyten).

⁴ For scale, we estimate that this collection would fill around 4-5 standard bookshelves (eg IKEA Billy, 80cm x 202cm)

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/132851767828/> - at the time of writing, the group has over 38,000 members.

⁶ Initially curated lists of games, the Geeklist format is also used for other types of listing including collections of shelfies.

⁷ <http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/boardgamegeek.com>

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