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Golden Age of Tabletop Gaming: Creation of the Social Capital and Rise of Third Spaces for Tabletop Gaming in the 21st Century

Abstract: This paper re-examines two turn-of-the-century observations of Putnam and Oldenburg about the decline of social capital-generating activities, and disappearance of certain social venues. Based on a decade of multisite observations on three continents I show that a particular type of an activity that Putnam claimed was disappearing—face-to-face, tabletop gaming—is thriving, and often doing so in third-place-like venues that Oldenburg described as endangered—local cafés and clubs. I present data on the proliferation of related leisure activities, including an estimate of their longitudinal and geographical spread and popularity. I also illustrate how social capital is created in physical gaming venues, and propose a six-type classification of those venues.

Keywords: social capital, leisure, gaming, third places

Introduction

In this paper I present an analysis of the hobbyist subculture that surrounds the leisure activity of tabletop games, and the way that hobbyists experience the play of such games. This analysis contributes to the debate on social capital, by showing that one of the examples used to justify claims of its decline by Putnam (2000), namely the decline of tabletop gaming, is incorrect. I will show that a particular type of an activity that Putnam claimed is disappearing—face-to-face (non-video) tabletop hobby gaming, such as broadly defined board and card gaming (to which I will subsequently refer to as just “tabletop gaming”)—is instead thriving, and often doing so in venues that Oldenburg described as endangered—local cafés and clubs, which are revitalized through said gaming activities. As family games of the old have been supplemented by new games with broader appeal, tabletop gaming is increasing in popularity as a leisure pastime bringing together strangers, generating social capital, and coming out from the living rooms into open, public (third) spaces.

I will further illustrate how social capital is created in various tabletop gaming venues, such as clubs, stores, cafes, and private residences, which fit Oldenburg’s definition of third places. Finally, I provide a first-ever analysis of the different types of those venues.

Methodology and Case Selection

This study is significantly based on the data from multisite field observations carried out in the metropolitan areas of Pittsburgh, USA (2005–2012), Seoul, South Korea (2013–

2018), and Katowice, Poland (summer and winter holidays, 2005–2018). I have carried these observations in over thirty different venues frequented by tabletop gamers, averaging twice a week through that period. Venues were chosen through convenience sampling as they represented locations I had regular access to. Since 2012 I have also conducted semi-structured, informal interviews with twenty different participants of related activities (15 gamers and 5 store owners; 14 male and 6 female; age data was not recorded; 10 from the United States, 6 from Poland, remainder from South Korea), to further improve my understanding of key issues. My observations have been supplemented by document analysis through the review of the main English and Polish Internet forums on tabletop games (www.boardgamegeek.com and www.gry-planszowe.com), and the crowdsourced database of board games maintained by the former site.

To gather data on the hobby's popularity, I have done a survey of the international press from the period 2005–2015, using Google News Archive to select a random sample of fifty English-language articles about board games from the population of all results returned after searching for articles with a keyword “board game” in their heading. The usage of only a single news archive database is a limiting factor but there is no reason to assume extending this search to other archives would produce significantly different results. For a discussion of best practices and different databases, see Weaver and Bimber (2008).

Following the pioneering study of tabletop gaming by Fine (1983), I adopted the stance of a complete member (Adler and Adler 1987: 33–35), since I have already been a part of the tabletop gaming scene prior to starting this research. A complete researcher has access to more data, not usually available to outsiders, in exchange for a higher risk of subjectivity. I have striven to reduce said subjective bias, inherent in any ethnographic work, with techniques outlined by cited works, as well as Dwyer and Buckle (2015), such as detailed reflection on the subjective research process, and researcher's own personal biases, and their disclosure. Since this paper also relies on my observations from before I started recording systematic observations (in 2012), this research should be taken as situated on the border between more formal ethnographic studies and position pieces. In this form it is also similar to the informal participant observation approach described by Woods (2012: 13–14).

Defining Key Concepts

The idea of social capital can be most easily understood following the reasoning of Robison, Schmid, and Siles (2002), who having reviewed various definitions simplified the concept as “benefiting from the sympathy of others.” This is in line with Putnam's own definition (2000: 19): he sees social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Portes (2000: 48) notes that despite minor differences, “the consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures.” Based on the above, I define social capital for the purpose of my research as benefits acquired through feelings of sympathy and trust that are generated by reciprocal ties of individuals.

Another topic relevant to this research is Oldenburg's (1999) concept of third places. They are the bars, coffee shops, clubs and similar public places where people congregate; they foster community among people outside of home (the "first place") and work (the "second place"). Third places are neutral meeting grounds, open to people of all socioeconomic status, offering stress relief from the chores of work and home and providing feelings of belonging, without barriers of entry or strict rules of organization membership (Oldenburg 1999).

Regarding tabletop gaming I follow Woods (2012: 5) definition of it as "any (non-video) game that requires a tabletop for play." They can be subdivided into "a number of specific game forms that have emerged over the last forty years and which appeal to a particular audience." Woods (Woods 2012: 5, 17, 132) distinguishes between role-playing games, wargames, collectible card games and board games, which in turn can be divided into eurogames (Settlers of Catan, Carcassonne), American-style board games (Risk, Axis and Allies), popular classics (go, chess, bridge, poker) and finally, proprietary mass market board games (Scrabble, Monopoly). Many games, of course, fall in between the above categories, belonging to more than one genre.

On Board Games Being Understudied and Ignored

The reasons for the slow development of the ludological research has already been summarized by Goffman (1961), who in his classic essay "Fun in Games" stated that games are simply seldom taken seriously—and that includes in academia. Though the field has experienced significant growth in the past few decades, most modern research in this field focuses on computer (video) games (in particular MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft and virtual worlds like Second Life) and to a lesser extent, role-playing games (see the literature review at Woods 2012: 9–10). As observed by Ortega-Girnaldo (2008) and Woods (2012: 8–9), board games were subject to only sporadic research. Similarly, only a handful of papers have tackled wargames (Carter, Gibbs and Harrop 2014) and CCGs (Kinkade and Katovich 2008). What has attracted even less attention is the analysis of the physical spaces and the institutions where the gaming is happening (although a few studies have been done about physicality of video gaming locations, ex. Jonsson 2012), while the pastime's contribution to the creation of social capital has been discussed at best in passing.

Woods (2012: 8) in the first comprehensive treatment of modern board gaming in academic publishing (one that goes beyond mass market and classic games) suggested that tabletop games are suffering from stereotype of being "a small, primitive ancestor of an evolved form" (i.e. the video game). Carter, Gibbs and Harrop (2014) note that tabletop games are an established cultural phenomenon that has successfully resisted obsolescence for centuries yet for is suffering from a widespread, enduring and inaccurate perception of the activity as a niche in decline, a perception that was certainly embraced by Putnam. He declared a decline of tabletop gaming in his seminal *Bowling Alone* (2000: 104–105), where he wrote that: "American adults still play 500 million card games a year, but that figure is falling by 25 million games a year." He noted that in the mid-1970s "nearly 40 percent of all American adults played cards at least once a month... [but by 1999] the average frequency [...] plunged from sixteen to eight times per year. [...]" His observations about

the gamers' demographics were dire: "the number of card players is rapidly falling below a self-sustained level [...] The average age of members of the American Contract Bridge League was 64 and raising steadily. The decline in card playing is concentrated among baby boomers and their children. A growing fraction of all card games occurs in retirement communities. To college students in the 1990s, 'bridge' had the same antique sound that 'whist' had to their parents." Dismissing "computer and video games" as solitary in nature, and "casino gambling" as not very conducive to the creation of social capital, Putnam concludes that "bridge, poker, gin rummy and canasta are not being replaced by some equally 'schmoozable' leisure activity" and predicts that if the steady rate of annual decline he observed was to continue unabated, card playing would disappear entirely somewhere around 2010s. Likewise, Oldenburg (1999: 183) has pessimistically noted that many traditional third places, often suitable for gaming activities, such as cafes, have been disappearing.

A number of studies, including those on online gaming, has challenged some of these assumptions, identifying new (sub)types of third places both in the virtual realm (ex. Second Life), and in physical locations such as Internet cafes (Jonsson 2012; Eklund 2012; Gajadhar et al. 2009; Wakeford 2003). One of Putnam's chosen examples, poker itself, rather than declining, has been reported to be booming (Holden 2007). To add to this debate I intend to show in the following chapters that the gaming stores, gaming-friendly cafes and similar venues are prospering, proving vibrant third places for generating social capital through new types of "schmoozable" leisure activity, i.e. tabletop gaming.

On Board Gaming and Gaming Cafes Becoming More Popular

There is no data, worldwide or national, on how popular the hobby of tabletop gaming is. The few existing large scale surveys on gaming, such as those carried by PEW, are either pre-occupied with video gaming, or are focused on classic and mass market games, whereas surveys of leisure activities do not delve into details sufficiently to be able to distinguish this hobby from gambling or attending broadly defined "clubs" or "hobby stores," a term that might as well include stores for enthusiasts of fishing or model assembly and painting. Putnam himself noted, responding to my email inquiry regarding this very topic, that "I did not discuss board games because I could not find good data on the incidence of board games overtime."

Indirect evidence, however, suggest that this hobby is growing in popularity. First, while the tabletop gaming market is estimated to be smaller than that for video games, it has likewise experienced significant growth from the late 1990s. Duffy (2014) estimated the growth of tabletop market at "between 25% and 40% annually" since 2010, and the ICV2 (2015b) report noted that "The hobby games market grew around 15% in 2014, the sixth consecutive year of growth [...]. The market is now roughly 2.25 times as large as it was in 2008, the last time the market declined." 2015 estimates for the value of this markets suggest it has a value of almost one billion dollars in the US alone (ICV2 2015a), which would put it close to about 5% of that of the US video game market (SuperData Research 2015). If we can use the market size as a proxy for the popularity of similar leisure activities,

given that about 42% of Americans play video games (ESA 2015), this would mean that tabletop games are played by ~1.5% of American populace.

This activity is not limited to US, or Western culture—just as the video games are a global phenomenon, so are tabletop games. As another measure to gauge the popularity of this pastime, a survey of the press reveals that its rise has been noticed by mainstream international press, and playing board games is consistently being reported as an activity on the rise. The term “golden age of board games,” found in about a tenth of the sampled articles, is a good indicator of the press sentiment. The phenomenon is not limited to the English-speaking, Western countries (ex. Duffy 2014; Freehill-Maye 2016), as the hobby has been reported as popular in non-Western, developing countries, such as China (Morris 2015). Board games are indisputably popular in Germany and my own experiences confirms they are common in Poland and South Korea. During my fieldwork I have also met several gamers from other developing countries (Brazil, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Haiti, Libya) who confirmed that the hobby exists there as well, but noted that the cost of many modern tabletop games (roughly stable worldwide, as with similar luxury goods) is a significant barrier for many potential players in those regions. There, traditional games like chess, go or backgammon remain universally popular, while the younger players make their own copies of newer titles, often through the growing availability of (official or pirated) print-to-play variants.

Woods (2012: 121) also described the main English-language Internet portal for tabletop games, “BoardGameGeek,” a site that has been rapidly growing in popularity since its launch around the turn of the millennium (see also Table 1 and Image 1). The number of tabletop games published each year is also on the rise; a search of the BoardGameGeek database (which indexes all tabletop games except role-playing titles) gives over 700 titles for the year 1990, over 1400 for 2000, over 3300 for 2010 and over 4900 for 2015, for an average of 10% increase in new titles published each year (see also Image 2).

Statistics about gamer meetups in the real world are also showing a similar trend. The world’s largest tabletop gaming conventions—Gen Con Indy in the United States and Spiel in Germany, the former tracing its beginning to 1968, and the latter established in 1983—are reporting record number of attendees, steadily growing over the last several years and recently reaching over 60,000 and 160,000, respectively. The American convention, while smaller, has nearly tripled its attendance in the recent decade whereas the German one seems to be growing more slowly but steadily at about 2–3% a year (see Table 1). Internet forum posts about looking for new players and gaming groups for tabletop gaming have roughly tripled on the Polish gry-planszowka.pl forum (in the period 2007–2015), and in the BoardGameGeek forums (2005–2015), both growing at a rate of about 10% year. This particular statistic is almost certainly underestimating the growth of the phenomena, as Internet foras are being superseded by social networks; many of my interviewees noted that they have recently begun to look for new gamers or groups through social media sites such as Facebook or Meetup.com. Data from one of such new groups, “English-speaking BoardGamers and Roleplayers of Seoul,” which was founded in 2011 and organizes weekly tabletop gaming sessions, shows the group roughly doubling in size every year: it had 34 registered members by the end of 2012, 142 by 2013, 346 by 2014, 578 by 2015 and 981 by 2016.

A note of caution is nonetheless advisable, as with the growth of Internet use and available data, at least some of the increase discussed here is simply a byproduct of the growth of the number of Internet users (in other words, the growing number of, for example, board game fans using meetup.com or bgg.com is a combination of the raise of board games popularity as well as the spreading access to such online platforms).

Image 1
Number of registered users of BoardGameGeek site

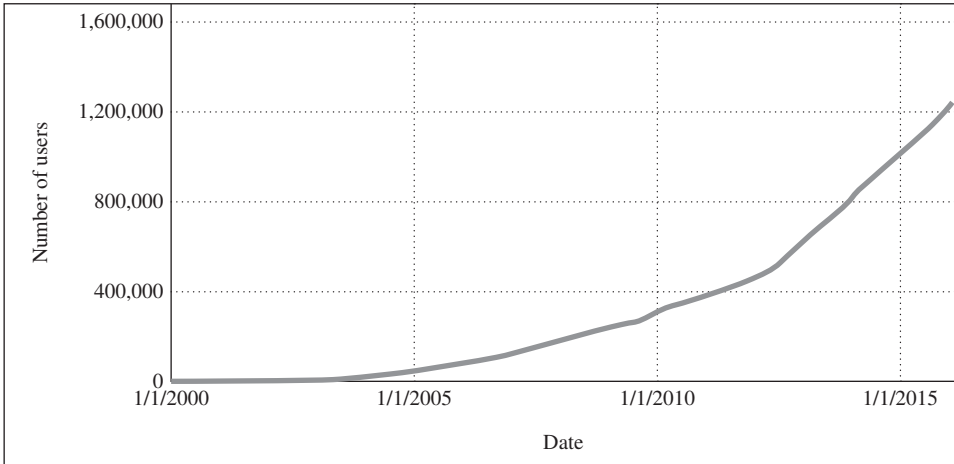
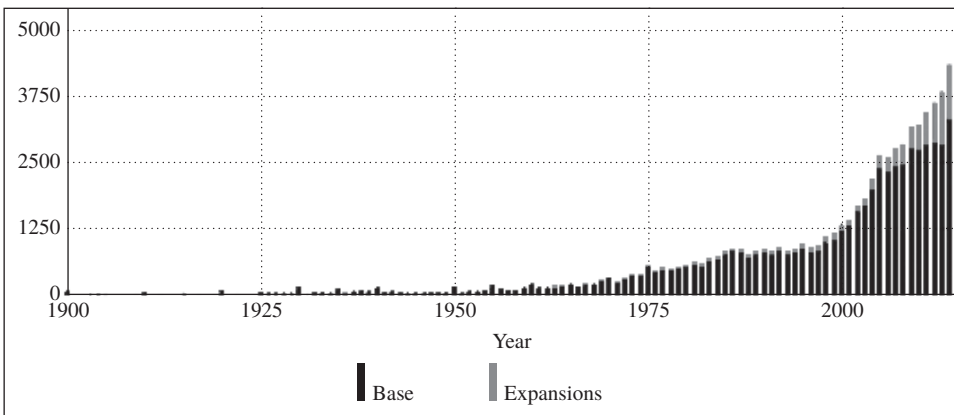


Image 2
Board games published by year 1900–2014



Finally, 90% of my interviewees have agreed that with the statement that “there are significantly more tabletop gamers, and more physical gaming venues than there were ten years ago.”

In summary (see also [Table 1](#)):

- 1) Market and press estimates indicate that the tabletop gaming market is growing worldwide; and the number of published tabletop games has been steadily rising;

- 2) Websites about tabletop games are increasing in popularity (based on their readership and membership);
- 3) Physical events (conventions) for tabletop gaming are reporting growing numbers of visitors;
- 4) Internet forum and social networks posts about “looking for new player/gaming group” are also becoming more frequent.

Table 1

Estimates of tabletop gaming growth

Description	Date range	Growth rate and size estimate	Source
Commercial market for tabletop games	2010–2014	25% and 40% annually	Duffy (2014) ICV2 (2015a, b)
	2008–2014	15% annually, 2014 market more than double that of 2008. Roughly 5% of the American video game entertainment market in 2014, enjoyed by ~1.5% Americans.	
Website popularity	2012–2015	BoardGameGeek.com increases its Most Popular Website rank from 6000 th to 2500 th	http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/boardgamegeek.com
	2002–2015	BoardGameGeek.com userbase grows at an average of 50% a year	Own estimate based on public BoardGameGeek/meetup.com databases
	2011–2015	“English-speaking BoardGamers Role-players of Seoul” meetup.com group userbase grows at an average of 100% a year	
Number of tabletop games published yearly	2000–2015	Number of titles published each year since 2000 grow by a 10% average each year	Own estimate based on public BoardGameGeek/database
Growing attendance at gaming conventions	2012–2015	German convention Spiels grows at about 2.5% a year, has 150,000–160,000 attendees in 2012–2015	Own estimates from news and press releases
	2003–2015	American convention Gen Con grows at about 10% a year, from ~25,000 attendees in the early 2000s to over 60,000 attendees in 2015–2016	
Internet postings with the theme of “looking for new player/gaming group”	2005–2015	Both gry-planszowe.com and boardgamegeek.com show the number of such postings growing at about 10% a year.	Own estimate based on public BoardGameGeek//gry-planszowe databases

I believe that the presented data in aggregate is sufficient to conclude that the leisure activity of tabletop gaming is on the rise.

Where the Gaming Happens: Clubs, Cafes, Cons and Homes

It is now time to consider the situation of the “third places” related to the leisure activity of tabletop gaming. During my field research I have identified six distinct types of locations where related activities are taking place.

First, there are *gaming hobby stores* selling gaming merchandise that also have spaces for gamers to sit down and play. Such places usually do not charge for using their space; their profits come primarily from the sales of games and related merchandise; they may occasionally serve pre-packaged snacks and drinks, and are usually open to customers bringing in their own refreshments. They may have a small selection of games to rent to customers as well, though like most other venues described here they usually rely on people bringing in their own games. The few gaming stores with no room for gamers to stay and play are usually located in places like shopping malls, not targeting hobbyists so much as the average mall-going family. In stores that have places to sit and play, the regulars tend to be experienced gamers. Those regulars are usually engaged in more complex games (such as wargames or Magic CCG), paying little attention to any newcomers. The staff, focused on conducting a sale, does not expect a casual gamer to stay. There is a common expectations that regulars who come have already made an arrangement with others to join a game. In no observed interaction have I noticed either a regular or a staff member suggesting that the newcomer should join a game in progress, such initiative has to come from the newcomer themselves, and the disinterested behavior of the regulars unintentionally but effectively discourages casual players or walk-ins from joining.

Such gaming stores seem to be slowly replaced by two new types of venues. The first is the dedicated “gaming cafe”: a cafe which caters primarily to gamers, attracting them with sizable collection available for in-place use (walls in such places can be literally stacked with games) and charging customers per time spent. Those places often offer refreshments similar to what one would expect at a regular cafe. Some of these places are similar to the Internet cafes and video gaming rooms described in literature on video gaming (Jonsson 2012; Gajadhar et al. 2009; Wakeford 2003); and I have seen at least one place that was a cross between an Internet cafe and tabletop gaming store, with PC booths for video and tables for tabletop gamers. Perhaps due to the décor and the framing of a cafe instead of a store, availability of games for rent, as well as staff more likely to welcome newcomers, explain game rules and introduce them to regulars, such places attract a higher proportion of casual gamers than a gaming store.

Third, there are traditional bars and cafes which are open to tabletop players occupying space for hours at a time, in exchange for the purchase of refreshments. Major differences between dedicated and part-time gaming cafes includes features such as: whether the staff is willing and able to explain game rules, whether the lighting and table size is convenient for gaming, and how large the venue’s selection of games the players can rely on.

It is those two types of cafes that are primarily featured in mainstream press, becoming the public face of the hobby, populated both by casual and veteran gamers, and illustrating the (sometimes literal) coming out of tabletop gaming to the main street (Morris 2015; Freehill-Maye 2016; Godfrey 2016).

Fourth, there are the clubs. Whereas the three prior types of venues are commercial, clubs are the first of the two that can be seen as non-profit. They are usually created by hobbyists who want to have a permanent place for their meetings, and who have taken some steps to find a locale that will permit the events to be hosted at low cost or even free of charge. Often, clubs are formed at educational institutions (in particular, univer-

sities). The frequency of club meetings (usually advertised through social media) is not likely higher than once a week, whereas the other type of venues described above are open five to seven days a week. Despite the word club, often associated with stricter rules, the five clubs I have observed (two in United States, two in Poland and one in Korea) are relatively open. Only two out of five had any official list of members and collected dues, but neither actively enforced any requirements for participants to join or pay; those who preferred not to were still welcome, and not discriminated against in any fashion. One of the American clubs I observed was a university based one, and it was open to any non-university affiliated “walk-ins” interested in the hobby. Rules I encountered were primarily related to enforcing social norms, such as cleaning up litter. In all cases the clubs seem frequented by more serious hobbyists, through new, casual players do make their appearances.

Unlike in regular stores where they are usually ignored, in all clubs I have observed the newcomers are much more likely to be noticed and welcomed into a group. The difference between the attitude of club members and store regulars seems to be related to the fact that store regulars form a more exclusive group, expect newcomers to know the rules, arrange a place in the game—many of which are two-player duels—well in advance, and otherwise see them as annoyance. On the other hand, most club regulars expect to see new faces during each event, see their recruitment as vital for the club survival, are prepared to play more casual, multiplayer games and regularly teach the rules. The dynamic of cafes seems to be yet again different, with numerous dating couples, clearly not interested in a third wheel, as well as mostly teenage groups, also composed of previously acquainted individuals—often students—not interested in integrating aliens into their social play.

A fifth type of a gaming venue is a convention. It can be seen as an evolution of a gaming club, as they are usually organized by them, although large conventions can evolve into legal entities, either non-profit or commercial. Key characteristics of conventions is that they occur only once or twice a year, but are significantly larger—the usual numbers are in hundreds, with major conventions reporting attendees in tens of thousands. They are often supported through ticket sales, unless they are co-organized by the government (in Poland, for example, I have observed several free, smaller scale gaming conventions co-organized by local fans and clubs with local government-run libraries or cultural institutions). Conventions will also tend to be more professionally organized and advertised, though scale is a factor (smaller, non-profit events tend to be run by volunteers, whereas larger, for-profit events will have salaried professionals in charge). In either case, they are primarily attended by more serious gamers, as casual players and random passerbys are likely to be discouraged by the entry fee requirement.

Sixth, we should also consider the institution of organizing gaming events at one’s home, an intriguing cross between Oldenburg’s “first” and “third” places. Many of those events are clearly not indented just for “family and close friends”: they are open to all-comers, advertised by word of mouth or increasingly on the Internet, therefore more similar to the social phenomena of a party, though one that is a regular, even weekly event recurring for months or even years. Given the smaller, more intimate nature of such gatherings, even casual newcomers are often given a relatively warm reception and integrate into such group.

Gaming Clubs or Cafes as Social Capital-Generating Third Places

Gaming clubs and cafes are very much “home away from home,” meeting most of Oldenburg’s third place requirements. All the places I have observed have regulars (see also [Kinkade and Katovich 2008](#)). Numerous gamers I have talked to at the gaming venues have stressed the importance of meeting their friends (“I come here because that’s where my friends are”) at locales where they feel welcome (“here everyone understands my geeky nature”). Similarly, the staff of such places serves a role not too different from stereotypical barmen, often willing to chat with the regulars for a long time, or offer advice on topics from one’s career to the best game to play (or beer to drink).

Public gaming venues are open to all newcomers, although there are clearly some self-selection issues at play, shedding some light on the demographics of the tabletop gamers. Notably, gaming groups are still predominantly male, though the ratio has improved from the near absence of female participants reported by [Fine \(1983\)](#) to what emerges from my observations as approximately 25% female / 75% male ratio, which matches with [Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder \(2008\)](#) data. Over half of the attending females are either girlfriends, partners or wives of male attendees; something similar was observed by [Kinkade and Katovich \(2008\)](#) in their ethnographic study of Magic the Gathering card game community. Based on my observations of various tabletop gaming communities there seem to be a major difference between board gaming and role-playing communities, and much more male-dominated wargames and CCGs communities, where female participation seems to be < 5%. Little research has been done regarding the under-representation of females in any of those subgroups, though my interviews and observations suggest some of the factors observed by [Hartmann and Klimmt \(2006\)](#), [Eklund \(2012\)](#) and [Fisher \(2015\)](#) in their studies of gender gap in video gaming are likely highly relevant. Women tabletop gamers seem to dislike games which are highly competitive (wargames and CCGs are based on duels and feature frequent tournaments, whereas board games have a much more relaxed, casual atmosphere and most role-playing games are by design cooperative, not competitive). They usually game with closer friends and are more likely to attend smaller gaming events hosted at private residences, which they are more likely than male attendees to view as primarily social, rather than gaming events. Finally, women are also critical of the stereotypical characterization of females in game materials: most tabletop games, like video games, still have few if any female characters for the female gamers to identify themselves with; and the art style of those that do is usually skewed towards male-pleasing “fanservice” (ex. skimpy clothes); such visual cues contribute to framing of this hobby as male-oriented.

Most gamers I have met are young, though unlike in video gaming, few attendees of gaming events are pre-adolescents or teens. Over two thirds of the gamers I have met falls somewhere in their 20s, with majority of the remainder in their 30s and 40s. Meeting anyone younger than a college student is about as rare as meeting somebody over 60s. This should not be taken, however, as a sign that the younger generation is not playing tabletop games; my interviewees were roughly split between those those who thought that they are not (suggesting they are primarily video-gamers), and those who expected that they may be intimidated by the relatively older crowd at such events, and are probably playing—but

in their own, younger, peer groups. Further, I have observed a higher proportion of pre-adolescents and teens playing CCGs and wargames than board and role-playing games, but I am hesitant to speculate whether it is because of the differences in competitive natures of such games (ex. the need to attend tournaments and practice matches), or whether board and role-playing games are simply less popular among the youngsters (a topic that will hopefully be clarified by future research).

Regarding social position or class, while I did not collect the data on job, wealth or education of the individuals I observed or interacted with over the years, based on free flowing conversation that occasionally included people commenting about such aspects, most gamers who are older than students seem to fit into what roughly can be described as middle class. A significant proportion of people I interacted with owned several games, some had collections of hundreds—a clear indication of sufficient wealth to be able to afford purchasing of luxury goods, and sufficient leisure time to be able to indulge in them. Gamers also seem to be immersed in more general science fiction, fantasy and horror subculture and are generally familiar with many works of fiction, including literature, an indicator of positive attitude towards self-education. Woods (2012: 129–130) suggested that leisure activity of board gaming can be seen as one of the dimensions of the broader geek culture, and geeks, in turn, tend to be well-informed in the dimension of popular culture and popular sciences. To what degree, however, is board gaming a middle class leisure activity and to what extent does it cross educational and occupational boundaries is an intriguing issue. One of the gamers I knew, an American nurse, had difficulty saving any money in his bank account. Another gamer was a successful computer engineer who sold a patent and was able to retire from working for at least a year. Both of them seemed to consider themselves, nonetheless, part of middle class (like most Americans for the last few decades...), and both of them were part of the same community. Overall, my observations suggest that this leisure activity is reasonably wide-spread and connects many individuals from relatively broad circles, through further research may be needed to see whether it is spread to the extreme parts of the society, both in terms of social class, status and culture.

It is also worth noting that gaming has created a number of separate if connected subcultures (video gaming, board gaming, war gaming, CCG-gaming, RPG-gaming, and others). They are closely connected (like, for example, science fiction, fantasy and horror fandoms), but they also have their unique memes or jargons (examples of board game jargon are terms such as “euro game” or “ameritrash game,” used to describe some distinct types of games). Woods (2012: 72, 129) suggested that those board gaming subcultures became noticeably evolved and separate from others around the turn of the millennium two decades ago. Role-playing subculture is one of the oldest in this grouping, already discussed in the classic work by Fine (1983: 237). Taking into consideration the history and development of tabletop gaming, war-gaming subculture likely evolved around the same time, whereas the collectible card game and modern board games subcultures are most recent. I concur with Woods that those subcultures are not counter-culture subcultures, but more relaxed leisure subcultures, focused less on political and social change, and more on the pursuit of leisure, in the form of being passionate about their hobby, and, in their devotion to it, analyzing, critiquing and discussing games with a dedication that is comparable to fans of other cultural products such as music or movies.

In here we can also see how does the tabletop gaming compare to socially associative function of old-time hobbies, like playing chess or family games. With regards to the latter, Woods (2012: 130) suggested that tabletop gaming “positions itself against a more conventional counterpart—in this case the main-stream board game market.” This is indeed confirmed by observations—it is quite common for tabletop gamers to criticize mass market “family” titles like Monopoly. While for non-gamers, a board game may be seen as a way to sink a few hours into a relatively mindless activity, for tabletop enthusiasts, a significant value of a game is based on degree to which they allow players to engage with a system that produces meaningful decisions and outcomes. As such, board gamers perceive mass market games usually as a low quality product that is unfortunately widespread to a degree it creates a false and misleading impression about their hobby. In other words, a common complaint I have encountered numerous times is that non-gamers dismiss board gaming hobby as childish based on their perceptions that board gaming means playing low quality titles like Monopoly. With regards to the former, i.e. comparison with the chess, bridge, poker, mahjong or similar subcultures, the picture is different. In my years of observing tabletop gamers, I have noticed there is surprisingly little overlap between the worlds of euro, CCG, war- and RPG gamers and fans of classic games like chess. While those classic games are recognized by other gamers as being mechanically elegant and intellectually challenging, there is a significant lack of overlap in related subcultures. While tabletop gamers are generally part of the geek culture, this is not true for many, if not most, players of chess, bridge, poker or such. While to an outsider a person playing chess and a person playing a euro-style game may seem like they are engaged in the same hobby, they are very likely individuals belonging to quite different subcultures. With regards to players of classic games, two relatively unique subcultures that are rarely seen in more other gaming scenes seem reasonably common: professional players and gamblers (through those two subcultures can appear in CCG subculture, which features organized tournaments with significant monetary prizes). While I did not carry any significant observations of classic gamers and their venues, based on conversations with tabletop enthusiasts I noted that there is a perception that classic gamers are seen as either dedicated professionals or compulsive gamers, and the latter group is also seen as being older (and throughout male). Finally, those activities are also not likely to co-exist in the same physical spaces: classic games have their own localities dedicated only to them (i.e. chess club or poker club, intolerant of any other titles), whereas venues which host more modern tabletop games will allow but not see much play of classic titles, as their attendees are looking for ‘newer’ formats and experiences. The proprietors of modern gaming clubs I have asked about this agree that they see people playing titles like chess or poker rarely—every few months or so. Also in Korea the proprietors of modern tabletop venues like gaming cafes and such actively discourage the play of classic titles (which in Korea mean generally mahjong and go-stop, Korean version of poker) as they are stereotypically associated with gambling *ajushi* (old men), and gambling in Korea both requires special licenses and is seen as low-brow, part-criminal and generally disreputable hobby.

An important element of a third place—and social capital building—is that conversation should be a major, if not the main, activity. And it is; gaming places are surprisingly loud, full of laughter and general banter. Often enough it concerns the ongoing game; but other topics, including social capital-building discussion on civic matters, are frequent. Just

like in a bar, one minute the topic can be the quality of the beer (or game), the next—the merits of parliamentarism over a presidential system. This is an observation that is shared by virtually all published research on tabletop gaming, with a number of researchers going on as far as to say that the primary purpose of gaming is socialization and social interaction (Heller 2008: 273; Woods 2012: 171; Zagal, Rick and Hsi 2006).

Throughout my observations of tabletop gaming, I have witnessed constant creation of social capital. I will illustrate this in line with the classic definitions of social capital as related to key concepts of connections, trust, sympathy, reciprocity and benefits (Portes 2000; Putnam 2000; Robison, Schmid, and Siles 2002).

Connections are apparent due to the formation of networks of friends and acquaintances. It is common for a new gamer to engage in social rituals such as introducing themselves to the group and shaking hands; often contact information are exchanged. New members establish their gamer credential through talk about games, and usually display their connection to the larger geek culture by demonstrating familiarity with related topics like video gaming, graphic novels, fantasy and science fiction literature, and so on. After several meetings the newcomer becomes a regular, a member of the team in the sense of Goffman's dramaturgy, often subject to the stage talk and various team and loyalty building practices (Goffman 1959). Many gamers I interviewed noted that a significant proportion, if not majority, of people they consider friends are other gamers that they have met at one or another gaming venue.

Establishing connections and team loyalty builds trust. Members of the gaming group, even relatively casual, express that trust in a number of ways. Inviting relative strangers to one's home for a gaming session, and leaving them unattended in a room is common, for example, as is asking members to look after one's belongings for a brief periods.

Connections, trust and shared interests in turn build sympathy, which leads to the ability to ask for and receive certain benefits in the form of social capital. Members of a gaming group already regard others as friends and acquaintances, and this makes them feel positively disposed towards one another. As in any social settings, conflicts can arise, but the usual atmosphere in a gaming group is one of politeness and enjoyment, full of friendly banter and mutual respect.

Benefits of participating in such groups express themselves in numerous ways to acquire social capital: conversation about jobs, education and career enhancing moves, for example, are not uncommon. Several times I have witnessed participants offering to invest in others' businesses or hire them. The most extreme example of that I observed in Poland, where one of the founders of a long established group (registered as a NGO centered around the local science fiction and fantasy club whose activities include, but are not limited to, tabletop gaming) is also the owner of a medium-size company, and has a policy of offering jobs to all club regulars. In Korea I have seen some gaming groups double as English-speaking conversation clubs; they are attended by some Koreans and other ESL individuals as events during which they can practice their English and spend time more enjoyably than in a class. Several participants I have talked with have also drawn attention to various skills they believe gaming improves, such as memory, computational thinking, or navigating complex documents (see discussions of skills acquired from tabletop gaming in Heller 2008 and Small 2015).

Connections on a more personal level are frequent as well; while most are on the level of weak ties in the gaming community, exceptions can be found. A number of gamers have mentioned that some of their most enduring friendships are with other gamers; and dating and romance are not absent, neither: while in the United States I have personally attended two weddings of couples which have met over gaming sessions.

Outside community value can be created as well. In Korea I have witnessed a large gaming group which organizes recurring events collecting funds for charitable purposes. In other instances I have witnessed conversations about civic issues which have led participants to inquire about topics such as how to join an NGO, or attend a social movement-organized event such as a parade or a protest march. Though we lack any precise statistics, it seems likely that the generation of social capital through tabletop gaming should be comparable to that found in more traditional settings (ex. Putnam's proverbial bowling alley), and is likely higher than what is occurring in the less social video-games settings.

Conclusion

This article shows that a particular social-capital-generating activity that Putnam was predicting would be all but gone by now, i.e. tabletop gaming, is thriving (albeit in new forms such as 'eurogames' and others), and doing so, among other places, in cafe-like third place venues whose future Oldenburg was concerned about.

There are several reasons these predictions were off. Data and research on tabletop gaming is pretty sparse even today, and in the 1990s when Putnam was gathering his data it was even more so. Further, back then related activities were primarily a domain of teenagers and young adolescents, groups whose visibility and social capital-building skills are rather limited, and whose leisure activities are commonly dismissed by their seniors, for many of whom the tabletop gaming is still a domain of children, elderly and a few professionals. Now, a generation later, teenagers of the 90s are young professionals, not afraid of gaming in the public, spending big chunks of their disposable income on related products, running businesses centered on gaming leisure activities, and in doing all of that, generating social capital—in a booming activity that was predicted to have been all but gone by now.

Existing surveys of leisure activity have not been refined sufficiently to capture this social change, and the resulting lack of quantitative data should not be taken as a proof of absence of a phenomenon, since such absence can also be a result of said phenomenon being simply understudied, and can lead to assumptions that can be widely off predictions. Another reason for the lack of data, one that the field of leisure studies is well aware of, is that certain activities can be affected by social and academic stigma of 'this is not worth studying'. Tabletop gaming seems to be still suffering from both the traditional bias of 'tabletop games are a childish activity' and of the 'if I am to study games, I will study the video ones, since they are the new, cool phenomenon' one. Hopefully, this paper will lead to lessening of those biases.

The description and analysis of the six major types of third places where tabletop gaming is taking place should contribute to the better understanding of physicality of gaming, a topic that has been woefully understudied, even more so that the activity of tabletop

gaming itself. Hopefully, the presented analysis will not only add to the understanding of what a third place is, and how it helps to generate social capital through leisure activity, but will also facilitate further ethnographically studies of non-digital, game-related leisure phenomena.

With regards to the question on whether the growth in tabletop gaming is a global trend, or are there obvious national differences, being able to compare this social scene in three countries on three continents, plus interviewing and researching individuals from several other countries, provides some insight. The cost of board games (a luxury product) makes this leisure activity less popular in poorer (developing) parts of the world, and therefore it is likely that there is a correlation between country's development level and popularity of newer games, through we have to be mindful of both the popularity of classic games among older generations and the possible impact of print and play and self-made versions of newer games.

I am hesitant to conclude that there are significant national differences between the venues I observed. As my research progressed, I observed more visible participation of females in the hobby, but I would be hesitant to conclude this is a difference between Korea (a culture I have observed more recently) and the US (a culture I have not observed in the earlier phase of this study). I expect this is more likely related instead to the change in the physical location, i.e. the growing popularity of a game cafe venue, catering to couples and generally not as much male-dominated as the old gaming clubs of the past, some of which were much less friendly to female gamers due to sexist behavior on the part of some male gamers which seems much less common in the newer public gaming spaces.

I hope that future studies will contribute to better our understanding of various dimensions of the tabletop gaming, a leisure activity with long history and promising future. I would therefore like to end this paper with a call for more research of related phenomena. Why do some people engage in tabletop gaming rather than other leisure activities, from video gaming to physical sports? Why is there so little overlap between geek-dominated modern subcultures like role-playing or CCGs and the subcultures of classic players of bridge or chess? And how does it compare to other contemporary socially bounding activities? Most of current research on gaming focuses on video gaming, but the more physical, and arguably, social aspect of this leisure activity is as strong, if not stronger, as it has ever been, and still woefully understudied. As the tabletop gaming subculture is entering into what some media proclaim to be its golden age, it is a good excuse to turn our eyes away from the dazzling video game screens and look into the physical reality once again.

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