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The Gamer Tribes

An Ethnography

A game is "a physical or mental activity or contest that has rules and that people do for pleasure" (*Merriam-Webster*), but gaming encompasses so much more. The people that I am going to be discussing are associated with games of the non-digital variety, which most often referred to as "table top" games. This is mostly because they are usually played while sitting around a table. These games are made of cardboard, plastic, resin, metal and glass and they differ from electronic games in many more ways than just materials; these table top games require social interaction as a means of participation. To be a gamer means that you are part of a community, whether you are playing at your local game store or you have a group of friends that get together, these games are all about interacting with other people.

There are many different gamer groups, and each one acts like its own tribe. The way that I have divided the gaming community is based upon the kind of games that they like to play. As said by Thomas Bringnall, "Tribes frequently form because of the desires of members to be among others with shared identities.(111)" This seeking out of like-minded people creates a group in which one can feel included, safe, and supported. There are four such tribes I will be discussing the board game tribe, the miniatures tribe, the role play tribe, and the deck builder tribe. I am most interested in what attracts people to each individual tribe and how the games

that are played define the different communities.

I have a very unique perspective to be investigating gamer communities. I work at one of the local game stores, so I have the opportunity to interact with many different people from each tribe every time that I work. This situation causes some interesting power relations, since I am a patron of the store that serves as a second home for some of these gamers. The other way that I stand out as an individual among the people of this community is that I am female; and even though female gamers exist they are much fewer in number and usually not as involved or accepted as their male counterparts. This downside of being a female gamer in a mostly male society is that my opinions and thoughts may not be seen as important to the male gamers, and that can cause conflict and misinformation. However, I was able to observe people that I already had affiliations with and because of this they viewed me more as an individual and less of a female. I also had many acquaintances within the gaming community and was able to coordinate my findings through interviewing individuals from each of the different tribes. Because of my role I was able to gain much information on each of the different gamer tribes.

I accumulated knowledge through the process of participant observation, that is, I included myself in the activities of the gamers that I studied. This method of participant observation was also used in the article, "Maxwell's Demons." The way that Janet McIntosh commented on this kind of interaction was enlightening. "Ethnographers distinguish themselves as anthropologists by living and learning from within their study communities"(Podolefsky,16). This kind of study allows an anthropologist to get a much more involved look into the lives of the people that they study, and because I am already part of the gamer community, participant observation came very easily to me. It allowed me to take an in-depth look at each of the different tribes.

The first group that I will delve into is the board game tribe. Most people have played some type of board game in their lives, be it Monopoly or Candy Land, but there are many more. These games vary in subject, size, length, difficulty, and number of players and have prices that range from less than 10 to over 100, but usually fall somewhere in between. One thing that all of these games has in common, however, is that you need more than just yourself to be able to play. Most board games play the best at maximum capacity for players, therefore they lead to very strong cohesiveness.

The board gamers are one of the most community minded tribes, because of the nature of the games that they play. These individuals exist in small close knit groups that I will refer to as circles. These circles usually include 3-6 people who share games amongst themselves. Due to this social exclusivity, it is very difficult to get involved with this tribe, unless you have enough people to construct your own circle, or if you have connections in another circle that has few enough members to include you. This limitation of the number of people who can play together, in turn limits the number of people who exist in a circle. While the number of people in a circle is limited, there is nothing to say that you cannot exist in more than one circle. A gamer is actually likely to play in a couple of different circles to be able to play all the games that they are interested in.

There are very many different kinds of board games that cover a vast array of genres and in turn appeal to many different kinds of people. There is the family gamer. This gamer uses board games as a way of bonding with different members of their family. Usually these family circles are made up of parent-child groups and can include other close family friends and relatives who live in the same household. Very similar to the family gamer is the casual gamer. These gamers play the games to be able to experience the stories behind them and use them as a

tool for socialization. Many times these circles exist between groups of friends, and in some cases have a scheduled time on designated days every week for play.

There is yet another kind of board gamer in this tribe, the competitive gamer. This gamer wants to win and that is the driving force behind their actions. They are not very numerous in the board game tribe, but they do still exist. They usually do not exist in their own circles but may be present in small numbers in circles of other gamers. These players stand out in a group, when playing a game they can adopt aggressive body postures and boisterous voices. This means that the competitive gamer must be close with their circle and to try to be good natured about losing and winning or risk being cast out of their respective group. These competitive gamers are the most likely to be a stickler for the rules and enforce proper play amongst their fellow gamers. This is in contrast to the other types of gamers because most gamers will interpret the rules loosely for the sake of having fun.

In contrast to the competitive gamer there is the cooperative gamer. This gamer plays games where all of the people involved are working together toward a common goal, and this promotes camaraderie and teamwork. There is also the intellectual gamer. This gamer plays games for the challenge of it. They play complicated games with multiple goals all occurring simultaneously and feel as though it is an exercise of the mind. The party gamer, on the other hand, is looking for a game that is usually no more than 1 hour in length and that has simple rules for ease of teaching others. This kind of gamer tends to be the most social outside of the gamer community and the least involved in it. This gamer doesn't necessary need to exist in a circle due to the nature of the games that they play.

I find it very interesting that even though they are playing the same game, that everyone exhibits such individual characteristics. This idea is akin to what David Berreby said in the book

Them: Understanding your Tribal Mind:

Human beings are unusually alike, compared to most species. We're also, each of us, unique. From those two facts, it follows that measurable, objective differences will always exist between *any* two groupings of people, and that any two groups, no matter how different, will be the same on many other measures. (19)

No matter how different we are, or how similar, we can always be divided into groups of like-minded individuals, and whether or not we realize it, that is what society does to us every day.

The next tribe that I will discuss is the miniatures tribe. This tribe includes a couple different genres of games, but their common characteristic is the movement of small figures around a designated play area. Most miniature games have figures that need to be assembled and painted before you play with them. It is possible to play with unfinished miniatures, but it is a kind of social faux pas, and during competitive play there are rules that require you to have all of your figures painted with a minimum number of colors. There are many different games that are considered "miniatures games" but they fit into one of two categories.

War games are ones that include large armies, usually chosen from among different factions that all have unique abilities. When playing one of these games your army could consist of, on average, anywhere from 12-60 individual figurines which all need to be assembled and painted. These figures are usually moved in squads or in vehicles to battle other squads or vehicles that belong to your opponent, and are like miniature replications of war scenarios. These games require a large financial commitment and many man hours. In fact some would consider it more of a hobby than a game.

Skirmish games are played on a little bit smaller scale, and instead of fighting between squads of figures, you battle between individual figures. This kind of game is much easier to get

into because it requires less hourly and financial commitment. This kind of play means that every individual model is more important to the scenario and is less like a massive war scene. Similarly, people who play these games tend to spend more time painting the individual models, allowing for these armies to have more detailed and unique appearances.

The miniatures gamer tends to be a very strategy minded person who likes to manipulate different scenarios and observe the outcome. Many of these individuals who find themselves being drawn into this kind of game have some kind of military background, either just interest in the historical sense or actually having been enlisted. Being able to strategize and use your intellect to try to predict your opponent's moves is very appealing to these kinds of gamers. Another kind of person drawn into this tribe is the artist. Artists enjoy expressing themselves creatively and showcasing their talents while playing in a social situation, which is an opportunity that is unique to these games. The miniatures tribe also has groups similar to those depicted in the board game tribe. The family gamer, the casual gamer, and the competitive gamer can all be found in this tribe as well. They exhibit similar mindsets as the board gamers but have preferences for a more crunchy¹ rules set and a more inclusive game.

The kind of fluff² involved in these games draw particular crowds in their own right. Some of the genres in these games include historical, fantasy, science fiction, steam-punk, mech³, and many others. Most everyone has a preferred flavor that they play, and because of the abundance of subjects these games attract people of all ages.

One reoccurring theme, however, is how people get introduced into this community. Many players came to be in this tribe because of either an invitation from another player or a gift

¹ Crunchy is a gamer-specific term that refers to something whose rules have a lot of numbers, pieces, and rules.

² Fluff is referring to the story that provides setting and context for the game and traditionally has nothing to do with the actual rules.

³ Mech is a term that refers to media that includes giant robots.

of figures. This kind of exchange is important to this tribe, because the gift of invitation symbolizes the desire to spend time with the gifted. It is this inclusion into the miniature society that keeps enough people in each genre of the tribe for members to be able to continue playing these kinds of games. The symbolism of giving gifts is different in each culture but still has importance. In the article, "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari," Richard Lee said it this way, "...a group's customs and rules about appropriate social behavior can reflect important cultural values." He then goes on to say, "All people give gifts to each other, but there are rules and obligations about those gifts... there are rules about the polite way to receive a present." (Podolefsky, 11). Even in these small social tribes the ideas behind gift giving are still present and have significance in their exchanges.

Another tribe whose small circles are exclusive and close knit is the role play tribe. Role play games are games in which a group of people adopt personas to act out different scenarios. Each persona, usually called a character, is equipped with numbers to represent different skills that they have and which may or may not include supernatural powers. Most every role play game has a system of using dice to represent success and failure in performing actions. Role play games are played with books that are filled with rules, mechanics, and setting for a particular system and have a storyteller to fill in all of the details. Some role play games are module abased, which means that the whole story is already written down and you just follow along in the book and read the options according to what your players are doing, but if you have a very talented storyteller, they can make up the game as it progresses.

In these role play games the ST (storyteller) is god. He interprets the rules, makes the world that his players exist in, puts obstacles in his players' paths, and calculates the outcomes of battles that may occur. It is very difficult to be an ST. It takes the ability to perform on the fly

and keep the information on each of your player's characters in order. Because of this difficulty the groups tend to be very exclusive, for it is difficult for an ST to maintain a group of more than 8 players. This being said, it is impossible to play one of these games without someone to tell the story. It takes a special kind of person to be able to assume the identity of a character that is represented by no more than numbers on a page. This means that role players need a certain skill set.

The role player is a gamer of great literary and theatrical talents. Whether you are a story teller or merely a character, you must act out your assumed persona to convey your actions in game. Taking on these personas allow a player to act out his or her thoughts and more hidden aspects of their personalities without worrying about judgment. This kind of freedom can lead to both good and bad behaviors, on the good side you have the ability for personal growth, but on the bad side there is an opportunity to practice escapism. Escapism is defined as a "habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine." (*Merriam-Webster*) These people use games to escape their problems by becoming another person in a world that they can try to conquer, but escaping is not the only reason to play a role.

When you take on a persona you can learn things about yourself that you may not have previously known, and it can lead to confidence by acting out and overcoming difficult situations in game. These games draw in people who need outlet in many different forms, and promote camaraderie and teamwork. The interesting thing about role play games is that they are both the least and the most social of the tribes. They are the least social, because you are interacting as characters and not as yourself, and also the most because the game is built upon social interaction between these characters and the ST.

The last tribe is probably the most complex. This tribe is the deck building tribe, these gamers play a game that uses cards to represent actions and creatures used for attacking. There are two major sub tribes that exist in this tribe which in themselves are very different. The first is the collectable card games. Collectible deck builders include Magic, Yu-gi-o, and Pokemon and the players vary in age, gender, and background. This game is probably the easiest to get into and the hardest to be competitive in. The way that you gain cards is unique because they come in randomized booster packs⁴. It requires a higher disposable income to play these kinds of games because you don't know how many boosters that you will need to open before you crack⁵ the card that you are looking for. There is however an aftermarket for these cards but depending on the function and rarity they can cost 10 cents or the most expensive card I have heard of was 27,000 dollars.

Due to this flux in card prices the people who play collective card games exist with a couple of different mindsets. There are both competitive and casual players but even the casual players seem to have a strong desire to win. Magic especially has a very competitive side for there are tournaments which have both card and cash prizes. It seems, however, that the effectiveness of your deck is directly proportionate to the amount of money that you put into it, and only secondarily related to your skill level.

People who play collectable deck builders are diverse in their reasons for playing these kinds of games. The strangest reason I have seen people play is to make money, they very often open packs like someone else would buy a scratch off, this happens in magic especially, because of the substantial aftermarket value. The booster packs contain 15 cards, and in a good pack you may get one or two cards that actually have aftermarket value. Usually, however you

⁴ Booster packs are sealed packets of a set number of cards.

⁵ Cracking is opening booster packs.

get nothing, but people keep buying these packs in the chance that they will be able to make a couple dollars more than what they paid for the pack. There are some who play the game just for the community; those people generally play formats⁶ that are less reliant on money. These people generally play for the social interaction and the intellectual challenge rather than the money.

The other subset of this tribe is the inclusive deck builders, these games are released with all of the cards that you will need to play the game. They require minimal financial investment because you only have to buy one set of cards from each expansion as they are released and you always know what cards are included. This group draws in people of two different mindsets, the casual players and the competitive players. Casual players just play to have fun, win or lose they just enjoy playing the game. They are most likely drawn to this game for the low monetary investment that it takes to start playing. Competitive players are in it to win; there are usually tournaments where players can enter to showcase their skills. They are more interested in this format because of the challenge that playing within a limited card pool provides. This play is more balanced because everyone has the availability to have any and all of the cards to build with.

Each of these tribes is unique, as are the people in them but there are definite draws that are associated with each of the tribes. When people are attracted to the same game, they share at least some small similarities that can spark friendships between them. By spending more time together they grow into a community with other like-minded people. It was said very well by David Berreby:

The Human Mind is of a very imitative nature; nor is it possible for any set of men to

⁶ Formats are guidelines for building decks and rules on play.

converse often together, without acquiring a similitude of manners and communicating to each other their vices as well as their virtues. The propensity to company and society is strong in all rational creatures; and the same disposition which gives us this propensity, makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes like passions and inclinations to run, as it were, by contagion, through the whole club or knot of companions. (36)

The more time we spend in these communities the more alike we tend to become, and in this likeness we gain a group identity. While this is true, it is the game that brings us to these communities in the first place, and the type of gamer you are makes all the difference.

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