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The evolution of facilitation of board game practices in France

1969-2019

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Abstract

In the last 50 years, there has been a significant evolution of play and games practices in society. With the valuing of play for children's development, there has been a social and professional concern about the facilitation practices to encourage play and allow access to toys and games for all children. However, the new paradigm of board games as an adult leisure activity changed the representation of play and games and brought some confusion about why and how these practices make sense, in a useful way for the community.

Keywords : Toy libraries, Facilitation practices, Free play

As the French toy libraries organization (*Association des Ludothèques Françaises*), our purpose is to unite, represent and support Toy Libraries (mostly in France, although we do have some other European toy libraries in our network). We do so because we think play and games have a major interest for the community, and that it's important to make them accessible to everyone. In this paper, we will focus on how facilitation practices have evolved over the past fifty years. Of course, we will deal with toy libraries, but the other kinds of structures won't be forgotten.

But first, we would like to point out the topic of facilitation or mediation practices as a possible field of research. Indeed, we know about games themselves, sometimes about the people who play them, who design or craft them, and so on. But this article is about how players become players, how they know about the very existence of the games, how they learn to play them, how they pass their playing practices to other people, i.e., how games and gaming practices spread in a given society.

Of course, peer groups are central in facilitation practices. But it's still interest-

ing to understand how it happens: when does it occur? Where are games transmitted? Who is involved? Why some games and not others? etc. However, spreading amongst peers is by definition endogamic. Practices stay mostly in the same social class and the same cultural world. This is probably the case of modern edition board games, which are a hobby for the middle and upper classes (Berry & Coavoux, 2021.

Besides, as our modern democracies (sometimes) have some intention towards equality, it happens that some people try to share their knowledge and resources with others. So the objective is to set up places and organizations where people can have access to these resources.

Early concern about the accessibility of games

In the field of play and games, it started, at a political scale, with nurseries and kindergartens[1], which, in the late nineteenth century, were meant to take care of children during the day so that their parents could go to work in the factories, and at the same time give children health care and educational activities (Buisson, 1911). For Pauline Kergormard, founder and first inspector of nursery schools in France, « play is the child's work » (Kergomard, 1886). But as nursery school became more and more academic, there was a need to build other places to give children access to play and games. This is when toy libraries appeared.

The story of the first toy library (at least it is considered to be the first and constitutes our « mythical origin ») is recounted in a publication by the US Toy Library Association, based on a Master's thesis (Moore, 1995). It took place in 1934 in Los Angeles, during the great depression of the 1930's. At this time, the owner of a dime store noticed that some kids were steeling products in his shop, like sewing thread, bobbins and similar small material. He followed them and saw that the kids used his material to craft toys and play with them. He went to the police and they conducted a kind of social inquiry that showed that these kids were not hoodlums. The police and social services decided to implement a place where children could borrow toys and games for free. It was the first toy library, and it was a great success, although the Los Angeles experience didn't spread much in the 1930', even in the US.

1 There were also more local and stand-alone initiatives, like the one by Fritz Jahn, who collected many toys and games for the children of the orphanage he managed, and published several books about play and games. Our thanks to Ulrich Schädler for drawing our intention on this amazing work.

This first experience remains very significant however, as we will find this purpose in the whole history of the toy libraries up till now: to ensure an equal access to toys and games for everyone and especially children.

In Europe, the birth of toy libraries came with another approach. In northern Europe, toy libraries were designed at first as places for children with disabilities. There was a therapeutic purpose in giving these kids access to play , to develop sociability and mobility. This kind of facility is known as a lekotek[1]. In some countries, like the United States, we can find both lekoteks and toy libraries. But in France, the role of the lekotek is taken on by toy libraries with an inclusive purpose while mixing participants with and without disabilities. Some toy libraries however, work to improve their offer for people with dissabilities, sometimes focusing on a specific kind of disability: the toy library Accessi'jeux, based in Paris, works for example on making games available for visually impaired people.

Giving access to free-play

In France, the first toy library appeared in 1969. However, there was a difference with the north European lekotek, that was formally noticed in the third International congress of Toy Libraries in Brussels in 1984. Lekotek were indeed mostly oriented toward disabled people, whereas southern countries' toy libraries (Switzerland, France, Italy, Spain) were meant to be social and cultural facilities for everyone. With this idea, the same as in the 19th century, that playing is important for every child's development. And by playing, we mean free play.

Here some explanations are needed, for there is an ambiguity about the concept of free play. Sometime, especially in English-speaking publications or speeches, free play means playing without manufactured toys or games. In the adventure playground for example, children can use what they have found to build a tree house, or for pretend play. But for us, unstructured playis opposed to directed play. That means people can play freely with whatever they want: board games, toys, recycled objects and so on, with nobody telling them how they should play. So they choose the game they want to play, they choose their playing partners, etc. In short, free play means letting kids play the same way adults play, without all these educational good intentions.

Free play also means an autotelic activity: there is no other purpose beyond

1 « leka » means « to play » in Swedish.

playing, no hidden skill development objectives. Of course, playing isn't without consequences for the player: it brings pleasure or frustration, it activates some of his or her abilities (cognitive, social, technical, emotional…), it possibly connects people together, etc. We call these consequences « induced effects » of play. The role of the facilitator, the toy librarian, is then to bring the best playing experience, to maximize the beneficial effects, and to avoid the potential negative ones, like excessive practice.

From 1969 onwards, toy libraries started to spread. Slowly at first, but with a boom during the 80' and early 90' (fig. 1). As toy libraries spread, toy librarians are getting more professional. They began to think about how play can be supported, strongly influenced by childcare practices. For example, with the concept of non-interference, which means that the gaming experience is completely lead by the player, without directives or unwanted advice. However, the professional facilitates it with an appropriate space layout, by taking time to observe the play and being receptive.

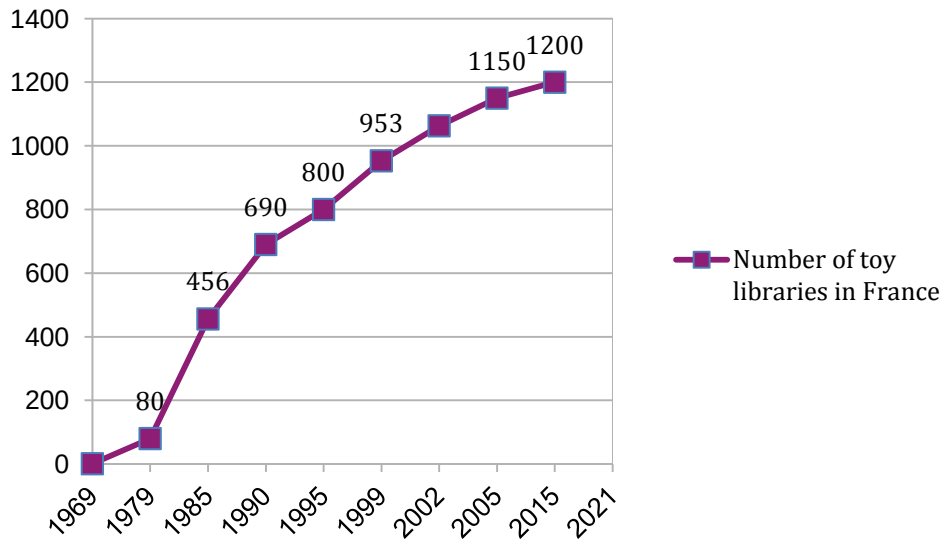

Figure 1.

A change of paradigm: board games as an adult cultural leisure practice

The practice of board games as a hobby for adults is ancient, of course. People played many kinds of games in public places, in pubs, or on the street. For more specific kinds of games, like wargames or, in the late 70', roleplaying games, the initiates had to look by themselves for specialized shops, magazines or clubs where they could find fellow players and resources for their hobby. But there weren't any

social or political intents for these hobbies to spread. Which is quite understandable, for play hasn't the same value for adults as for children. Playing games is certainly an interesting hobby for adults, but play (i.e. free play) is an essential and unavoidable way of development for children[1].

Around the mid 90', modern board game practice became more and more mainstream. We can see this with the expansion of modern adult-oriented board games, represented by titles like Klaus Teuber's *Settlers of Catane* for the German market and *Magic: the Gathering,* by Richard Garfield, for the American one. Since then, we can notice an increase both in the number of board games published and the number of copies sold. The democratization of this hobby is also visible with the introduction of such games in hypermarkets shelves, whereas they were previously restricted to specialized shops.

As the main era of toy libraries development occurred before this rise of published adult board games, they were at this time mostly designed as facilities for children, and the board games found there were mostly conventional and well-known.

There were exceptions however, and some toy libraries played an important role in the dissemination of new kind of games.Boulogne-Billancourt Toy library, for example, created in 1980 after the success of the first International board games design contest in 1977, that is well-known today, and the game exhibition that followed[2]. Toy libraries also played an active part in the importation of German board games in France and were recognized as a serious partner for board games publishers and distributors, like Oya, which introduced a lot of German games in France, working with homemade translations of the rules. Another example is, in 1991, the publication of an interview with the Ravensburger's marketing manager who gave explanations about the withdrawal of David Parlett's game *Hase und Igel for the* magazine of the French and Belgian toy libraries. Those examples show that, at this time, toy libraries were already involved in the democratization process of board game practices.

Still, some toy libraries missed this new era of board games and stayed mostly focused on children. Most of the toy librarians, at this time, were not « nerdy »

1 There are some discussions about this, in particular with Peter Smith's concept of « play ethos ». This controversy seems to come from epistemological issues about the construction of the concept of play and the reduction of the scientific approach to experimental protocols.

2 https://centreludique-bb.fr/le-clubb/qui-sommes-nous/historique-de-lassociation/

players, but childhood or cultural entertainment workers. However, toy libraries caught up during the first decade of the 21st century and started to turn towards adults to share this new paradigm of modern adult play as a hobby. The profile of toy librarians changed too, and nowadays people turning to this profession are mostly board game practitioners, which means sometimes a loss of childcare skills.

Meanwhile, other kinds of facilities rose to fill the gap, and especially board game cafés. This trade name is very interesting, because cafés and pubs have always been playing places for card games, dice games, dominos, pub games like darts, pool, and so on. The birth of board game cafés is then probably linked with the rise of the production of specific board games, as a hobby for middle and upper classes with a good cultural level. who don't want to play in the same places as the other. These cafés played a part in the spread of these new practices, giving them more visibility. However, their main audience remains the already enlightened. Thus, their practices mostly consist of giving those clients a place to play, games to play with and sometimes explanation of the rules.

Indeed, with this new era of adult-oriented board games, the most important facilitation practice seems to be the transmission of the game's rules. With the development of the internet, we can now see many amateur or professional websites or channels providing online videos of rule tutorials and game reviews. So games are now not only something to play, but also something to talk about.

And this introduces a new vision of board games as a cultural work, the same as books, comics, movies, music. Today there is a strong movement around the cultural recognition of games: recently, many media libraries, who were already invested in video games (already recognized as a cultural activity in France) turned to board games too, which implies it is a cultural media. But what « cultural » actually means is often unclear, especially in public policies. A first meaning of « culture » is what makes the identity of a human group that distinguishes itself from another. So we can talk of Japanese, Bantu or Victorian cultures. From this perspective, games are cultural, since ancient and modern games, or German and Anglo-Saxons ones are not the same. A second meaning is the idea of a work of authorship, which required creative or intellectual work. Here the recognition of the work of board game designers is at stake. And there is indeed a growing interest in how games are designed, what the authors' inspirations are, their intents while using a specific game mechanism instead of another, and so on. Last but not least, the label of « cultural » is linked to the recognition of the value of an activity or product by « the society », i.e. by the dominant classes. The same that happened for comic books, contemporary music, etc. now, as board games spread as a middle or up-

per-class hobby, it can claim this cultural aspect.

Culture is not enough

The cultural recognition of board games, which we would like to extend to all play practices, is completely in line with the free play approach. If games are full cultural works, it is a sufficient reason to play and to encourage playing practices. But nowadays, quite the contrary is happening. And as this cultural recognition of board games is about to be achieved, it's more than ever endangered: indeed, putting forward the utility of games to achieve external goals (education, marketing,…) tends to deny their intrinsic value. nowadays, facilitation practices in toy libraries mostly consist in preserving kids from games.

And it's not only about design mechanisms to make video games more and more addictive or about violence in games. As gaming became an industry, business companies tried to find the best arguments to sell their products. And today, we are overrun by serious games and the gamification process. Of course, using games for education is a very ancient and constant idea (Brougère, 1995). What changed is the spread of gaming practices and the growth of the game industry, and this brings the problem to a new scale, because of the space it takes in the actual mentalities. This very colloquium, as the whole of game studies, proves it beyond any doubt: in France there are around 800 new board games on the market each year (board game for play purposes) but how many game designers of "true" (ie. non-serious) games do we have here presenting their work? None. But we have many papers about gamification projects, serious games. So there is a problem.

The intentions are sometimes good. People who design serious games and gamified tools are often passionate players, but it has nevertheless a lot of damaging effects on society. Some wrong uses of this kind of thing, like hidden evaluations in a business environment, concealed work through gaming activities (as the gamified translation of Windows by Microsoft) have already been pointed out. But now we would like to point out the negative consequences of this global approach of games on children.

First, is the obsession with performance. Everything activity now has to improve your skills, increase your income, or the size of your brain (or whichever body part you want). Playing should not be wasted time, it has to be useful. Enjoying life is no longer a sufficient reason to play games. This is politically and philosophically questionable.

So now we have a lot of educational board games to improve children's capacities. Parents are rightly worried for their children's future so they often jump on these miracle products to make them better. For these new concepts introduce an implicit distinction between serious, educational, useful games and activities and what should then be « non-serious » and « non-educational » play. When unaware parents hear about the benefits of « play » for children, they think it's about these educational products and miss the importance of free activity for children's development. Consequences are a decrease in free time for children, always engaged in directed activities, which is linked to the increase of attention disorders, social behavior problems and performance anxiety (Gray, 2011).

Secondly, gamification leads to a loss of connection with reality de-realization of life. In real life, we don't do things only because it is fun, but because it's important to try to make the world better. And these should be distinct things: there is a time for play and to enjoy doing nothing useful, and there's a time for work, and work doesn't need to be a game to be interesting. It needs to make sense and to seem useful. So why make students work on gamified tools when we can make them work on real problems for which they show some interest? This should remind us of Roger Caillois' definition of play as (amongst other criteria) a separate activity: games can only exist as long as we can make a distinction between play and non-play.

So now the most important part of the toy librarian's facilitation work is to make this separation effective. Facilitating play means opposing the idea of games as tools. In concrete terms, that means constantly telling adults, parents or professionals (especially teacher): « please, let the kids play the way they want, this is what they need ».

Conclusion

We can see how facilitation practices radically evolved in the past 50 years. At first, it was about giving access to games because playing is important, or at least a healthy activity for children. And today, because playing is important, we have to struggle against the new paradigm of utility games.

This should not be so hard as, all things considered, it is a very simple semantic issue. Indeed, there is no problem using simulation tools for work, research, studies. And as game designers are good at building simulation systems, of course they are qualified to do this. But these are tools, potentially inspired from gaming prac-

tices, but they are not games and should not be called such.

Unfortunately, we also came to that point because academics and researchers failed to bring some clarification about this, considering the issue with a philosophical approach instead of a scientific one. This has led research to focus on the use of the words "play" and "games", instead of working on the anthropological and psychological process at work. Our hope lies in the children, who are much wiser than academics are: as reported by many toy librarians, when a directed game ends, there's always a young boy or girl who raises his or her hand and asks: "Please, can we go play now?"

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