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Social and cultural infrastructure for people and policy

Discussion Papers

May 2024

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5 Playful infrastructures: building communities through social board gaming

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Abstract

Although space plays an integral role in strengthening the UK's social and cultural fabric, merely putting people together in the same physical environment does not necessarily bring them together socially. The paper argues for a shift in the policy focus from the provision and maintenance of physical spaces where social connections can be formed to a more nuanced understanding of how such connections can be facilitated. Drawing on a case study of social board gaming in the post-pandemic UK, the paper explores how social gatherings structured around a shared activity with a clear interaction framework, such as the one provided by board games, makes existing social and cultural infrastructures (pubs, cafes, community centres, etc.) more convivial and accessible to diverse demographics, including neurodivergent people and those struggling with loneliness and social isolation. Despite many social, economic and civic benefits of social board gaming, there are some barriers and challenges that need to be addressed to fully harness the community-building potential of this activity. The paper presents several policy considerations drawn from existing good practice in accessibility, inclusion, outreach, impact generation and fundraising, and concludes with further recommendations for development and support of social board gaming in the UK.

Keywords: board games; community building; loneliness and isolation; neurodiversity; mental health

Introduction

The Bennett Institute for Public Policy's definition of social infrastructure includes three key elements that collectively constitute this notion – “who” (members of the local community), “what” (meaningful relationships between them), and “where” (physical spaces where such relationships are formed through regular interactions).¹ But how can these relationships and interactions be facilitated? As has been established by sociologists and anthropologists, merely putting people together in the same physical space does not guarantee that they will make new social ties.² To quote Lisa Peattie, conviviality “cannot be coerced, but it can be encouraged” by certain props, or, as William Holly Whyte called it, “triangulators” – external stimuli providing a linkage between people and prompting strangers to talk to one another.³ While policy literature often associates such facilitation with physical design solutions (e.g. public pianos, chatty tables or social benches),⁴ meaningful connections can also be built through social events. To make social and cultural infrastructures accessible to diverse demographics, including neurodivergent people and those struggling with loneliness and social isolation, such events should be structured around a shared activity providing a clear interaction framework.

A great example of such an activity is board games. Traditionally considered a private, mainly domestic pastime for children and niche hobby groups, board gaming has now become a prominent element of the UK's social life. Over the past decade, local enthusiasts in all corners of the country have been organising social gaming events in public places ranging from pubs and church halls to dedicated board game cafes and shops.⁵ Together, these spaces of play

¹ Kelsey, T. and Kenny, M. (2021), Townscapes: the value of social infrastructure, *Bennett Institute for Public Policy*.

² Small, M.L. and Adler, L. (2019), 'The Role of Space in the Formation of Social Ties', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 45: 111-32.

³ Peattie, L. (1998), 'Convivial cities', in M. Douglass and J. Friedmann (eds.), *Cities for Citizens* (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons), p. 248; and Whyte, W.H. (1980), *The social life of small urban spaces* (Washington, D.C., Conservation Foundation), p. 94.

⁴ See, e.g., Bynon, R. and Rishbeth, C. (2015), Benches for everyone, *The Young Foundation*. https://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The-Bench-Project_single-pages.pdf.

⁵ According to a community-sourced, work-in-progress map maintained by the UK Games Expo, there are at least 104 tabletop gaming clubs, 40 hobby game shops and 12 board game cafes in the UK as of January 2024: <https://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk/community/>. However, these numbers should be treated as a very conservative estimate. For instance, a country-wide Google Maps search for board game cafes alone returns over 80 results, whereas venues hosting non-profit gaming clubs and meetups are more difficult to quantify as such events are advertised through a range of online and offline channels and thus cannot be easily collated into one list without using special data scraping tools. For more precise estimates of social board gaming activities in specific UK regions, one can use location-based search on Meetup.com and/or Facebook.

form a rich and diverse infrastructure that proved particularly important after 16 months of COVID-19 restrictions, followed by a ‘second pandemic’ of mental health issues⁶ and the ongoing cost of living crisis. For many people, including those who had little or no prior interest in board games, social gaming became a remedy for the adverse effects of the societal and personal crises they have faced.

Between June 2021 and September 2022, I conducted a qualitative study of the UK’s social board gaming scene, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, which involved 50 in-depth interviews with event organisers, attendees and business owners and participant observations at 24 venues spanned across six regions of England. I also visited two roundtable discussions for community organisers at the 2022 and 2023 UK Games Expo. In this paper, I will use my research findings to demonstrate the community-building potential of social board gaming and propose policy recommendations for supporting the role of this activity in enhancing the UK’s social and cultural infrastructures and strengthening the social fabric of our cities and communities. Although these recommendations are primarily intended for existing and potential event organisers (both non-profit and commercial), they will also be of interest to national and local authorities, public and private bodies, and healthcare and social service providers that can support or partner with social gaming communities (e.g. the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; the Department of Health and Social Care; the Power to Change Trust; local councils; NHS practitioners; mental health, disability and youth charities).

The rest of the paper is organised into five sections. After a brief overview of the UK’s social gaming infrastructure (section 2), I will outline the social, economic and civic benefits of social board gaming (section 3) and examine the most common user barriers and challenges faced by event organisers (section 4). I will then present several policy considerations drawn from existing good practice in the fields of accessibility, inclusion, outreach, impact generation and fundraising (section 5) and conclude with five recommendations for further development and support of social gaming in the UK (section 6).

The infrastructure overview

Social board gaming events are public social gatherings where people interact through and around tabletop games. Such events can be regular or one-off, non-profit or commercial, community- or business-led. Thanks to the exceptionally wide scope of themes, genres and complexity levels of modern board games, they attract not only hobbyists but also casual players and those who have little interest in gaming per se but want to socialise. To organise a social gaming event, one needs a collection of games, a venue with tables and chairs, and at least one communication channel.

At present, the UK’s social gaming infrastructure is comprised of two main categories of spaces: specialised board game cafes and shops and non-specialised venues that are also used by the wider public for other activities. Non-specialised venues include pubs, bars, cafes, community centres, village halls, sports and leisure centres, social clubs, church halls, libraries and museums. Some of them organise their own gaming events to generate more revenue and/or enhance the social life of their local communities, while others host groups led by external

⁶ Gregory, A. (21 February 2022), ‘Millions in England face “second pandemic” of mental health issues’, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/21/england-second-pandemic-mental-health-issues-nhs-covid>.

⁷ UK Games Expo, (2023), Community, Available at: <https://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk/community/>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

According to a community-sourced, work-in-progress map maintained by the UK Games Expo, there are at least 104 tabletop gaming clubs, 40 hobby game shops and 12 board game cafes in the UK as of January 2024: <https://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk/community/>. However, these numbers should be treated as a very conservative estimate. For instance, a country-wide Google Maps search for board game cafes alone returns over 80 results, whereas venues hosting non-profit gaming clubs and meetups are more difficult to quantify as such events are advertised through a range of online and offline channels and thus cannot be easily collated into one list without using special data scraping tools. For more precise estimates of social board gaming activities in specific UK regions, one can use location-based search on Meetup.com and/or Facebook.

organisers. These groups, often called clubs or meetups, are usually run by local enthusiasts on a non-profit basis, although more recently there have also emerged micro-enterprises organising pop-up ticketed gaming events in commercial locations like pubs and bars.

However, most hospitality businesses are equally open to non-profit gaming groups, as long as attendees buy drinks and/or food. In specialised board game cafes and shops, social gamers typically pay a fixed cover charge that gives them access to the game collection, whereas drink and food orders are optional. Non-profit group organisers may also ask the group members to make small donations towards maintenance costs.

In 2020–2021, amid COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions on socialising, some communities put their events on pause, while others continued to meet online. Although digital platforms such as Discord, Tabletop Simulator, Board Game Arena, Zoom and Google Meet helped to support and maintain existing social gaming groups, they did not replace face-to-face interaction. While digital infrastructure is an important element of the UK's social gaming scene, it is first and foremost physical spaces that form its core.

Like other community facilities, the social board gaming infrastructure is unevenly distributed across the UK. Large metropolitan areas tend to have greater numbers and varieties of gaming events and venues compared to smaller and remote towns and villages.⁷ Nevertheless, the many values of social gaming can benefit all kinds of communities – and especially those in need of reinvigoration.

The benefits of social board gaming

The study has identified several ways in which social board gaming benefits local communities and the wider society. Following the Bennett Institute for Public Policy's classification of values generated by social infrastructure,⁸ these benefits can be divided into three groups – social, economic and civic.

Social benefits

Facilitating social interaction

Social gaming provides an opportunity to socialise and meet new people in a fun, informal environment. But unlike some other popular social activities, such as visiting a pub, board games add focus and structure to interaction, making it easier for those who do not feel comfortable in social settings:

If you're socially awkward and have anxiety issues, it's much easier to have a thing to focus on, and a game gives you that thing. You're still going for the pub experience, you're still going to be surrounded by people in a warm environment, but you don't have to rely on your ability to make small talk. Instead, you'll have a task that you're focused on, and there are rules, and there are turns, and you know what you're supposed to do (Katie,⁹ attendee, 50).

The focused and structured character of board game-assisted social interaction is particularly appealing to people with autism and other forms of neurodivergence:¹⁰

Because I'm neurodivergent, I find it difficult to socialise without some objective for the event. It gives a focus for the social endeavour, it gives structure that I can always refer back to if I get lost (Toby, attendee, 32).

⁸ Kelsey, M., and Kenny, T., (2012). Townscapes: The value of social infrastructure. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Available at: <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/social-infrastructure/>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

⁹ All names in direct quotes have been changed.

¹⁰ See also Cross, L. and Atherton, G. (2021), 'Board gaming on the spectrum', 2nd Game in Lab Symposium. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3Fpc2mpE0s>.

The facilitative effect of social gaming does not arise solely from the inherent interactivity of board games but is also largely driven by the work of event organisers. Many of them make conscious efforts to introduce and connect players to one another and support vulnerable attendees. As a result, social gaming events provide an interaction framework that enhances existing social and cultural infrastructures by making them more convivial, inclusive and open to different uses.

For instance, hosting a board game social at a library, church or sports centre creates so-called ‘accidental’ social infrastructure¹¹ in places originally intended for other purposes.

Creating a sense of community and belonging

The facilitative nature of social gaming creates an “instant community” effect that may only last for the duration of the event or develop into more meaningful relationships. New friendships and more fleeting convivial encounters facilitated by social gaming proved especially valuable for those who lost their social connections in the aftermath of COVID-19 or due to personal circumstances. For many people I interviewed, social gaming events served as a fast way to settle into a new city, town or rural community. Seasoned gamers also noted that playing board games in public places alongside non-hobbyists makes them feel more “socially accepted”. This phrase, referring to the once widespread dismissal of tabletop gaming as a niche, “geeky” pursuit, illustrates yet another aspect of the community-building role of social and cultural infrastructure.

Improving mental health and wellbeing

By facilitating social interaction and creating a sense of community and belonging, social gaming events help tackle loneliness and isolation. Many interviewees also felt that board gaming alleviates the fatigue caused by the overuse of digital technology and provides a healthier alternative to more traditional forms of alcohol-focused socialising. As one participant summarised it,

Everything we do in life now is in front of a screen – TV, computers, working, whatever. We want to get away from the screen, we want to socialise with people, but not necessarily by having large amounts of alcohol, like, “I’m gonna go to the pub and get smashed” (Evan, attendee, 40).

Other positive effects on health and wellbeing frequently mentioned by study participants included stress, anxiety and depression relief and improved cognitive abilities.

Economic benefits

In addition to strengthening the social fabric of UK cities and communities, social board gaming benefits them economically by supporting local businesses and making existing social and cultural infrastructures more versatile and up-to-date.

Supporting local businesses

Most board game cafes and some shops partner with local bakeries, coffee roasters, breweries and other food suppliers, sometimes within a 5-mile radius. Social gaming events hosted in non-specialised commercial venues – first and foremost, pubs – help them bring in and retain customers. Hospitality businesses started to recognise the value of social gaming after COVID-19 lockdowns and even more so amid the cost of living and energy crisis. While some of them are now running their own game socials, others are reaching out to local gaming groups or coming up with even more bespoke solutions. For instance, The Hop Garden pub in Birmingham invited a local award-winning board game designer Andy Hopwood to host a weekly game night as their resident “game guru”.¹² According to recent market reports, mixing dining with social entertainment offers good value for money to consumers with less disposable income and appeals to younger demographics who tend to drink less than previous generations.¹³

¹¹ The British Academy (2023), Space for community: strengthening our social infrastructure.

¹² Hop Garden Pub, (2022), What’s on, Available at: <https://sites.google.com/view/hopgardenpub/whats-on?authuser=0>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

¹³ Mintel (2022), UK Leisure Outlook – Autumn 2022; Mintel (2022), Pub Visiting – UK – 2022.

Contributing to urban regeneration

Apart from driving more footfall to the high street, social gaming can bring new life into underutilised buildings. For example, the owners of the Dice Saloon shop in Brighton's London Road repurposed and refurbished a disused former church (at one point occupied by an unlicensed nightclub) and turned it into a popular gaming hub that regularly hosts beginner-friendly events and runs a kids club. Along with other creative and independent businesses operating in that neighbourhood, Dice Saloon contributes to its ongoing regeneration, both functionally and aesthetically. The owner of another gaming venue, converted from a defunct conservative club in a former navy town, pointed out the role of his business, alongside other social and cultural amenities, in youth retention in the area:

There's nothing quite like it when it's summer and sunny and there's always stuff, little random events. Young people set roots here and then they stay, and that's helping to regenerate the city. It's the opposite of brain drain, it's retaining a lot of the students (Steve, board game cafe owner, 36).

Civic benefits

For some people, participation in social board gaming is not just a fun pastime but also a pathway to civic engagement. This mostly applies to leaders and active members of non-profit gaming groups, who can try their hand at various aspects of community organising, such as liaising with venues and sponsors, developing the group code of conduct, advertising, maintaining social media channels, volunteering at gaming events, resolving interpersonal conflicts and tackling other strategic and day-to-day tasks.

Another common form of engagement, fundraising, is accessible to a broader audience of social gamers. Thus, the Herefordshire Board Gamers community raised over £22,000 for local and national charities in a seven-year period through donations, merchandise and second-hand games sales and raffles. On top of that, they run a community lending game library, provide games and other equipment for local community-focused events and initiatives and offer support and guidance to other gaming groups across the country.¹⁴

Although commercial businesses are naturally more focused on generating profit, some of them also seek to improve the lives of their local communities. In 2021, the Dice Board Game Lounge in Portsmouth engaged its customers in a community outreach project that helped over 20 local schools launch tabletop game clubs. The participating schools received tailored bundles of second-hand games, donated partly by the company itself and partly by its customers and friendly game publishers, along with guidance on how to play them.

To make the benefits of social board gaming accessible to a wide range of demographics, we need to identify the barriers that keep people from participating in this activity and recognise the challenges faced by event organisers.

Barriers and challenges

Understanding the different types of user barriers and acknowledging the key challenges encountered by community organisers is crucial for the creation and maintenance of open, accessible and inclusive social and cultural infrastructure. The key barriers to participation in social board gaming range from general stereotypes about board games to more specific personal, organisational and interpersonal obstacles. The key challenges for event organisers include funding, liaising with venues, promotion and managing interpersonal relationships. These barriers and challenges are explored in turn below.

¹⁴ Herefordshire Board Gamers, (2022), Home, Available at: <https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Stereotypes about board games

Despite the long-term popularity of board gaming among adults and its growing acceptance in mainstream culture, it is still often assumed to be a pastime meant either for children or for “geeks”. The “geek” stereotype is twofold: on the one hand, it implies that board games are a less socially accepted form of leisure (than, for instance, sports); on the other, it makes them appear too intellectually demanding or competitive. Altogether, these assumptions can keep non-hobbyists from participating in board game socials and complicate securing administrative and financial support for social gaming initiatives.

Personal barriers

Lack of social confidence and/or gaming experience

This is the most common barrier experienced by newcomers to social gaming events, especially if they turn up on their own. For those with little prior exposure to board games, the stress of walking into a room full of strangers is often coupled with performance anxiety:

I get so many [direct] messages about, “I’m turning up by myself, is that alright?”. It’s very scary, walking into a room of people you don’t know, not knowing what you’re playing, not feeling like you know the games. People worry so much about, “I’m slowing you guys down because I don’t know the game” (Isabel, organiser, age not specified).

While most attendees tend to overcome this barrier fairly quickly, for some it can take weeks and months, if not years. Another meetup organiser, Brian (40), mentioned that the group he runs “has had some members with anxiety get as far as the front door of a pub and then walk away”.

Health-related barriers

These include short- and long-term physical and mental health conditions and illnesses that directly or indirectly impair one’s ability to socialise in public places. Direct barriers range from seasonal illnesses to neurological and psychiatric disorders, while the impact of indirect ones (e.g. weakened immune system) became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when many clinically vulnerable people and their family members continued to shield and isolate even after the end of general restrictions. In addition to these socialising-related barriers, board gaming involves prolonged sitting and engages sensory and cognitive skills, which may be problematic for those who have mobility issues or learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia or ADHD).

Lack of leisure time

Just like with other leisure activities, it can be difficult to carve out time for social gaming due to a lack of free time for socialising. Parents and people with caring responsibilities, especially women, are particularly affected by this issue.¹⁵ Not only does lack of time prevent them from attending social gaming events as frequently as they would want to, but it can also stop them from taking up a more active role as an organiser or force them to step down from it, thus limiting their opportunities to influence their group’s culture.

Organisational barriers

Venue issues

As interviews and observations showed, certain types of gaming venues can attract or intimidate certain groups of people. For example, cafes (both specialised and non-specialised) appear particularly appealing to women, LGBTQIA+ and BAME attendees and those who have little or no gaming experience. As one organiser put it, cafes, despite their commercial status, feel more “public” than community centres, social clubs and church halls because:

¹⁵ Pobuda, T. (7 August 2022), ‘Women are too tired and time-strapped for board games due to shrinking leisure time’, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/women-are-too-tired-and-time-strapped-for-board-games-due-to-shrinking-leisure-time-186372>.

In such spaces, there's a bit less of that [social] mix, it's a bit more focused on the games and you feel a bit trapped in. It's more of a commitment, whereas if you are in a public space and you are a bit nervous about attending and you've come in on your own, you can just walk past and have a look and go, "OK, they don't look like a bunch of weirdoes, it's not gonna be just me and one old guy, it's a room full of people" (Ryan, organiser, 42).

Furthermore, cafes are more socially and culturally inclusive than pubs:

The fact that it's a cafe really helps. As a Muslim, I don't always feel comfortable in pubs where I am limited in what is offered for me, or when people drink too much (Ariana, attendee, 38).

That said, events held in quieter, more isolated spaces such as community centres or separate function rooms at pubs better accommodate the needs of neurodivergent people who struggle with sensory overload. Overall, venue type is not always a decisive factor. Such variables as cost, location, disabled access (or lack of), layout and seating arrangement, lighting and levels of noise can also create or remove barriers for different groups and individuals.

Informational barriers

Most social gaming events are advertised exclusively through social media (and often through one given platform, e.g. Meetup or Facebook), which makes them less discoverable by non-users and less technically-savvy people. However, indoor and outdoor advertising used by some gaming venues for internally organised events can only reach existing customers/visitors and those who live or work nearby.

Interpersonal barriers

While social gaming groups generally strive to be friendly and welcoming to newcomers, they are not immune to interpersonal tensions and conflicts. Inexperienced gamers and women (who are often assumed to be newbies, regardless of their actual gaming experience) often have to contend with hostile or patronising attitudes from other group members. However, even experienced male gamers may feel like outsiders if they join an unfamiliar gaming group that fails to welcome and include them:

There was nobody to welcome you, everyone was busy playing a game, and the person running it wasn't really running it. They'd organised a day and that was pretty much all they'd done, and that didn't feel as welcoming at all. You kind of had to fight your way in, and there were definitely cliques going on. I haven't gone back (Evan, attendee, 40).

Other issues mentioned in the interviews included (from more to less common): unwanted attention towards women (both in-person and online), microaggression (sexist, transphobic or racist comments) and aggressive play (yelling, swearing or throwing things).

The key challenges for event organisers

Funding

While community-led gaming events are often assumed to "run themselves" at no cost, their organisation requires time, transport (to and from the venue), physical work (moving tables and chairs, carrying dozens or hundreds of games), the actual games (which are prone to wear and tear) and a budget for advertising (including the cost of setting up a group page on Meetup.com, the most popular online platform for social events). Additional resources may include storage space, foldable and special needs furniture and even portable toilets for outdoor events. Commercial organisers, despite being more financially resourceful, have their own challenges of maintaining the balance between social impact and profit:

Our [social project] now sits in a weird place because we haven't set a charity or anything up for it, and it technically runs at a loss on our books (Steve, board game cafe owner, 36).

Liaising with venues

Externally organised gaming events require a continuous negotiation between the organiser and the hosting venue. All too often gaming groups are forced out of their original space because the owners no longer can or want to accommodate them. The most common reasons for venue change include double-booking, loud music, disturbance from other customers and the pressure to buy more drinks and food.

Promotion

Increasing visibility and membership on a limited budget is the top priority for new gaming groups, especially if they are located in less populated areas or have well-established competitors.

Managing interpersonal relationships

From meeting and greeting newcomers to occasional conflict resolution, maintaining a fun, safe and inclusive environment at gaming events involves a lot of emotional labour. Supporting vulnerable attendees is a particularly challenging task that requires special knowledge, skills and, most importantly, boundaries:

We had someone come in who had a crisis here. Luckily, one of our members is a trustee of [a mental health support organisation]. She took this gentleman to one side and had a chat, signposted and said, “You need to get help”. We want to create a safe space, but we’re not a support service, we’re not therapy. That’s not appropriate for a games night, it would cause stress for the volunteers and lower the tone for everyone (Brian, organiser, 40).

While some of the barriers and challenges discussed above are not unique to social board gaming, it is important to understand how they play out in specific contexts and what needs to be done to reduce their impact on the users and producers of social and cultural infrastructures. The next section will showcase the best practices that help strengthen the role of social board gaming in creating open, accessible and inclusive spaces for community.

Policy considerations

The following policy considerations build on the existing good practice of social board gaming, identified through the analysis of organisers' and attendees' experiences. They include general accessibility and inclusion measures suitable for most gaming groups, as well as more advanced outreach, impact generation and fundraising solutions.

Accessibility and inclusion

Policies

Having a code of conduct and a protocol for reporting and addressing unacceptable behaviour is essential for preventing and managing conflicts in gaming groups. In addition to general policies against abuse, harassment and discrimination,¹⁶ some organisers develop guidelines that suit their specific needs. For instance, the Gamers@Hart shop in Hartlepool has a safeguarding policy in place for its children-focused events.¹⁷ Other organisers mentioned the importance of communicating the rules in a friendly manner (i.e. avoiding too many prohibitive statements) and displaying them both online and on printed materials (e.g. posters).

Venue characteristics

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, good practice includes disabled access, free entry or affordable/discounted prices, board game-friendly furniture, lighting and soundscape, non-alcoholic drink options and quieter chill-out zones where neurodivergent people can decompress.

¹⁶ Dungeons & Dragons, (2022), Code of conduct, Available at: <https://dungeonsanddragons.co.uk/code-of-conduct>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

¹⁷ Gamers @ Hart, (2022), Safeguarding, Available at: <https://gamersathart.co.uk/about-us/safeguarding/>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Promotion

Keeping the group's social media active (ideally on multiple platforms) helps tackle not only informational but also social confidence barriers for new members. To ensure access and inclusion for those who do not use digital technology confidently or at all, some printed alternatives should also be distributed through appropriate channels (e.g. a local community noticeboard).

Pre- and post-event support

Welcoming new members in social media groups and answering their queries in direct messages and public comments creates a friendly online environment and helps mitigate newcomer anxiety. Some groups, e.g. Portsmouth on Board, also use social media to pre-arrange games and share links to rulebooks and YouTube playthroughs. Herefordshire Board Gamers created a detailed step-by-step walkthrough guide that explains what happens at a game night and includes multiple photos of every venue they meet at, from exterior to interior, along with information on food and drink options, costs, parking and disabled access.¹⁸ Photos from events, taken and shared on social media with attendee consent, contribute to community building and give new members an idea of the group's composition and atmosphere.

Support at events

Door-to-table support includes signage and dedicated greeters (ideally wearing distinctive shirts, vests or lanyards) who welcome attendees and help them find game partners. It is important to offer a range of games for different skills, abilities, interests and personalities, recognise potential issues and give heads-ups where necessary (e.g. certain games can be challenging for people with dyslexia, colour blindness, autism, etc.) without drawing attention to individuals. However, Herefordshire Board Gamers also offer optional name badges with blank space for preferred pronouns, disabilities, traits and other things attendees may wish to disclose. Unobtrusive monitoring of people's behaviour and interactions and quick friendly check-ins with new members should continue throughout the event.

Special events

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most gaming groups moved their meetings online, which, despite inevitable technical issues, brought people together across geographical borders and became a lifeline for those who felt the most isolated. After the end of restrictions, some organisers chose to run occasional online sessions for those who cannot attend in person. Other types of special events target people with special needs (e.g. quieter autism-friendly meetings) or shared identity (e.g. LGBTQIA+ socials) and complement gaming with other social activities (book clubs, group walks and hikes, cinema visits).

Feedback

Attendee feedback, collected both informally and through surveys, helps organisers and business owners better understand the needs of their communities, identify areas for improvement and, if necessary, gather evidence for funding bids.

Other initiatives

To better support vulnerable attendees, the organisers of Herefordshire Board Gamers took a free course in mental health first aid. They also run awareness-raising workshops on allyship and gender-inclusive language in board gaming.¹⁹

¹⁸ Herefordshire Board Gamers, (2022), Our venues, Available at: <https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk/guides/guides-hb-events/what-is-a-games-night/> ; <https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk/where/>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

¹⁹ Herefordshire Board Gamers, (2023), Allyship & Privilege and Gender Inclusive Language, Available at: <https://herefordshireboardgamers.co.uk/allyship-privilege-and-gender-inclusive/>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Outreach, impact and funding

Non-profit gaming groups seeking to expand their outreach and impact often partner with other local clubs and meetups (e.g. social anxiety and mental health support groups, “geek” and “nerd” culture communities on Meetup.com), signpost attendees to local health service providers, support relevant charities and council initiatives such as warm rooms (which also helps promote the benefits of social board gaming for health and wellbeing) and participate in local festivals, fairs and community showcase events.

On top of that, there are non-profit organisations specifically focused on using social gaming for social good. Board in the City, a community interest board game cafe in Southampton, provides a wide range of social services, from educational and mental health support to surplus food delivery and emergency housing, and partners with 30 local organisations including schools and colleges, social enterprises, charities and businesses.²⁰ Disability Support Project, a charity based in Redditch, runs a weekly public-facing board game cafe with free access, affordable hot meals, dedicated game buddies and more formal and tailored mentorship services for those who struggle with depression, anxiety, stress, learning difficulties and mental health disorders.²¹

As mentioned earlier, commercial board game cafes and shops have limited opportunities for community outreach and engagement, but sponsorship from and partnerships with public sector organisations can be a good solution for socially driven businesses. For example, board game cafe Socialdice recently received a grant from Swansea Council to provide free access to autism-focused and LGBTQIA+ socials and purchase more disability-friendly and educational games, while the Fan Boy Three shop in Manchester ran a series of discounted autism support sessions in conjunction with A Spectrum of Possibilities charity. The owners of Hartlepool’s Gamers@Hart shop, in addition to their own social project, government-funded holiday clubs for children and youth, launched a sister community interest company People’s Meeples in partnership with their regular customers, which became an outlet for other community-focused initiatives, such as Literacy Game Bundles for local families, post-COVID recovery game nights and personalised wellbeing support offered through social prescribers.

The key sources of external funding available for non-profit social gaming groups and organisations (and, in some cases, for commercial enterprises, too) include donations from businesses (UK board game publishers and other companies looking to support local community initiatives) and grants from public and private organisations (local councils, NHS, UK Community Foundations, The National Lottery Community Fund, Asda Foundation, etc.). In June 2023, Gamers@Hart and People’s Meeples’ directors Peter and Jeni Hart organised a seminar “Finding Funding for Community Gaming” at the UK Games Expo and shared their experience of securing nearly £200,000 for their projects since the pandemic. To conclude, even unsuccessful bids and non-monetary awards help increase the visibility and recognition of social board gaming as a community-building instrument.

²⁰ Board in the City, (2022), About us, Available at: <https://www.boardinthecity.co.uk/about/>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

²¹ Sanctuary Gaming Cafe, (2023), About us, Available at: <https://www.sanctuarygamingcafe.co.uk>. Last accessed: 26th April, 2024.

Conclusion and further recommendations

Although space plays an integral role in strengthening the UK's social and cultural fabric, shifting the policy focus from “where” to “how” is necessary to ensure the best use of existing social and cultural infrastructure. The rise of social board gaming in the UK indicates a demand for placemaking solutions that facilitate meaningful connections between people from different backgrounds and walks of life. Social gaming events provide an interaction framework that makes the UK's social and cultural infrastructure more convivial, accessible, inclusive and open to different uses. However, there are barriers and challenges that need to be addressed to fully harness the social, economic and civic benefits of this activity. In addition to policy considerations drawn from existing good practice in accessibility, inclusion, outreach, impact generation and fundraising, there are several areas for support and improvement that can be summarised in the following five further policy recommendations:

1. Both non-profit and commercial event organisers should be recognised as an asset contributing to strengthening the social fabric of their communities. Their knowledge and experience should be shared and exchanged with their peers and other social service providers (e.g. local councils; the NHS; mental health, disability and youth charities) through national and local workshops, roundtable discussions and a dedicated online resource containing, among other things, accessibility and inclusion policies, impact case studies and fundraising tips. Launching a national non-profit organisation (further referred to as NNPO) bringing together the leaders of the UK's board gaming community and dedicated to using social gaming for social good would be a helpful step in that direction.
2. More partnerships are needed between social gaming communities and local and national social care and healthcare organisations (first and foremost, the NHS and mental health charities such as Mind), particularly in the areas of social prescribing, signposting and appropriate mental health support training for organisers.
3. Non-profit organisers can benefit from bespoke training and support in social marketing, which will help them promote the benefits of social gaming. This initiative may be funded by a large UK-based or international game publisher (e.g. Asmodee or Big Potato Games) and administered by the NNPO.
4. More research is needed into the CIC model of social gaming venues and how it can be used in local urban and rural regeneration projects.
5. A location-based app or website matching event organisers (including but not necessarily limited to social gaming groups) with available venues, funded by a national grant (e.g. The National Lottery Community Fund), would allow for a more efficient use of the UK's social and cultural infrastructure.

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