The ethnography of BoardGameGeek

Janne Henriksson
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English
Languages and Literature
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
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Abstract

This thesis produces an ethnographic description of BoardGameGeek (BGG). BGG is a website for board game information as well as a community for its users. The thesis aims to locate signs of a community on the website to form an understanding of an existing virtual community and its practices. Previous research on computer-mediated communication and virtual communities form the theoretical framework for the thesis. The methodology in this qualitative study is virtual ethnography where the author sets themselves in the community as a member to collect experiences and observations through participant observation. Data for the study is the website itself and the author's field notes. The website data includes an array of discussion forums, the existing structural elements and affordances offered to the users on the site.

Elements for a virtual community and methods on locating them were established based on earlier literature and those criteria were shown to exist on BGG through ethnographical analysis. Based on the analysis, BGG has several elements of a virtual community, including different levels of membership and participation, shared values and norms, support and reciprocity as well as conflicts. Analysis shows the existence of many asynchronous, textual discussions on a variety of topics and the existence of several different modes of discussion. Users' feelings of a sense of community through different interactions can be noticed from the discussion. BGG users participate in building the site by providing and editing information, including texts, images, and videos in the board game database. Additionally, users are tasked with moderating other users' contributions. Politeness and respecting others are guidelines that users are encouraged to adhere to by BGG and by each other. These elements point to the existence of a virtual community. The ethnography can be extended by in-depth user interviews and studying the discussions and interactions of users in them.

Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkielma tuottaa etnografisen kuvauksen BoardGameGeekistä (BGG). BGG on nettisivusto lautapeleistä sekä yhteisö sen käyttäjille. Tutkielman tavoitteena on paikantaa sivustolta yhteisön ominaispiirteitä, jotta voidaan muodostaa kuva virtuaalisesta yhteisöstä ja sen käytänteistä. Aiempi tietokonevälitteiseen viestintään ja virtuaalisiin yhteisöihin liittyvä tutkimus muodostaa tutkimuksen teoreettisen viitekehyksen. Tämän kvalitatiivisen tutkimuksen metodologia on virtuaalinen etnografia, jossa tutkija asettuu mukaan tutkittavan yhteisön jäseneksi kerätäkseen kokemuksia ja huomioita osallistuvan havainnoinnin avulla. Tutkimuksen aineistoa on itse sivusto sekä tutkijan kenttämuistiinpanot. Nettisivuston aineistoon kuuluvat keskustelufoorumit, olemassa olevat sivuston rakenteet sekä käyttömahdollisuudet, joita sivusto tarjoaa käyttäjille.

Pohjaten aiempaan tutkimustietoon, tutkimus määritteli virtuaalisen yhteisön ominaispiirteet sekä tavat paikantaa niitä. Näitä piirteitä todettiin olevan BGG:ssä etnografisen analyysin avulla. Analyysin perusteella BGG:ssä on useita virtuaalisen yhteisön ominaispiirteitä: mm. eritasoisia jäseniä sekä eritasoista osallistumista, jaetut yhteiset arvot ja normit, tukea ja vastavuoroisuutta sekä ristiriitoja. Sivustolla on paljon pitkän ajan kuluessa tapahtuvaa, eri tavoin käytävää, tekstimuotoista keskustelua eri aihepiireistä. Keskustelupalstoilta on havaittavissa käyttäjien kokema yhteisöllisyyden tunne. BGG:n käyttäjät osallistuvat sivuston rakentamiseen lisäämällä ja editoimalla tietoa lautapeleistä tekstinä, kuvina ja videoina sivuston tietokantaan. Käyttäjien vastuulla on myös toisten käyttäjien tiettyjen kontribuutioiden tarkastaminen. BGG ja sen käyttäjät rohkaisevat toisiaan kohtelemaan toisia kohteliaasti ja toisia kunnioittavalla tavalla. Nämä kaikki piirteet osoittavat virtuaalisen yhteisön olemassaolon. Etnografista kuvausta on mahdollista laajentaa tekemällä tutkimushaastatteluja ja tutkimalla tarkemmin keskusteluja ja käyttäjien vuorovaikutusta niissä.

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1 Introduction

The objective of this paper is to produce an ethnographic description of BoardGameGeek (BGG) by conducting a detailed qualitative case study analysis of it.[1] BGG is a website that is a database for all types of board and card games as well as a place where people gather online.

The technological developments of the recent decades have allowed for *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) to become commonplace almost everywhere in the world. In turn, this has allowed for local and global *virtual communities* to emerge. It must be pointed out that researchers are yet to fully agree on a conclusive definition of what exactly constitutes a virtual community. The core of this thesis is to search for traces of a virtual community and analyse them. Compared to traditional *communities*, virtual communities share many similarities but also deviate from them in many ways. This study will showcase different tiers of community and culture in a virtual world. They will be presented with an analytical mind-set. The theoretical background of the study will comprise of the aspects of CMC and virtual communities, and they will be discussed in section 2. Virtual communities increasingly interest scholars to study human behaviour online. This study will provide information of people's online social activities on the website in question and through that will attempt to increase understanding of human conduct online.

The methodologies used in this study are *virtual ethnography* and *participant observation* that are based on ethnographic research in the anthropological field of study. Having been a registered member on BGG for roughly fourteen years allows the author advantages on discovering fractions of data that might be unnoticeable to new or arbitrary users of the site. It must be considered that my membership might generate a certain bias when conducting analysis but the aim is to conduct analysis as objectively as possible. The methodology, the data and the ethical approach will be presented in section 3 of the study.

Section 4 will provide a detailed analysis of the topic based on the theoretical background. An overview of sense of community on BGG, a discussion of the structures and affordances of the website that offer participation and an examination of users interacting, contributing and organising will be presented. Section 5 will discuss the themes further and section 6 will have the conclusion of the thesis. This scope will provide the reader with an understanding of the research fields in question as well as an adequate ethnography of BGG and a broad perception of its functions and actions as a virtual community.

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[1] https://boardgamegeek.com/

2 Theoretical background

The theoretical background of this study will be based on previous studies done in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and studies of virtual communities. As other websites, BGG relies on CMC as a structural basis to build its virtual community. Knowledge of earlier research in these fields will help in creating an adequate ethnographical description of BGG. This section will provide definitions and an overall view of the theoretical fields of study that are employed in this thesis. Section 2.1 will cover CMC and section 2.2 will have a view of virtual communities.

2.1 Computer-mediated communication

Technology has taken significant advances in recent decades. This has allowed for CMC to become a widespread phenomenon. Many scholars, e.g., Mann & Stewart (2000) define CMC as text-based communication between humans which occurs through computers (p. 2). Herring (1996) has noted that these texts can include graphic, auditory or tactile forms (p. 10). This stance is followed in this thesis and all references to *texts* might include different text variants.

CMC occurs in two different forms, synchronous and asynchronous (see, e.g. Herring, 1996, p. 1 and Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 2). The previous one includes all communication that happens in real-time between two or more participants. The latter covers communication that does not happen in real-time, rather over time where two or more participants leave textual traces online at different times yet forming a communication process. Asynchronous CMC processes can possibly happen and conclude in a short period of time but might also take years or even decades and occur as commonplace online actions in emails, private messages, discussion forums, social media sites and blogs. Jones (1995a) notes that this type of communication has gained a "ubiquitous nature" (p. 1). Asynchronous communication is the core of this thesis as almost all communication on BGG can be labelled as asynchronous. Mann & Stewart (2000) acknowledge that CMC can be used in several different fields of study: including analysis of the internet and internet culture, human behaviour online, linguistic status of CMC, social interaction, self-presentation and psychology of the internet (pp. 3–4). Herring (2004) adds to this by noting that a research boom in human behaviour has been triggered by the Internet as people who are active online leave textual markers making the study of their social interactions feasible for researchers (p. 338).

Mann & Stewart (2000) state that there are several advantages of using CMC as research data in qualitative research projects. Time and space barriers might sometimes restrict face-to-face research whereas CMC allows researchers to work without these constraints. This allows for cost savings as

well. Data is often obtainable online with relative ease compared to field studies, tape recordings and so on. In addition, research data from different geographical locations is often easily available through CMC and it also allows contact with people or peoples that might otherwise be difficult to reach. CMC can also offer researchers access to 'closed sites' that relate to areas that would be difficult to access otherwise. Mann & Stewart (2000) note that CMC is a unique platform for studying people who might have similar interests, experiences or expertise as is the case with users of BGG (pp. 17–25).

As CMC is studied, it is important to note that it is not an entity completely disconnected from the offline world as Ess (2011) notes that even though the distinction to online and offline worlds is often made in CMC research, it is not a realistic view of the situation, rather the two worlds are interwoven with each other (pp. 23–24). In CMC research, a stance must be taken where it is pointed out that online worlds would not exist without offline worlds. Online discussions are often based on events or concrete things in offline environments. This is the case in this study as the site, its database and discussion are based on physical games that exist and are designed to be played.

Holmes (2005) adds to these ideas by saying that CMC allows for a large group of people to communicate with ease in different ways (p. 47). CMC allows socially produced space and creates an open, often anti-hierarchical, conversational platform for people to use (p. 60). Jones (1995b) adds to Holmes's (2005) statement by concluding that "CMC is, in essence, socially produced space" as well as claiming that people can easily navigate social structures through CMC (p. 17). If this is true, a stance can be taken that alongside or through other social structures, communities can emerge through CMC. The next section will discuss this by analysing studies on virtual communities.

2.2 Virtual communities

The Dictionary of Sociology (Abercrombie et al., 1994) notes that the definition for community is found one of the most vague and elusive in sociology. This notion is confirmed by Herring (2004) who writes that "community is an inherently abstract concept" (p. 335). Jones (1997) discusses that while some scholarly voices have denied the existence of a community without geographical boundaries, there are sociological definitions that agree that community is not only a geographical concept but a sociological one (Section 1). McMillan & Chavis (1986) provide guidelines for a closely integrated community in their idea of a "sense of community" where community members interact, share experiences and donate time and energy for the benefit of creating the community. The sense of community is formed by four key elements. The first element, *membership*, means that a

person has a right to belong to a group by investing part of themselves to become a member. This also requires that there are some types of boundaries that define who is a member and who is not. An important point is that a member must be able to identify themselves as part of the group. The second element, *influence*, is reciprocal – the community needs to be able to influence its members in some way as individual members need to have a feeling of the ability of being able to have an influence in the group. The third element, *integration and a fulfilment of needs*, means that the community must meet the needs of its members and that the members need to feel that their association with the community is rewarding to them. The fourth and final element, *shared emotional connection*, includes several emotional meanings that could be relevant to a member, such as "the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close" and "the more positive the experience and the relationships, the greater the bond". The sense of community that McMillan & Chavis (1986) offer relates almost as a utopian idea of a community but it seems to offer a very thorough explanation of what different factions a single community is comprised of (pp. 8–14).

Another utopian image of community is offered by Gudykunst & Kim (1997) who regard communities as places where justice and loyalty are shared and the shared commonalities are recognised. In addition, they say an engaged community makes it easier to support one another and a characteristic of community is the giving of oneself to others (pp. 263–264). Gudykunst & Kim (1997) paint a picture of communities by making seven assumptions on communities and continue with seven community-building principles based on them (pp. 267–268):

Assumptions:

1. Communities are necessary to make life worth living

2. Each person has a responsibility for building and developing a community in their life

3. Cultural and ethnic diversity are necessary resources for building a community.

4. Communities can be any size but work must be started in smaller groups to develop larger ones.

5. We are what we think – we act according to our belief systems and thought processes.

6. Conflict is part of community and must be conducted gracefully and through persuasion, not coercing.

7. One person can make a difference in relationships and community development

Community-building principles:

1. Be committed to building the community

2. Be mindful, contemplate own and community's behaviour

3. Be unconditionally accepting, value diversity, do not try to change others.

4. Be concerned for both ourselves and others

5. Be understanding, strive to understand others as completely as possible

6. Be ethical

7. Be peaceful.

Gudykunst & Kim (1997) state that if people consistently act according to these ideas, communities will occur (pp. 267–268). Even though it might not be necessary for all of the assumptions to materialise and all of the principles to be in use to warrant a community to spring up it can be argued that these guidelines would enhance that possibility and that wherever we notice behaviour correlating to these assumptions and guidelines there is at least a significant possibility of an existing community.

Baym (1998) writes that early studies on CMC were mainly concentrated on how CMC could assist group work processes and different organisational uses and results might have concluded that CMC in not an adequate tool for enhancing social relationships. It was only later discovered that these relationships actually thrive online and have done since early uses of CMC. Baym (1998) says that, early on, the term "community" was found suitable for describing online interaction and it has since carried different meanings for different researchers (pp. 35–37). As is the case with the definition of community, to this day there is no definite definition for virtual community. Griffith et al. (2013) mention that the Internet offers an unparalleled setting for groups to interact (p. 150). On one hand, in one of the ground-breaking books on the subject, Rheingold (1993) states that "virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Introduction, para. 25). This early definition, in its simplicity, offers a very precise interpretation of the nature of virtual communities. On the other, Androutsopoulos (2006) summarizes that many critics argue virtual communities not having stable membership and lacking long-term commitment and social accountability (pp. 421–423). Baym (1998) notes another critical point that suggests that virtual communities often have temporal structures where discussion or meeting have no definite or regular timetable and that computer network infrastructures are designed in a way that might encourage this structure as asynchronous CMC is often offered to members of a virtual community. Baym (1998) then continues by writing that the types of network infrastructures most likely have an impact on the actions of the community but those actions are affected also by external contexts, the tasks or purposes of the community and the participant characteristics which include the size of the community which vary from three people to millions (pp. 43-49).

Herring (2004) has compiled her "six sets of criteria" for a virtual community based on earlier research (pp. 355–356):

1. active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
2. shared history, purpose, culture, norms, and values
3. solidarity, support, reciprocity
4. criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
5. self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups
6. emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals

These criteria share similar ideas with the previously mentioned sense of community by McMillan & Chavis (1986). Both depict a picture of a strong, ideal community. Herring's (2004) research has shown that some of the features appear rarely or are not present in all groups and that might be caused by differences in circumstances. Herring (2004) notes that these criteria can be used for objective assessment of virtual communities as they offer a possibility to dissect the idea of a virtual community into smaller segments. In regard of participation, Wenger et al. (2002) say that many different tiers of participation should be invited by good community architecture. They suggest that having different levels of interest and, consequentially, participation is beneficial for a community. They offer three levels of community participation: core, active and peripheral. As the names imply, the degrees of participation where the small core group is responsible of regular and active discussion and participation, the active group participates slightly less and more occasionally and the peripheral group mostly observes. Members might shift their position within the community periodically. Wenger et al. (2002) state that rather than forcing participation, successful communities provide opportunities, or "benches" of participation for people at all levels which allows for the peripherals, as well as others, to stay connected to the community (pp. 55–56).

Wenger et al. (2009) write about the role of technology stewardship of a community in a world where technology constantly shapes our understanding of community. They state that community needs are central to the everyday practices of a virtual community and should be addressed in regards of the technological possibilities and this is where the stewardship can help virtual communities create sensible digital environments (pp. 14–27). Jones (1997) says that a virtual community requires a virtual settlement to exist in order to operate. They present four requirements: a certain level of interaction present on the settlement, at least three different communicators, "common-public-space where a significant portion of a community's interactive group-CMC occurs" (Section 2), which could be labelled as the cyber-place that the technological infrastructure offers, and sustained level of membership stability. In their view, interaction is a key element permeating all four requirements. Jones (1997) continues to state that provided these requirements are met, there is a guarantee that a related virtual community exists as well (Section 2).

Malinen (2016) has found out through empirical processes that feelings and behaviour that resemble traditional community models do occur in different online environments. The development into a community is facilitated by feelings of similarity which are emphasised in online groups that share similar interests and goals. If the common interest disappears or the technology does not offer enough support for social interaction, the already established ties may be lost (p. 78). Along with user activity, the users' orientations define how interested and involved they are in communal activities. Sites that have structurally embedded elements where users are guided towards forming networks and engaging in the social structures on the site benefit from increased user involvement. Furthermore, networked and interactive users enjoy more recognitions from others and also receive more feedback and this strengthens the user's ties with the site. Enabling the users to build networks and engage in their social practices with people they find interesting is, according to Malinen (2016), the most important issue to take into consideration when developing an online community. Available tools that aid in constructing a community and open information about other members help communities to be more inviting to possible new users (p. 79).

Malinen (2016) dismisses the thought of staying to wonder whether an online community exists or not but rather encourages to research how users orient themselves towards communal and social aspects of a site. Her findings show that users of the same site can experience it as a community or simply as a place to find content. This shows that technical structures do not themselves create a community as users will use the site differently. The design of websites should be planned in way that encourages different styles of usage and different levels of participation. Malinen (2016) argues that contemporary online communities can be seen as a web of solitary connections that vaguely remind a community instead of solid reciprocal connections that create an established community. Nevertheless, they conclude that community experience is not solely place-bound but can be experienced online as well. The Internet provides opportunities for various community-like groupings which can be voluntary or temporary. Alongside similarities which previous research has offered there are also differences between physical and online communities and they should not always be compared side by side. To create a better understanding of communities online, Malinen (2016) suggests that researchers analyse characteristics of communities that are scattered, networked and fluid (p. 80).

Discussing the culture of the internet, Sproull & Faraj (1997) view electronic groups as places that offer information, entertainment and affiliation where a common interest is shared. They consider this a possibility to receive emotional support. They note that even though bad information might be shared in the groups, the benefit of good information outweighs that. According to Sproull & Faraj

(1997), these principles create lively discussion but also conflict (pp. 42–47). In the discussion, Wellman (1997) offers researching social structures as a way of identifying and defining electronic groups with the idea that communities exist through social structures offline as well as online. They suggest looking into the following: modality; density and existing structures, boundedness, history and interconnectedness; scale and exclusivity; social control and finally, strength of ties (pp. 198–200).

Kozinets (2010) uses the term *online communities* and notes that they are becoming increasingly a part of people's Internet experience as people align and connect with others. Online communities range, among others, from professional to hobby, lifestyle-oriented, political and psychological. They seem to cover nearly all aspects of life and this can be seen as an indication of the extent of entanglement of people's offline and online social actions. They point out that it is difficult to label online communities as virtual. This has to do with the meaning of the word virtual as connections and actions made in an online environment are real and not virtual. Kozinets (2010) says that this idea is emphasised by participants in online communities who feel that they belong to a very real community (pp. 13–15).

As stated earlier in this section, it is difficult to define what a community or a virtual community is. This is demonstrated by the views of researchers exhibited above. Even though "community" is a word used commonly in formal and informal speech and carries meaning that most people would probably understand it seems that it is problematic to define it through scholarly procedure. Scholars seem to have different views as to how exactly to define a community. It is not clear where its boundaries are, how they are defined and who can claim membership in a community. Different research methods seem to produce somewhat different results. The Oxford Dictionary of English (n.d.) defines online community as "a group of people who regularly interact with each other online, especially to share information and opinions on a common interest" Scholars referenced in this section seem to agree that communities are places where people interact with each other. This thesis will attempt to examine BGG through the idea of sense of community and its four elements set by McMillan & Chavis (1986) and through Herring's (2004) six sets of criteria for a virtual community. Both stances offer clear textual reasoning for a community and provide research possibilities for pinpointing those elements and criteria in a community. Both suggest a somewhat utopian idea of a community but that should only enhance the opportunity for finding evidence of a community on BGG. If hints of a utopian community exist, it could be reasonable to argue the existence of a community.

3 Methodology, data and ethics

Section 3.1 offers a description of the methodology used in this thesis, virtual ethnography. The author has been a member of BGG for several years and that was the main reasoning for selecting virtual ethnography as the methodology for the thesis as it allows to display a unique viewpoint into a virtual community. Section 3.2 describes the data for the study, the BGG website, and section 3.3 considers the ethical viewpoints of conducting research online.

3.1 How to study life online?

This section will discuss earlier research in virtual ethnography and participant observation to form a method of studying life online to be utilised in this thesis.

Kozinets (2010) states that people's social worlds are changing towards the digital. Consequently, to have a full understanding of society, it is vital to follow the social actions of people online as well as offline. They propose a form of ethnography, netnography, as a methodology to study CMC and cultures. Kozinets (2010) says that the term "netnography" is especially used in consumer and marketing research. Nevertheless, it can be used to study a wide selection of themes such as identity, social relations, learning and creativity (pp. 1–3). Netnographic research can be conducted by following five steps: first, research questions are formulated, second, a field of culture or community is chosen as the subject, third, the target community is entered and data gathered by means of participant observation, fourth, the data is analysed and interpreted and fifth, a written report of research presented. Kozinets (2010) expresses that this model seems straightforward but in reality, the research process may be much more complex (pp. 60–61). Kozinets (2010) mentions four characteristics of doing ethnographic research online. One is alteration, or adaptation, as online research methods require an understanding of the different means of data collection compared to traditional face-to-face methods. Online environments forces users to abide to certain codes and norms which the researcher must be aware of. Also, as several different variants for CMC exist, it is relevant to know, for example, how, when, where and on which technological platform different modes of CMC are used – one message on an online bulletin board alone could be constructed of text, audio and visual elements. The second characteristic is anonymity as online worlds offer users to act, write and identify themselves anonymously. This creates a challenge for the researcher as they cannot be sure whether anonymous users are being truthful or not. This is something that must be acknowledged when handling online data. On the other hand, this opens up many possibilities for the researcher as they can gather data anonymously without interfering with online users to create a bias

of any type. The third characteristic, accessibility, allows researchers to collect data without the majority of, for example, users of a certain virtual community, ever knowing that their texts have been under analysis. It is naturally important to adhere to ethical codes when collecting data from sites that are public or private. The nature of CMC creates a vast Internet that provides access to an incomprehensible amount of data. It is the researchers' responsibility to choose relevant segments of the Internet for analysis. The fourth characteristic is archiving – asynchronous and synchronous communication create different ways to archive data. Asynchronous messaging often leaves permanent traces online, and the researcher can easily access the information. Kozinets (2010) notes that synchronous use is not usually left publicly viewable and the researcher must be able to record conversations by using technological equipment (pp. 68–72).

Priest (2010) delivers an overall picture of media research in their book. Priest (2010) compares qualitative and quantitative research and notes that qualitative researchers sometimes face difficulties in getting credibility, even though both methods are used widely (p. 39). They write that anthropological ethnography, although originally intended for the study of isolated cultural groups, is still a valid methodology that can assist in creating a detailed depiction of a social group and its way of living. The two key methods of ethnographic research are participant observation and depth interviews. They view participant observation as an act of learning about a social group and its culture through engaging as a group member where attempts are made to understand social roles, group organisations, tools of the culture and everyday life of the group. They note that holism is the key principle of ethnography. This means the understanding of cultures as whole interconnected systems rather than isolated parts. According to Priest (2010), individual parts of cultural notions might seem irrelevant but the researcher must form patterns of consistency through individual notions to find overarching results (pp. 16–17). The research in this thesis will mainly be conducted by participant observation. In the method the researcher is engaged as a member of a social group in order to study it and its culture. A researcher immerses themselves in a community and attempts to deliver an adequate description of it to the reader. Fine (2015) states that participant observation requires the researcher to actively engage as an equal member of a community. Boylorn & Orbe (2014) note that autoethnographic text should allow readers to experience the lives and actions of the research subjects and add that it is a powerful method to interpret, for example, ideas of identity (p. 15).

Pauwels (2012) discusses the vast possibilities for cyberspace research and points out that the amount and richness of data that is present on websites is extensive. Pauwels (2012) describes websites as "unique expressions of contemporary culture" (p. 247) and the multimodal study of them allows for a better understanding of contemporary courses of action of large groups of people across the world.

Furthermore, the Internet is not merely a vault for memorising different data but also, and above all, a place for people and cultures to connect their practices that exist offline and online. They add that this multimodal methodology for recognising cultural markers is not a simple task and does require specialised skills. Different researchers will be able to derive different information regarding their own expertise. This means that studies by a sociologist, a linguist, an anthropologist will all be relevant in studying the virtual world. Pauwels (2012) says that potential biases should be avoided by being as critical and explicit as possible about the choices that are made during the research process (247–261).

Hine (2015) agrees with several other scholars in that nowadays CMC is increasingly a part of everyday life for many. This has created a need for a methodology to study culture, social relationships and connections online as they are more and more a part of contemporary culture. Hine (2015) describes an *ethnography for the Internet* which tries to make sense of people's lives and find out in general and in detail the meanings of people's social operations online. The premise of spending time, interacting, living and creating first-hand reports of people is the key notion on ethnography. This needs to be in the centre of the ethnographic study of the Internet as well. Scholars need to partake in the diverse online activities, different forms of communication and communities that they study in order to gain a reasonable amount of insight on the matter. The special nature of online study is that the data only shows what traces have been left. The data most likely does not reflect all opinions of all the people that have taken part in or seen, for example, an online conversation. This is the nature of online texts as often there is a group of people who only observe without reacting through CMC. Therefore, analysis of online texts can only take a view on what is seen. Ethnography adds to this by using in-depth interviews to gain information. Hine (2015) writes that this is a way how also "silent online voices" could be heard (pp. 1–3).

Hine (2015) continues and says that the methods of ethnography make it a special discipline as it embraces the involvement of the researcher in field work, collecting and analysing data. This is in contrast to other methods where research is rather standardised and depersonalised. The embodied experiences of the researcher are employed as one of the main methods of research. The ethnographer attempts to view actions from the viewpoint of the data subjects - doing so the ethnographer must engage themselves in the community. The goal is to gather important insights from the community members on how the environment is experienced by them. The ethnographer may partake in activities that happen in the community in order to immerse themselves in the way of life in question. Hine (2015) emphasises that "being there" is regarded as the most important aspect of ethnographical work as that allows for direct confrontation and experiences instead of second-hand opinions (p. 19).

An ethnographer may report in manners that show the actions they took in order to gain different information. Current ethnographic conventions allow for the ethnographer to be featured noticeably in the analysis. It is important to note that the ethnographer's interpretations are unique and other researchers may come to different conclusions even in the same circumstances. As the researcher is present in the community that is being researched, they must be careful to keep a certain distance to not make biased judgements on matters. Hine (2015) states that the ethnographer makes observations throughout the process of gathering data and must be open and clear when reporting on decisions that have been made on selecting data for analysis (p. 20).

Traditionally, ethnography attempts to create comprehensive holistic accounts of the environments it is researching. Often ethnographic descriptions are not fully comprehensive but remain local or partial. This is many times typical as ethnographic procedures are not set in stone or pre-determined fully and have rather an open-ended idea of researching. One study can focus on opposite end of the spectrum as opposed to the other. Ethnographic study is built for understanding the world in small portions at a time. Alongside observation and making notes, the researcher builds up their argument by conducting interviews and surveys and drawing maps. Regularly a main goal for study is not decided in the beginning as discoveries are made along the research process. Hine (2015) mentions that, in this view, ethnography is adaptive and the researcher must be ready to allow time for continued observations in order to notice, for example, underlying social structures in a community, many of which would not be apparent immediately (p. 24–25).

Hine (2015) views that the Internet in all its vastness is very hard to comprehend and to create a clear analytical description of it is near impossible. Ethnography answers this by offering methods to understand the lived experience Internet users have and the social textures within different multimodal ways of using the Internet (p. 27). Hine (2015) describes ethnography as an immerse method where the participation by the ethnographer is vital in order to gain ethnographic knowledge. Being present allows the ethnographer to see small details in the actions of participants and in different activities. Furthermore, the researcher is immersed in the same setting as the participants which allows for a unique visibility for the ethnographer. Hine (2015) writes that the extended timeframe of field work is advantageous as the researcher can reflect on previous observations while still making new ones (pp. 55–57).

Hine (2015) says that the ethnographer follows connections and reflects on experiences. The researcher should strive to become an accepted member of the community. This is reached by actively participating and making observations in various activities and will vary between platforms and website that can be structurally significantly different from one another. One site will require opening
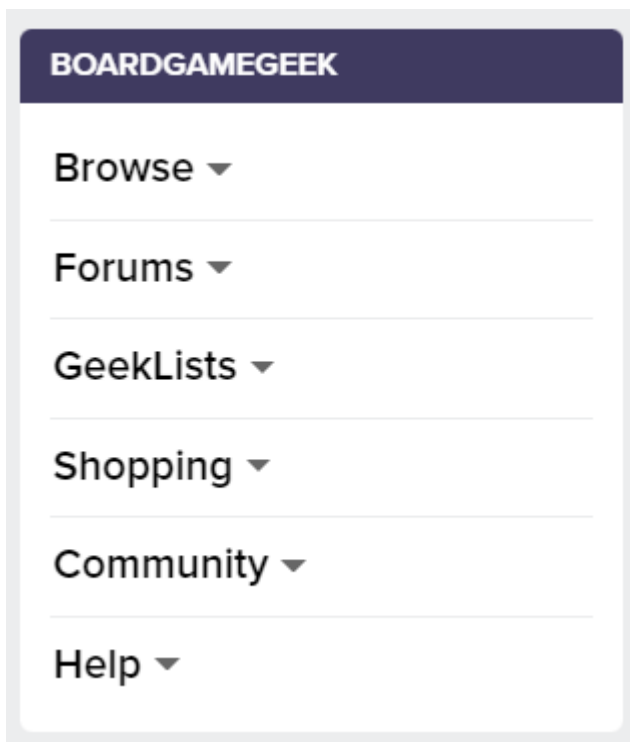
an account, creating a persona, posting on forums as another could require posting images and sharing content. Naturally, the researcher needs to have the technical resources to study online material and a skillset that allows for the learning and adaptation of previously unknown applications and structures of websites. In addition, the researcher should be able to adapt to the social etiquettes of different environments in order to be an active participant. Regular conventions are to record observations and impressions that are made as researchers can develop ideas using their own field notes. In online contexts the amount of data can be insurmountable and making notes helps in active processing in contrast to only downloading and saving material for later that could lead to passive participation. Another tool for analysis is to make note of user activity in various settings. Hine (2015) writes that this helps to showcase where users are pointing their interests and, furthermore, helps the researcher to focus their attention, for example, on why some aspects of the site are more interesting to users than others (pp. 70–74).

Hine (2015) suggests that even though observing and participating are very efficient methods for an ethnographer, asking direct questions will still be very useful. They say that interviews are often personal and establish some type of a relationship between the participant and the researcher but they can also be conducted, fully or in part, by email, which could help to avoid a too familiar touch but also to help to develop insight and create thought exchanges between participant and researchers (p. 78).

As scholars above have presented, ethnography is a viable method to obtain an understanding of culture, social groups and human behaviour. Practising ethnography online allows the researcher to study these elements in an online environment and present the reader an interpretation of human life online. As stated earlier, participant observation will be a key method in this study and as noted by Hine (2015) this is a special discipline as the researcher themself is strongly involved in field work and analysis. And as Hine (2015) stated, the researcher must "be there" and follow different details and reflect on observations. The scope of the thesis does not allow for depth interviews but it can be noted that pursuing that possibility would create a more detailed understanding of the website. Furthermore, it is important to note, as Priest (2010) mentions, that participant observation itself is not a guarantee for creating a good description of a group (p. 17). Nevertheless, participant observation will allow an avenue to attempt to describe the website and its community to some extent. The avenue and the stances taken by scholars in this section will be utilised to the extent that this thesis will allow.

3.2 BoardGameGeek

The data for this study is the material available on the board gaming website BoardGameGeek and this section is dedicated to offering the reader a reasonably comprehensive view of the site. BGG is run by BoardGameGeek, LLC and founded in 2000 (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-b). All aspects and details of BGG will not be displayed here due to the vast extent of site. It is stated on the BGG welcome page that it is "an online resource and community" (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-m). That statement demonstrates the focus of the administrative staff to view the site not only as an information source but also as a community. Currently, there are over three million registered users (Alden, 2022). BGG is an open website where non-registered users are able to view nearly all the information on site. In order to be able to provide content, post on the discussion forums, use an in-site messaging system and some other features the user is required to register for a user account.

Image 1 shows the main menu for BGG which showcases the main sections of the site. Games and other game related sections are available under "Browse" and general discussion forums are listed under "Forums". "GeekLists", a specific mode of discussion on BGG is listed next, followed by "Shopping" which directs the user to the in-site marketplace as well as the site shop. Following is the section for "Community", which includes links to all content submitted by users. Finally, "Help" will offer advice on how to use the site and answer frequent questions.

Image 1. Main menu showing the main elements of the site (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-c).

One of the main functions of the site is indeed to serve as an information source on various types of physical games. The current database encompasses over 136,000 different game titles in 84 different game categories (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-a & n.d.-e). Each game has its own dedicated game page where users find general and detailed information of the game. Each game page is divided into several different sections which include general information, images, videos, reviews, discussion forums, in-site links, off-site links, files, user statistics, a marketplace which all are related to the game in question. Images, videos and reviews have a double role as they are also discussion platforms alongside the general discussion forums. A single game's discussion forums are further divided into

sections titled: *reviews*, *game sessions*, *general discussion*, *rules*, *strategy*, *variants, news, crowdfunding, play by forum* and *organised play*. All registered users are able to participate in the discussions. Users are encouraged to edit and add content to the game page to provide more or more accurate information – this includes, among others, writing game reviews, uploading pictures, posting videos, sharing files and links as well as providing game information. Most of the information on the site is based on user input and almost all information is editable by the users. There are administrative staff, paid and voluntary, who oversee editing processes alongside automated filters.

Game-specific discussion forums, information sharing and active involvement are the main function of the game pages on BGG, as is suggested in the previous chapter. Outside the game pages BGG encourages member interaction through the site's general discussion forums. The forums are divided into eleven main sections: *BoardGameGeek Community*, *Gaming Related*, *Gaming Media*, *BoardGameGeek Related*, *Events*, *Buy, Sell & Trade*, *Virtual Play*, *Board Game Creation*, *Bulletin Board*, *Regional Gaming* and *Everything Else*. These are further divided into several subforums where the actual discussions take place. As of June 2022, there are over 2,6 million threads and over 35 million replies in the discussion forums (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-i). Related to the discussion forums is the structural concept of GeekLists that are virtually discussion topics where users, one or many, list things, usually games, as items in a list and elaborate on the listing and its each individual entry. The lists are often creative and encourage vibrant discussion as topics may vary from very humorous to very serious.

Another significant function of the site is the members' personal pages that include a profile page, a possibility to showcase and update one's game collection and the possibility of personal identification by information texts and graphical illustrations in one's BGG avatar. The site also has an in-site messaging system named *GeekMail*, an in-site currency, *GeekGold*, and a marketplace for games, the *Geek Market*.

As mentioned earlier, it is not possible to accurately describe all aspects of the site due to the sheer volume of data that is available. This section has attempted to provide a satisfactory overview of the characteristics that BGG has. Sections of the data will be presented and analysed in detail in section 4 which will further provide the reader with a more comprehensive understanding of the functions of the site.

3.3 Ethics of online research

Conducting research online calls for the researcher to evaluate their research from an ethical standpoint. This section will explore the ethics of researching a community and interaction online, BGG in particular.

This thesis will follow the "Responsible conduct of research and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct in Finland" (2012) published by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity. The publication notes that ethically acceptable and credible scientific research must be carried out with responsible conduct of research. To achieve this, research, handling and presentation of data and results must follow integrity and meticulousness. This process must be open and reviewable and work of other researchers must be managed appropriately. The complete research process must be completed through requirements set for scientific knowledge and any permission or license that is needed must be obtained. Any fabrication or falsification of observations or findings must be avoided. Plagiarism and misappropriation of any level is strongly forbidden.

Vuori (n.d.) says that all research must respect the dignity, privacy, information privacy and other rights of research subjects. In addition, any risk, harm or damages that the research might cause the subjects must be avoided. Research must be implemented by dignified and equal treatment of all research subjects. Laaksonen (n.d.) adds by concluding that even though the data for a research project would be publicly available, it might not be ethically acceptable to use. They continue stating it is the right of the research subject to know that they are the subject in a research project. Also, it is highly recommendable to ask for permission to use data that is connected to an individual.

Clarkeburn & Mustajoki (2007) note that ethical issues are often difficult to notice and that there might not be unambiguous solutions to ethical dilemmas. The researcher will face situations where it is not clear what to do from an ethical standpoint. Whether something is ethically sound or not might be interpreted differently by others. They say that the researcher must be aware of the rights and the responsibilities that face them through scientific work (pp. 22–32). Markham & Buchanan (2012) agree and say that ethical issues are complex and are often not solved through strict codes. They note that online research will create conflict of interest on ethical issues. Sometimes it is not clear whether data on online is public or private as some will have differing views on the matter. It is also debatable whether a text from an anonymous user online can be connected to their persona or not. When online data is analysed, it must be considered how it could impact people connected to it.

Studying online data, they suggest examining how the data is accessed and whether users consider the context to be public. Also, Markham & Buchanan (2012) propose consideration whether direct quotations are necessary or not (pp. 4–10).

Data used in this study is, to a large extent, publicly available online. Users of the site should be aware that contributions from them are publicly available. Likely, they have noticed information on BGG to be public when using the site before registration or when using the site without logging in. Some data used by the author is only available to registered members of the site. This partly closed data can still be recovered at a later point by registering as a member. Though, it is uncertain for how long BGG will continue to exist and therefore, several screenshot images obtained as a registered member will be used as data in this thesis. Due to the ethnographical nature of this research, it would be impractical to record all available information on BGG as data. The author mainly relies on field notes gathered through several years of observations when participating in the community. All field notes will be deleted after the publication.

As mentioned, the scope of this thesis is limited and, consequently, every available aspect of BGG will not be analysed in the research. Therefore, several omissions will be made. To follow ethical guidelines and the information privacy of users on BGG, no direct quotations or user information will be used. The author will guarantee anonymity for BGG users by analysing discussion only through generalisations made through field notes. As the only exception, the author accepts that their own personal user information is used as data in the research.

4 Ethnography of BGG

This section will provide a detailed ethnographic description of BGG based on the author's experiences as a registered user of the site. Regarding the scope of this thesis, some areas of the site will be analysed with more detail and some have been omitted. The analysis will focus on discovering traces of community on BGG. Section 4.1 will analyse sense of community on BGG and discuss the communal characteristics of it based on earlier literature. This will provide an ethnographical overview of BGG as a community. The following sections will concentrate on and analyse detailed aspects of the community. Section 4.2 will discuss the nature of BGG bringing people with similar interests together and examine the different participatory affordances offered by the digital place. Section 4.3 will explore the actions BGG users are involved in, including different modes of discussion and activities that expand from BGG to the offline world.

Hine (2015) mentioned that a researcher immersed in the setting will have unique visibility for research (pp. 55–57) and therefore data examples that are picked for the analysis are based on my personal evaluations and experiences on the site and the scale of cultural importance of a certain occurrence that might be interesting for the reader. I will choose and discuss examples based on personal field notes and bookmarks of BGG pages gathered and stored when participating on BGG. Bookmarking pages is an affordance offered for registered members on BGG for easy access to pages a user desires to store for their personal use. All examples are chosen with as little bias as possible to showcase the mind-set of a variety of users in a virtual community. Again, it is important to note that all users will interpret BGG in their own way, and as Pauwels (2012) wrote, all researchers will derive different information from the same source. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is not to create a fully comprehensive guide to the community but a text that will try to describe social activities and structures that are present on the site and thus creating an ethnography of BGG.

4.1 Sense of community

As discussed in section 2.2, McMillan & Chavis (1986) offer their four elements for sense of community and Herring (2004) provides six sets of criteria that portray a virtual community. This section will present an overview of how BGG presents itself to the user and analyse how the different structures of the website correspond to the ideas of McMillan & Chavis (1986) and Herring (2004). The analysis in this section suggests a viewpoint that the website is designed to be a community and provides several examples of the website structure discussing elements and criteria for a community. The analysis in this chapter is based on the author's experiences and observations as a user of the site.

McMillan & Chavis's (1986) four elements are membership, influence, integration and a fulfilment of needs and lastly, shared emotional connection. BGG has the option to join the site by becoming a registered member which promises the user to "download files, buy and trade, talk with our community of experts, and tons more" (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-j). The site can be used without registration as well. McMillan & Chavis (1986) say that membership requires for boundaries to exist but also that self-identification as part of the group is a distinctive feature of membership. The option to register as a member can be seen a distinct boundary for membership on BGG but as the site is also meant to be freely usable without being a registered member it can be argued that users that only read and find information without registration on the site can feel that they have membership on the site. Another membership boundary can be defined by interest in board games – people who do not have interest will most likely not be tempted to use the site as people who have interest in board games will likely be attracted to use it as it might be support them in their interest. Through different boundaries membership can exist without formal registration although it can be said that formal registration does create a distinct boundary that instantly offers the possibility and the feeling of membership to the user.

The second element of *influence* has reciprocal character. Firstly, registered BGG users have the possibility to influence the larger community. It is possible, to name a few options, to state one's opinions or reviews by starting a discussion in any of the different discussion boards, take part in conversations that already exist, post images, alert the community of unwanted action on the site, moderate incoming content for other users, *thumb*, that is to give a digital thumbs up signal to others for their contributions and to provide correct information on board games. These possibilities provide the user several opportunities to have influence, mostly in two categories: by adding or modifying the information on the site and by influencing other users through discussion. Taking part in the conversation, providing and receiving questions and answers, one feels connected to a larger community. Secondly, and in some proportion overlapping with the first point, the community uses user moderation to handle incoming content where several users' approval is needed to upload images, videos, links, articles and data to the site. Furthermore, user moderation is applied to notifying the administrative staff of unwanted behaviour on the site as content and discussion on the site can be reported through a link that exists next to all discussion posts. The community can make suggestions to the administration for improvements to the site through specific discussion board. These possibilities allow the community to influence itself and to act together to increase the sense of community.

The third element is *integration and a fulfilment of needs* that according to McMillan & Chavis (1986) are needed in a community. At its core, BGG provides information and discussion on board games. This fulfils the need of a user in need of more information on board games in general, or when planning on buying new board games. Information and views provided by users who themselves are interested in board games are seen as important and helpful. McMillan & Chavis (1986) say that members' association with the community needs to reward them. For the user, in is rewarding to know that information and opinions that they provide are appreciated and used by others. Also, adding images and other information enlarges the database of the website which itself is rewarding to the user by creating the idea of being a contributor for the community that helps others.

The fourth element, *shared emotional connection,* is present on BGG. Discussion boards are filled with conversations that create bonds between users. For the most part, discussions are positive and provide the user with a positive experience. This helps in encouraging the users to take part in in conversation as well as doing it in a positive way. In general, playing board games is viewed as a positive experience and this experience is shared through the discussions on the site. The interactions between users about their experiences oftentimes create positive shared stories which makes for possibilities of shared emotional connection.

Herring's (2004, pp. 355–356) six sets of criteria for a virtual community is discussed next. The first criterion states that active, self-sustaining participation is required, in addition to a core of regular participants. BGG encourages participation by having a vast selection of participating option available to the user. Many users participate in different courses of action, some more than others. There are users who contribute in some way very often, even daily, and there are users who do not contribute but only take part by observing. BGG has many active users as new discussions emerge and new content is added daily by the users.

Shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values, the elements of the second criterion, are also observed on BGG. BGG users share a strong shared purpose as playing board games is the main reason people are using the site. Discussion expands to various topics but mainly concentrates on board games. Users share values as they see a positive and a polite mindset as an important character trait when playing board games as well and discussing board games on BGG.

Solidarity, support and reciprocity comprise the third criterion. The culture of board gaming can be labelled as competitive but discussion around it on BGG lacks features of competitiveness, or the contrary, the discussion has properties of being helpful and supportive to others. Besides board gaming discussion, some people share their life stories, happy and tragic and other react to them by showing solidarity and support – even collecting funds for other users in need.

The fourth criterion expects criticism, conflict and means of conflict resolution to exist in a virtual community. As is the case with online discussion in general, it creates conflict as well. BGG users have conflicts and efforts to resolve conflicts often include responses by other users and, if needed, actions by the administrative staff. Adverse opinions can be silenced by the administration by censorship or suspension of user accounts. The administration generally welcomes criticism on site policies and technical malfunctions and take part in conversations as they attempt to have a site where everyone is welcome and the site works as it is planned.

The fifth criterion requires self-awareness from the group as an entity from other groups. BGG users make a distinction between board games players and people who do not play board games. This is evident, for example, in discussions where users ask other users for advice on what games to offer to those people who do not like or play board games. There is a consensus that some, slightly more straightforward yet alluring games, are considered "gateway games" to those who do not play board games. That is to say that those games might work well in introducing someone to the board game hobby. As this category of games exists, it points to the fact that users see a division between board gamers and others.

An emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance and rituals constitute the sixth criterion. There are rituals that are in place on BGG. Some events happen annually, for example, voting for the best games of the year and "Secret Santa" game exchanges at the end of the year. Every week, although recently discontinued, a "Geek of the Week" was named and interviewed to highlight users of the site to others. New users are provided a "New user" badge to their graphical user representation, (GUR) on the site for the first month to alert older users to welcome them to the community. The website is run by the administrative staff of whom some are employees and some work voluntarily. They provide the website to be used by the users and hold power on conflict resolution.

BGG appears to fit Herring's (2004) and McMillan & Chavis's (1986) criteria for a virtual community as those criteria are met through user interaction and the structure of the website itself as described above. BGG is a community that attracts people with an interest in board games. BGG provides a great number of opportunities for users to interact with each other as well as presents effortless means to contribute to the site. This has allowed for a community of users to emerge and sustain itself. This section has discussed the communal characteristics of BGG. The following sections will discuss some of the aspects of the community in more detail.

4.2 Website structures encouraging participation

Participation is a major principle of BGG where the majority of its content is produced by its users. As discussed in section 2, many scholars view participatory actions to be a vital part of a virtual community. Participation offers users opportunities to engage oneself in the community and to make one feel as a member of the group. Section 4.2.1 will consider the existence and nature of BGG as a digital place and its ability to gather people who share a similar interest. Section 4.2.1 will analyse examples that portray different participatory affordances that BGG offers to its users.

4.2.1 A place to gather

This section will analyse BGG as a place where people can gather and discuss. Analysis will also discuss the main aspects of BGG that attract people to visit the site and encourage them in becoming part of the community.

To the outsider, BGG appears as an information source on board games. To a person interested in board games, a place where information on board games is located, is a place of interest. Online searchers for "board games" or titles of board games will include links to BGG and will introduce new people to it. The nature of providing information will attract interested people. The existence of BGG is the starting point of the analysis as no community could exist if there was not a place for it.

As mentioned previously, Sproull & Faraj (1997) label electronic groups as places of information, entertainment and affiliation for those who share an interest. Years of membership on the site has shown that BGG is a vast information source and provides entertainment and affiliation through discussion and other affordances. BGG constitutes a virtual settlement, an idea presented by Jones (1997), where interaction, communicators, "a common-public-space" and membership stability are present. This is supported by the significant amount of discussion and the number of registered members on the site. Further analysis on interaction through discussion on BGG will follow in section 4.3.1.

Personal experience has shown that BGG is the most comprehensive source for board game information. It would seem that the clear majority of board games that have been published have a game page on BGG. I have never come a across a game that is not on BGG when searching for it. Many people ask for game recommendations on the forums when they are considering buying one or several new games. Users often provide insightful comments based on their own experiences. When I am planning a game purchase, I always check the game's game page on BGG for its

description, reviews, rating statistics and comments on it from other users. I make the decision whether to buy a game or not based on the information on BGG. This view is shared by several others on the discussion forums. Other users' comments and reviews usually have the most weight for myself as I find them to be trustworthy and thorough texts. Users, including myself, see other users as specialists on board games and this seems to be reflected by the large number of discussion topics on board game recommendations where positive and negative opinions on games are shared and discussed between users.

Wenger et al. (2002) discussed that successful communities do not force participation but rather offer opportunities of participation at different levels for people who have different levels of interest. This will allow connection with the community regardless of the level of participation. My experience as a member of the BGG community has revealed that different users will participate at different levels. Wenger et al. (2002) suggested that there are three levels participation. On BGG, the most active level, core participation, can be recognised with users who log in perhaps daily and post actively in the discussion forums. The middle level of active participation are users who participate slightly less or irregularly. The least active, peripheral participation is offered by BGG even to users who are not registered members as they are able to search and observe content on the site. Registered members who do not contribute to the site or interact in the discussion forums only rarely can be viewed as peripheral participators as well. My own experience corresponds to the suggestion of Wenger et al. (2002) that users might shift their position within the levels. At some points, I could have been labelled as an active user when actively following different ongoing discussions and participating in some of them whereas other times I have not had enough free time to visit the site regularly yet still maintaining a connection to the community by occasionally logging in to the site or checking game information when necessary. On the other hand, some users with lower levels of interaction might not be interested in shifting their position or being more involved the community and feel content and part of the community without contributing much. Complete statistics of user participation are not available as information on certain user contributions to the site, such as adding or editing game or wiki information or GeekMod participation are not publicly available. Therefore, there might a group of users who consider themselves core or active participators in the community through their contributions even though their actions are not seen be others.

BGG is an online place that brings board gaming people together. It offers board gaming information that attracts people who are interested in board gaming. Also, it offers different levels of participation thus allowing different levels of community to exist. The following section will

discuss what type of affordances are offered for the user by the site in order to have active participators and to create a community.

4.2.2 Possibilities to engage

This section will provide analysis of examples where users have the option to provide content for the site and for other users of the site. These affordances are a key element of BGG as it allows users to participate in creating the site and thus creating a sense of belonging for the users. The possible activities on BGG that are directed at the registered users are plentiful. A key concept of the site seems to be the notion of engaging users in various ways. Users are tasked with different possibilities and they can choose which ones they feel like participating in. These functions might not be apparent to the non-registered user of the site who could possibly only visit the site to gather information on games that they are interested in. Some users, though, thrive in an environment that offers many possibilities to participate and even customise the site to one's own preferences.

The information content on BGG is provided completely by the members of the community. Users are encouraged to add images, videos, reviews and general information on games. Actual game items in the database are also mainly uploaded by the users. This type of behaviour relates to the idea of membership offered by McMillan & Chavis (1986) where a user feels a part of the community by delivering something to it.
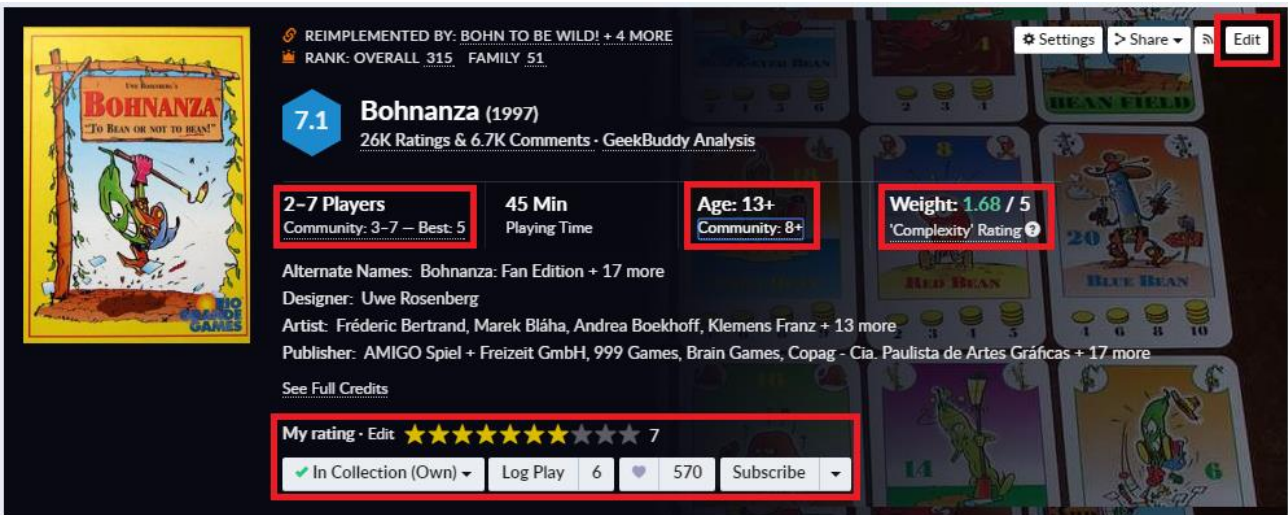

Image 2. Main information section on the game page of "Bohnanza" with areas where user contributions that are encouraged are highlighted with red squares (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-d).

Image 2 shows the first section of a game page where general information of the game is presented. Five sub-sections in the image are highlighted in red squares. These represent interactive elements where users can contribute different types of information on the site. The top-right corner shows a

general "Edit" button which allows users to edit, add or delete game information that is shown in the entire section. The three squares in the middle show links that open up an integrated section that allows users to vote anonymously on their opinion about the number of players, suitable ages and the overall weight or complexity of the game. The results of the polls are shown to all users in real time. The bottom square illustrates a possibility to give the game in question a star rating from one to ten, to choose whether to include the game in one of the user's virtual collections, to log plays of the game, to show appreciation for the game and also to subscribe to notifications for news and posts that are added to the game's discussion forums. This information provided by the users is not available anywhere else and is valuable to other users as it allows for a more in-depth overlook of a game than, for example, a publisher's description would. Users might be encouraged to provide their opinion on these matters as they know it will benefit others, as they know they are the experts on the matter and as the input of uploading the information is straightforward. Sharing one's opinion on age suitability, player amount suitability or providing a rating requires only a few mouse clicks. The ease of accomplishing the task encourages more participation compared to, for example, a website form that a person might have to fill out.

Information on games is a main aspect of the site and allowing users to provide that information makes for a significant structural component in building a community as users can view themselves as a notable contributor for essential information on the site and therefore see themselves as a member of the community who participates in building it. These actions taken by a user will strengthen their tie with the community and validate their membership in the community.

BGG is an open forum in the meaning that anyone can browse the site. Though, only members are allowed to contribute to the site. This encourages, or even forces, users to become members if they wish to, for example, write something in the forums. This seemingly creates a division of who is a member of the community and who is not. Although, it is possible that someone who wishes not to register would still spend a relevant amount of time on the site and consider themselves a member of the community even though others might not agree. This depends on whether participatory action is seen as a requirement for community membership or not.

BGG attempts to be a comprehensive source for board game information and part of that is to offer a ranking of board games on the site. All games are assigned a ranking on the list after they have received a set number of ratings from users. An algorithm is in place to ensure that ratings are not skewed by fraudulent users or programs. Registered users are encouraged to assign ratings to games they are familiar with by offering the option to rate a game at the top of every game's page as illustrated earlier in image 2. The icon for rating a game is prominently displayed on the game page

and only requires two mouse clicks for the user which shows that ratings and offering the option to rate games are an affordance that BGG values highly. In addition, the accumulated total average rating is shown prominently next to the game's title on the game page. As mentioned earlier, the rating information is important to me when consider purchasing a game. The overall ratings and ranks of games, especially the most highly ranked, are discussed regularly in the discussion forums. Users will agree and disagree whether a game is ranked too high or too low. Some users consider the ratings a vital part of the site and might discuss details on how the algorithm works and whether it works in a manner that is acceptable or not. A game's placement in the overall rankings is often mentioned in other discussions as well – often users will place more value in a game when in it is ranked higher. Therefore, many users will enjoy rating games as they can partake in the process of the larger community action of creating the ranking list. It can be argued that rating games is an affordance that allows the users to influence the site and the community and participating in that process could increase the users' sense of membership as they see that their opinion is valued and taken into account. It can be added that games are sorted into different categories, e.g., children's games, strategy games, party games etc., and as the ratings can be filtered to only include games from a certain category, they can offer useful information for users who are looking for certain types of games.

Communication is vital in creating a sense of community. BGG allows users to communicate with each other in several different manners. The main method to interact with other users on BGG: posting texts to discussion forums will be discussed next. The different BGG discussion forums can be considered as the main interactive element to produce a sense of community. Encouragement and prompts are presented by BGG to users who are about to post texts on the site. The possibility of discussion and interaction can be observed throughout the site and affordances that do not allow discussion appear to be scarce.

As previously mentioned, the two main constituents of the site are information on board games and discussion around them. This is supported by the existence of discussion forum through most features of the site. Among others, discussion is possible on game pages under several sub-categories, individual videos and images, blogs, news items, review and GeekLists. Additionally, a central element in the site design are the general discussion forums, as detailed in section 3.2. As possibilities for discussion are plentiful and deliberately scattered throughout BGG, an argument can be made that BGG is designed to induce discussion and with it, a community. The decision to have avenues for discussion not only in the general forums but throughout the content that is provided by the users does generate a direct method for interaction between users. This design guides the community towards the first set of criteria that Herring (2004) discusses – active and self-sustaining participation

with a core of regular participants. Allowing and creating opportunities for discussion invites active participation and creates a possibility for a core of regular participants to appear.

The following three images exhibit the attempt of BGG to encourage the third set of criteria by Herring (2004): solidarity, support and reciprocity. The images show the automatic prompts that appear when there is a possibility to comment somewhere on the site. Text on image 4 "Be the first to say something" indicates a desire to see a discussion at places where it has not yet begun. This might encourage users to participate more. The text on image 3, "Say something nice", not only encourages participation but encourages to participate in a polite manner. This advice is always visible after clicking on a text box to write something as is shown on image 5. This prompt is meant to influence users to communicate in a polite, respectful manner that would add to the sense of community and togetherness.
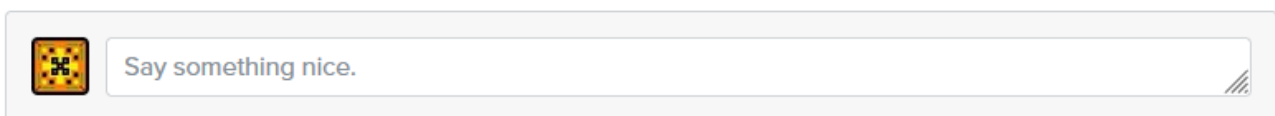
Image 3. Image shows what a user sees when they have to possibility to comment on something, not including discussions on the general discussion forums. The avatar of the user is shown on the left (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-n).
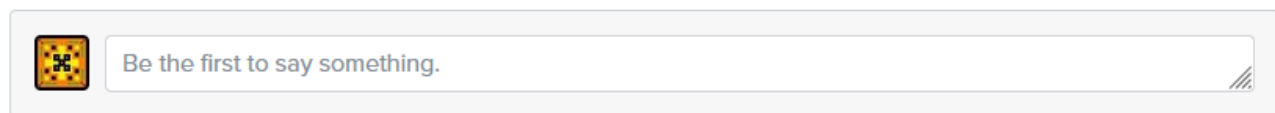
Image 4. Image shows what a user sees when they have the possibility to be the first to comment on something, not including discussions on the general discussion forums. The avatar of the user is shown on the left (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-n).
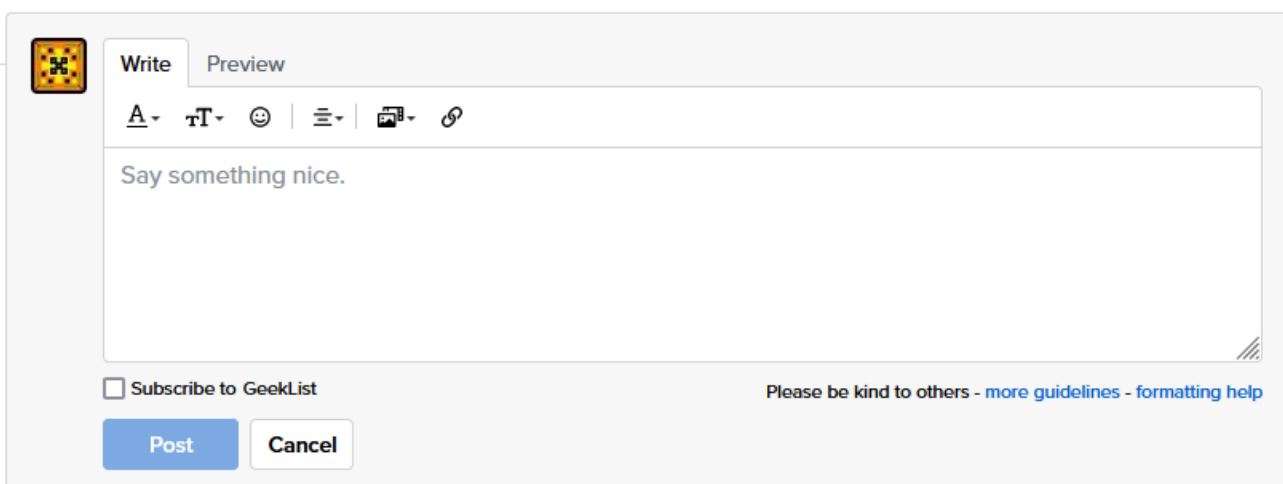
Image 5. Image shows the enlarged view after the initial prompt – after a user has clicked on the initial text box. This includes the general discussion forums (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-n).

In Image 5, there is a link to "more guidelines" that leads the user to a page titled "BoardGameGeek Community Rules". The rules are general guidelines for and set a standard for discussion on BGG. Censorship and possible administrative involvement in conflicts on the site seem to be based on these rules as well. Herring's (2004) fourth set of criteria includes conflict in the community and the existence of means of conflict resolution. The BGG rules state that inclusiveness and diversity are important standards which are aimed to make users feel welcome as well as safe and secure to contribute to the site. Noticeable from that is that even the rules are designed to encourage participation on the site. Disruptive, derogatory or inappropriate comments are not tolerated and if persistent might lead to suspension from the site. The rules encourage users to help in moderating the site. They are guided to give thumbs liberally to posts they like, demonstrate extra kindness to new users with the "New user" badge and report rules violations (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-g). These guidelines add to the sense of membership users might have. Users are taken seriously and valued as capable members who can judge other users' content whether it be positive or negative.

Image 6. A GUR as it is presented on the own profile page of the registered user, the author in this case. In addition to the GUR, the image shows the possibilities to edit one's GUR as presented to a registered user (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-l).

Users identify themselves naturally through their activities on the site but also recognisably by their graphical user representation (GUR), depicted in image 6, that is present on every discussion forum post and GeekList they add content to as well as alongside other contributions. The GUR allows the user to present their personality, taste in games, other interests to everyone who might be reading their posts. Image 7 portrays the placement of the GUR on discussion forum posts. The basic parts of the GUR are offered to all members: a person's username, their screen name and the country of their residence. This representation can be enhanced by obtaining, or buying, items by paying certain amounts of GeekGold in order to gain access to them. The most common identifiers are an avatar and different badges. Small icons, called microbadges are popular. Every member can have up to five microbadges presented on their GUR for others to see at any given time. The badges are premade, available for purchase and represent a vast variety of interests, games, ideas and other things. For

example, a user might have a "Married" microbadge on their GUR and it would immediately signify others that this person is married. Microbadges allows users to get to know each other little by little by not even being in direct contact with each other. Avatars are bigger images in the centre of one's GUR and they can depict anything that will go through the moderation. Users can upload an image for their avatar for others to see. As shown in image 6, some users might have larger badges on their GUR as well. This can help the users to create personified identification, which allows them to create their own online persona and to be recognised more easily in the mass of forums posts.

The GUR is an affordance that BGG offers for self-identification. It allows the user to portray themselves to others. That could be compared to how and what type of clothes people wear. It represents who you are and provides clues to where you are from, for example. The GUR is the representation of oneself when one communicates on BGG. It allows users to remember and know other users better as there is a visual representation of them, instead of simply a username. In turn, this allows users to familiarise and connect easily between each other and therefore, creating networks with those who they interact with. The ability to build networks is important in building an online community, as stated by Malinen (2016).

Outside of textual responses, BGG itself offers "thumbing" and giving GeekGold as possibilities to encourage civilised and positive behaviour and communication and maybe even more so, the creation of meaningful and relevant content. The function to thumb and donate GeekGold is presented under every forum or GeekList post or reply but is only available to registered users. The function is also present on images, links and other data that has been provided by users.

Image 7. Two posts from a discussion forum thread on BGG showing symbols to thumb and donate GeekGold to the user who has written the post. Also, the blackened squares on the left show the automated placement of the users' GURs on the forum posts (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-h).

In image 7, the option to thumb or donate GeekGold can be seen under the two forum posts in question. Also visible is the number of thumbs and GeekGold that has been received so far. Thumbing content can be seen as similar function to "liking" content on many social media platforms. BGG keeps a record of all thumbing activity and users can access records and links to all content they have

provided which have been thumbed by others as well as all content they have thumbed themselves. This information is available to registered users on their profile page. The fact that the historical account of thumbing is available to them might be a function designed to encourage the user to thumb content and, in that way, take part in the community more than that they would without the function to thumb. Thumbing can be seen as something that is encouraged and even as a norm for registered users to support and highlight content that is relevant and purposeful and might be beneficial to other users. Thumbing content is an affordance that increases interaction between users. There are many users who do not post texts as responses. The option to thumb content can be seen as an action that has a lower threshold to execute compared to a textual response. Gaining thumbs is recognised by users as something to strive for and it persuades users to provide quality content as well as act politely and appropriately. Therefore, thumbing acts as a positive characteristic of the community.

GeekGold is an online currency that is only used on BGG and that can be donated between the registered members of the site. There is a limited number of possibilities of how GeekGold can be obtained. Firstly, BGG provides GeekGold to users who donate financially to the site. Secondly, GeekGold can be obtained by providing relevant information to the site. This can be achieved by adding games to the database or providing additional information on games to already existing game pages. Thirdly, users can donate GeekGold to other users through their profile pages, discussion forum post, images or other data they have provided to the site. There are several possibilities to spend GeekGold on the site as well. That is directed to self-expression as GeekGold is used to buy items in the GUR of the user. Obtaining GeekGold offers the users a possibility to buy an avatar and different badges on the GUR which allow for self-identification, as discussed above. It can be argued that GeekGold and its functions act as a catalyst for community building. It clearly encourages users to take part in building the community by adding information and providing meaningful content as well as works as an incentive to take part financially in the upkeep of the site and the whole community through that. The way it is designed to be a bridge between users to show support and solidarity to other users increases sense of membership and community.

As the possibility to thumb and donate GeekGold are present in all posts on the site, they can be seen as integral functions of the site that have been deliberately designed to enhance the experience of a community. McMillan & Chavis (1986) noted that being part of a community must reward the member and GeekGold and thumbing can be seen as ways of rewarding the user. Wenger et al. (2002) suggested that communities must provide opportunities for all levels of members: core, active and peripheral. Thumbs and GeekGold provide an opportunity for all those subgroups to participate in a convenient and uncomplicated manner. Perhaps most importantly, it offers the peripheral user that

might not be interested or that might not have time to provide textual communication a possibility to take part in the community in a meaningful way and creates an avenue for support and solidarity through the different levels of participators.

BGG offers several approaches for users to participate. Contributing and being part of something allow for people to create communities. BGG encourages contributions, interaction, polite conversation and self-identification and through those actions seemingly deliberately aim for a community to emerge. As the examples in this section have shown users have the possibility to utilise several different affordances offered by BGG. The next section will discuss how users act on the site.

4.3 Users interacting, contributing and organising

This section will concentrate on different courses of action by BGG users. Interactive and participatory acts are the foundation of a community. User interaction is discussed in section 4.3.1 through an analysis of different modes of discussion on the site. Section 4.3.2 will view different possibilities for users to make contributions to the site and section 4.3.3 will analyse rituals, traditions and events on the site.

4.3.1 Modes of discussion

Discussion is abundant on BGG. This section will examine the different modes of discussion on BGG and how they differentiate from each other. Experiences recorded in personal field notes and BGG bookmarks carry special weight in the analysis in this section as overviews of different modes of discussion will be based on them. Among others, there will be a demonstration of the reciprocal practice of asking and receiving help and possibly accomplishing a common goal in the process, the process of "chit chat" where users partake in discussions of seemingly low levels of importance and critical discussion as well as conflicts.

Participating in the discussion forums myself has allowed me to understand that taking part in the forum discussions connects a user to the community. When receiving replies to one's post, it creates a sense of belonging and additionally encourages to continue taking part to increase that sense. Even though communication on BGG is not synchronous but asynchronous, oftentimes replies arrive within the same day. The spectrum on the length of the discussions is large: some carry on for only a limited number of posts but some continue seemingly endlessly. Short conversations can discuss, for example, rules questions or misunderstandings. Longer ones offer insights to online discussion in general, as they might not follow typical conversational conventions.

Some discussion forums have evolved into communities within the larger BGG community. For example, the "Feel the Love" discussion forums seem to have its own unique userbase in users that post on the specific forums often with the addition of infrequent visitors as well. Those forums include several different discussion topics but have a common nominator in the idea that people show encouragement, positivity and love to each other. There are different threads where free games, in-site GeekGold or thumbs are given away in a more generous manner that would be expected around other forums on the site. There are threads where personal stories, positive and negative, are shared and support and encouragement are presented by other users. A popular thread sees users sharing, through images or other texts, their everyday routines or special activities. Other users are active to reply in enthusiastic and cheerful ways. On many occasions, shared experiences are discussed in a positive light. This, even though possibly sometimes exaggerated, level of support seems to influence more users to share their stories and receive kind words from others. Herring (2004) discusses this type of solidarity and support as a key element in a community and it seems to create impressions and emotions that people value. Gudykunst and Kim (1997) assumed that people need communities to make life worth living and this type of reciprocal communication appears to offer important opportunities to be a part of a community. From user experience, it can be noted that "Feel the Love" is a special subgroup inside BGG but also, it can be argued that similar positive attitude towards others is not uncommon throughout the discussion forums on the site. An unwritten code of conduct to not treat others in a negative way is noticeable on the site even to the extent of users making other users aware if they are disrespectful or behaving in a manner that is negative.

Image 8 shows the "Recommendations" forum under the "Gaming Related" general forum. It offers discussion where a user asks others for help on an issue generally connected with purchasing a new game or gaming related products or choosing a game to play for a special situation or an audience. Users might discuss which games are best to play with a certain number of people attending a play session or they might discuss what are the best games that simulate wars in Europe. The date stamps on the image show that the ten most recent threads have been posted inside a 48-hour period and that those ten threads have garnered 79 replies during that time span. It can be noted that threads that have been posted most recently also have mostly received replies most recently. This seems to indicate that discussion on this forum generally happens during a short timespan among users who are active at any given day. When asking for help, other users share their opinions and after that the original poster will evaluate the replies and decide how to solve their issue. Sometimes they discuss their decision on the thread, sometimes they might not. This problem-solving method of discussion appears to generate immediate conversation that might not carry on for a long time but, nevertheless, creates

meaningful connections and interaction between users of the site. These interactions are meaningful even to the point that they might affect other users' behaviour offline as they could, for example, decide to act on purchasing a certain game or start playing a game based on recommendations from other users.
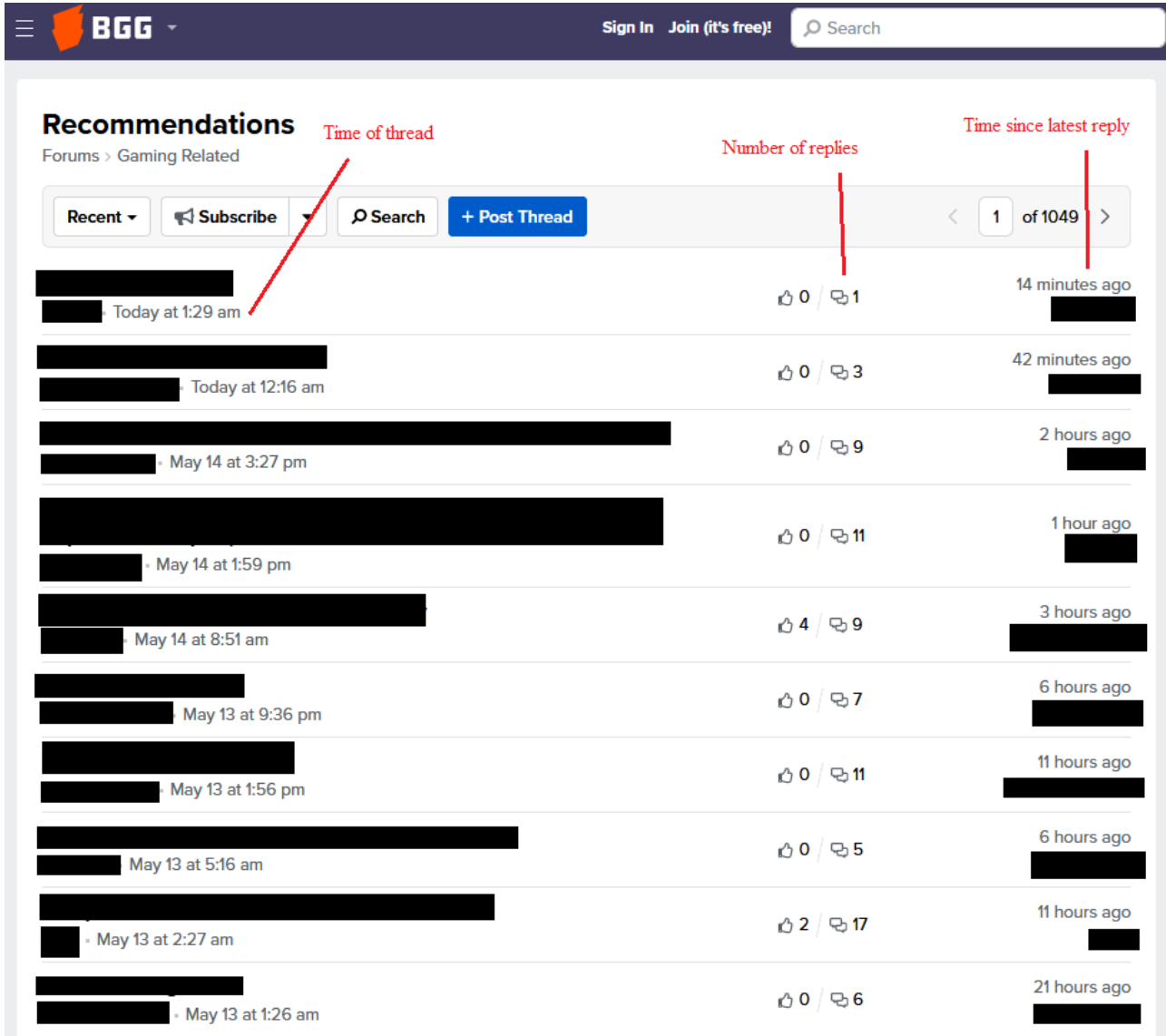

Image 8. Recent threads in the forum for Recommendations (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-k).

Discussions under images, videos, reviews share the aspect of short timespan as those discussions often take place in time after an image, video or a review is posted. Users share their opinion on the items or on the opinions of others. Reviews commonly generate discussion where different opinions are evaluated and argued back and forth. Videos are often reviews and have similar discussions. Images, on the other hand, are very varied and discussion models are varied as well. Some images depict gaming items that the users themselves have made, in full or in part, and can induce discussion where praise is awarded or advice is enquired in the hopes of doing the same. Many images depict

existing gaming components and serve the purpose of showing the users how a game looks like as it is visual representation seems to be important to people when playing games. Users will want to know how a game looks like before buying it. These types of images many times will not have elaborate conversations attached, rather short comments on whether something looks good to the user or not.

Many users on BGG communicate with each other in a manner what may seem to be having a conversation without having a specific goal for which the conversation would aim at. They will engage in discussions that might appear to be somewhat profitless or of no use to someone outside the community. Nevertheless, these discussions seem to be favoured by many users as they participate in them in large numbers. This phenomenon is studied more closely in the following.
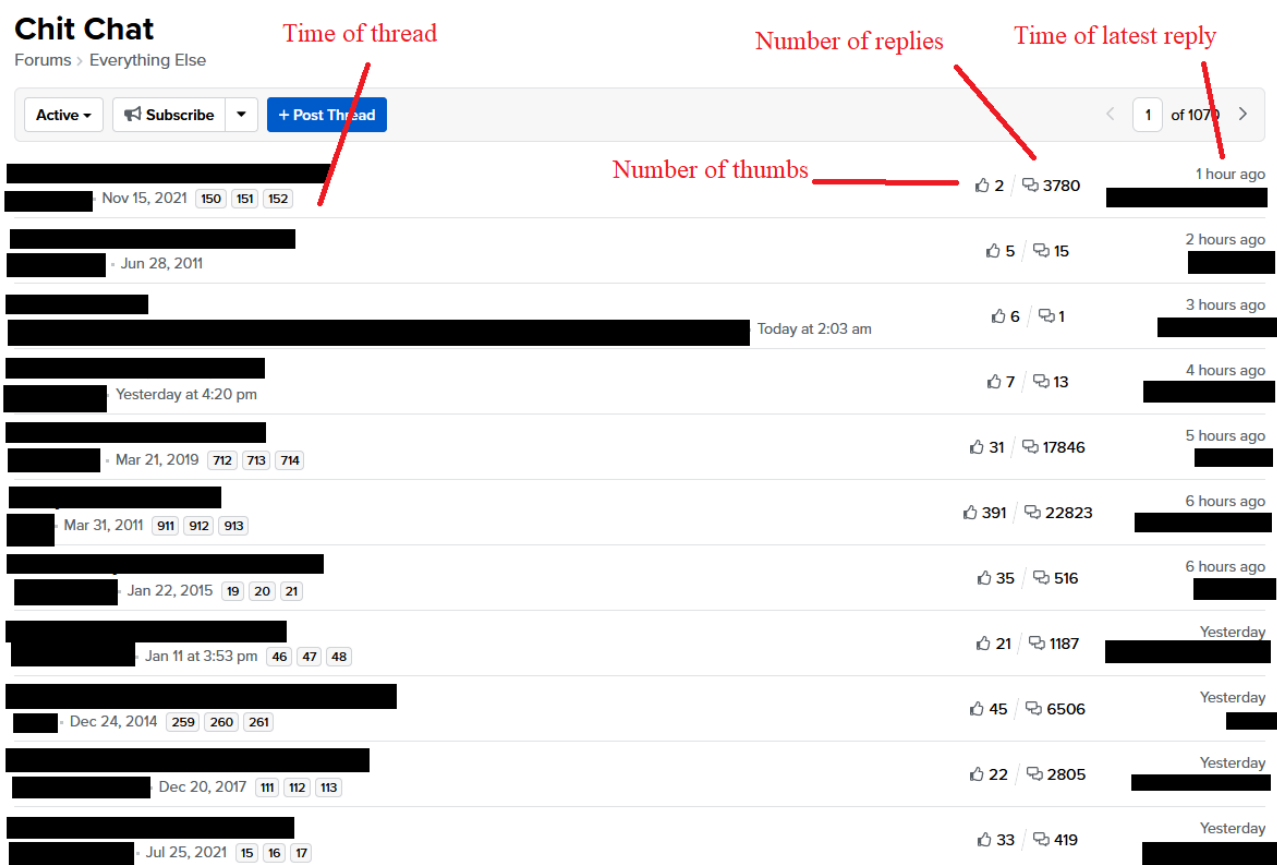

Image 9. List of active threads on the Chit Chat forum section (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-f).

One of the discussion forums on BGG is labelled "Chit Chat", a term which implies informal discussion on topics that are not necessarily of great importance. This forum is under the main discussion category of "Everything Else" which means that discussion on board games is not allowed there. This is a discussion board with a seemingly active user core, something Herring (2004) regards as the first of their six sets of criteria: active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants. Image 9 shows a listing of the most active threads on Chit Chat. It shows that many of the active threads have been started several years ago but still have active discussion, as can be noted

from the timestamps that show the creation of a thread and the time when the last reply was posted. The number of replies is also shown and they show that several threads have thousands of them which is an indication that continued interest on a certain topic has existed for an extended period of time and self-sustaining participation is evident.

Discussion on Chit Chat is not limited to a certain topic, rather a very wide variety of topics are present. Among current active threads users discuss what they are wearing on a given day, what music they listen to, amusing images they share with others, deaths of a celebrities, the dreams they dream, the sports they play, legal advice, a missing piece of clothing found after a decade, geography and flooding. Seemingly, the list is almost endless. Users share what they wish without much filter and others seem pleased and polite to discuss even mundane happenings in life. Responses are positive or neutral in tone and it appears that negative replies are very scarce. Different modes of discussion are present as some discussion revolves around a single personal story someone has shared, possibly inducing reactional commentary on it but also other personal stories of a similar nature. This type of discussion appears to have characteristics of a common offline discussion between friends where a matter is discussed back and forth between participants.

Some Chit Chat threads have continued for many years and will evidently do so for the foreseeable future. One discussion concentrates only on the colour of a certain piece of clothing that users wear on a given day. Posts on this particular thread mostly consist of single word replies that announce the colour of the piece of clothing. Users do not comment on others posts and do not discuss their own. This is a discussion that would most likely not happen in an offline discussion as it bears very few characteristics of a reciprocal discussion. It could be even labelled as a list or an archive of sorts when people document their own actions. It is difficult to decipher why users wish to post on this type of a thread. Still, it has continued for several years and a core group of users post on it therefore it seems to have some characteristics of a community which might be the alluring factor for those who post on it.

Other threads that, for example, discuss amusing images that users post have a flow of conversation that never appears to end. When a user posts an image, others comment on it or post another image as a comment. Another user might soon post an unrelated new image after which the discussion continues, sometimes back and forth with different images. In another thread, discussion is produced solely by questions without any specific topic. In contrast to an offline conversation, these types of discussions do not have an end point or closure and are continuously humorous in nature. Offline conversations always end at some point and humorous interactions appear but they do not often make for the whole of the conversation. An online environment allows for this manner of discussion to

exist and continue. Users will likely enjoy returning to the discussion as it not only offers an opportunity to participate with others but also provides entertainment.

While many examples in this section steer towards positive reflections of a community, there are several instances of conflict and criticism as well. Those aspects are included in Herring's (2004) criteria for a virtual community, alongside means of conflict resolution. According to Herring (2004), conflict and criticism are displayed where actions that disregard positive politeness appear. There are several instances where BGG users exhibit displeasure at other users or at the administration. Changes in site structure or site policy often generate several responses in the discussion forums for and against. At those instances, criticism is directed at website developers or site administration in general. Similarly, unwanted behaviour by other users creates conflict where others demand appropriate behaviour. In both instances, some express their emotion and disagreement using aggravated language where some are more moderate and thoughtful. Passionate interactions can lead to overestimated responses that sometimes alert other users to intervene and attempts to continue the conversation according to the community rules that encourage kindness and politeness are made. Additionally, users have the possibility to alert forum moderators of inappropriate behaviour by reporting posts by users by clicking the "Report" link that is included in all posts in the forums. If moderators determine that community rules have been broken, the user's posts might be deleted, or if they persist in their actions, they might be suspended from using the site. Herring (2004) says that conflict resolution appears through a succession of interaction – this can be witnessed by the interactive process of forum moderation as described above. Critical discussions often can continue if they adhere to community rules. Changes in site policy often create animated discussion among users. There have even been instances where users have threatened or even decided to leave BGG because of recent changes or new policies.

GeekLists offer a specialised and varied mode of discussion. They could be categorised as a general branch of the forums but as image 1 in section 3.2 shows, BGG categorises them as a separate main entity on the site. As GeekLists is one of only six elements in the BGG main menu, it shows that it is a valuable section of the site. GeekLists do not fall under any specific category of discussion but rather each GeekList has its own theme. GeekLists are entities generated by users by creating a list of items that have a page on the site. The items are mainly games but might be designers or publishers among others. The user will write texts beside the listed items as well as in the general heading of the GeekList. Other users have the possibility to comment on the individual items or the GeekList itself. Therefore, albeit being on the same GeekList and a single webpage, one GeekList could be described to have several separate discussions connected to it. The user chooses a topic for the GeekList and

describes it in the general heading, then they discuss separately about each individual listing as to why they are on the list. The user has the option to allow or to deny other users to add items in the list, therefore, when allowing it, creating it to be an interactive, shared experience. For example, a user might start a list that includes games they enjoy playing with their spouse with a wish that other users add items according to their experiences in order to gain new information or tips on games a couple could enjoy playing. Typically, other users will participate in adding items as well as discussing individual items through their own experiences. As stated, GeekLists cover different topics that are very varied. GeekLists can be created to discuss, for example, the best games a user has played, to share a personal story, to highlight games from a certain culture, to auction games for charity, to discuss forgotten games or to show images of games. Personal stories of travels, sickness, or gatherings often produce active discussion and many users might reciprocally share similar stories that they have experienced in the GeekList discussion. Lists that discuss or compare games also attract involved discussion as users are keen to share arguments on good and bad experiences on game play or certain game mechanics, for example. GeekLists appears to be an affordance offered by BGG where users actively participate. It is a place where something is shared and reciprocal communication emerges. As McMillan & Chavis (1986) stated, when people interact, they are likely to form bonds with each other. This creates emotional connections that are building blocks for a community.

As discussed in this section, people gathering to share personal stories is a common occurrence throughout the site in different forums. It is not self-evident that a virtual community could be a place where sometimes very personal occurrences are shared. There are instances where users share cheerful occasions that have happened to them but there are instances when family tragedies are shared. Illnesses or other unfortunate events that are shared often receive compassionate and thoughtful responses. On some instances, the community of users have joined forces in paying hospital bills of a family in need. One special example of the BGG community coming together and supporting a family in need led to the foundation of the Jack Vasel Memorial Fund which is a fund outside of BGG that financially supports members of the gaming community that have faced difficulties in their lives.[2] This mode of support goes beyond Herring's (2004) criteria of solidarity and support as Herring (2004) only suggests finding instances of verbal humour and positive politeness as signs of solidarity and support on a virtual community.

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[2] http://www.jackvasel.org/

Another mode of discussion is "Blogs" which are an affordance of BGG offered to users. Any user can start a new blog inside BGG on any topic. All blog entries allow comments from other users and are, as other forums, viewable for unregistered users as well. Common genres for blogs are board gaming diaries and personal diaries or a combination of both. Generally, blog entries discuss experiences on board games and gaming. Entries on other topics, such as travel, do occur but are infrequent. From a community standpoint, it is noteworthy that many blogs are in diary form. This suggests the existence of an affordance where users are comfortable in sharing personal stories to others. Comments from other users show emotional connections when personal stories are shared. Many who comments share similar instances from their experience. One of the blogs on BGG is "BoardGameGeek News" which is a blog highlighted on the front page of BGG and run by BGG as a medium for board game related news and. It offers nearly daily entries on news from the board gaming world and its industry, previews of new games and designer diaries where board game designers discuss games they have designed. Interactive user discussions take place on the blog entries. Users share their opinions on the news items and discuss and sometimes argue with other users about similarities or differences in opinion. Designer diaries offer avenues for interaction for the users with the game designers.

Several different modes of discussion were discovered. Detailed data searches will probably result in even more modes. It appears BGG is a place where a variety of discussion modes exists and thrives and users seem engaged in the discussions. The existence of discussion and interaction between people who share similar interests, board games in this occasion, in different modes of discussion mentioned in this section previously, correlates with Malinen's (2016) findings. They note technological means that offer possibilities for social interaction are needed for the development of a community. Allowing people to engage with others and share feelings of similarity facilitates the development. As noted by several other scholars as well, interaction is a key ingredient in a community. Therefore, this section portrayed a wide selection of examples to focus the analysis on interaction on the site.

4.3.2 User contributions to the site

Registered BGG members are encouraged to be active contributors to the site. As shown in section 4.2.2, BGG offers several avenues for users to contribute to the site and to the community. This section will offer examples of user contributions and discuss the effects of such user participation to the BGG community.

The game database is a main element of the site and its upkeep is directed to the users. Users keep game information up to date by adding new games to the database or new information to existing game pages and by editing existing, possible dated data. They add images of the games into the database and provide reviews on games in text and in video form. By default, images and reviews will have the possibility for other users to discuss the contribution. Having images and reviews appear in the database is crucial information to users who mainly use the site as an information source. As the main function is the site is to be a resource and a community as noted on its welcome page (BoardGameGeek, n.d.-m). It is interesting to note that the members of the community are trusted with the maintenance of the database. There would be no database without the community. Having users as contributors is a main factor in building a community on BGG. As McMillan & Chavis's (1986) say, donating time and energy to a cause brings about a sense of membership in it.

One aspect on contributing to the site is the information users provide about themselves to the site. There are many different opportunities for self-identification on BGG. Registered users will have a public profile page that they can insert information on. Many write a short description of themselves as a board gamer and some add other personal information, for example, of their family. Users can show their interest in games by marking games as "owned", "wishlist", "want in trade", "for trade" – this information is shown as a metric in the games' pages. This type of information as accessible to other users but is not interactive unless a user wishes to use, for example, the in-site messaging system to enquire about information they are interested in. Also, part of the profile is the GUR which was discussed in section 4.2.2. The GUR allows users to present themselves in a manner of their choosing in the discussion forums. Parts of the GUR and the GUR itself are, in effect, symbols that address other users. GUR allows the user to contribute an image of themselves to the site.

User input on game information, reviews, pictures, videos etc. on the game pages is moderated through a system named *GeekMod*. It is a user-based moderating system where any member can go and judge images, reviews, files and data that people are posting and decide whether it fulfils the content guidelines of BGG. When enough users accept or deny a specific contribution, it is either let through to the site or dismissed and not posted on the site. In contrast, general discussion forums posts and GeekLists are posted without moderation but there is a function for any member reading to report post or a comment in order alert the administrative staff of, for example, an inappropriate text that someone posted. When enough people report something, site moderators act and possibly remove that post in question and are in contact with the poster regarding the moderation. GeekMod allows for contributions from any user and might encourage those who do not wish to interact with others that much but might wish to be able to contribute to the community. Naturally, some might

want to interact much, and yet also enjoy the "unseen" work of GeekMod. Participating in GeekMod presents an opportunity to be a community builder. As discussed, different levels of participation are needed for a community to exist. Users might enjoy different tasks. GeekMod offers an avenue for anyone interested but also specifically for those who are experts in some field. For example, those who are interested in photography might be interested in "GeekModding" uploaded images.

Information about BGG is found on the in-site wiki pages. As in other wikis, the BGG wiki on editable by users, although some the of wiki pages have been locked and are editable only by the administration. The editing processes are supervised by staff members to ensure the correctness of the information. As with GeekMod, the wiki offers possibilities for contributions without much chance of interaction, barring questions from the staff. The BGG wiki functions as an information source to the users of the site and presents guidance and helpful tips on how to use BGG. The wiki is for all users but might make new users feel more at home on the site when they are aware of site functions and structures.

There appears to be two different models for contributions: first, models that additionally encourage interaction by having the possibility for others to comment on the contributions. This allows for possibilities for users to come together to discuss specific interests inside the larger board gaming hobby. Second, models that are not interactive as they will not show others the contributions of a single user. It is important that both models exist and that users are able to contribute in a manner that feels good to them.

4.3.3 Rituals, traditions and events

This section will discuss different rituals, traditions and events occasion on BGG. Some of the events on BGG are repetitive, meaning they are organised on a regular basis. Some events occur once a year, some once a month. The analysis will discuss these cultural habits as parts of the larger community.

New users that register for the site receive a badge on their GUR for thirty days. The badge has the text "NEWUSER" on it. It disappears automatically after the first month of being a member. It would appear that the badge's main purpose is to show other users that this user is a new user. Many times, older users welcome new users to the community based on the new user badge when replying to them regardless of the topic of the discussion. This adds to the perception of the new users' membership, which is McMillan & Chavis's (1986) first element of in sense of community, as a new user not only gains membership through the registration process but also through interaction from older members

who welcome them. It can be argued that the existence of the badge appears to be directed to inspire a welcoming spirit from the older users – even if that is not the case, this is what happens.

There are several "Secret Santa" exchanges that take place during the holiday season. They are events where users sign up to send a gift to another user and to receive a gift from another. Some of the exchanges are local, some are national and some are international. The gifts are customarily games, the value of which are determined in the rules of the individual exchanges. The events have their own discussion forums on the site where users share their feelings and thoughts on the events before and after they happen. Most texts are posted after the gifts start arriving. On many occasions, users send gifts that are over the required value of the gift and people are sharing their surprise and excitement through the forums. Taking part in an exchange appears to make one feel part of something bigger, especially in the case of the international exchanges. Seeing users from different continents posting pictures of the arrived gifts seems to create a feeling of a large community in which the user is allowed to be a part of. Participants of the exchanges seem to enjoy the lengthy process. First, plan the purchase by researching the recipient's gift wish list, which itself is an affordance on BGG which allows users to mark games that they are interested in and create personalised lists, profile and forum interactions in order to create a unique experience for the other when receiving the gift. Second, they send the gift and have the possibility to message the recipient through an anonymous account to provide hints of what is to come. Third, they can follow the recipient's reaction to the whole process if they post about it on the forums. At the same time, participants are part of two processes, receiving and giving. This makes for a unique experience and seems to generate a sense of belonging among users. Currently, BGG provides for technical solutions for arranging these events but earlier they were run solely by active users of the site. The nature of the events being a creation of the users of the community makes for a special atmosphere where compassion and kindness are shared. This correlates strongly with McMillan & Chavis's (1986) idea of shared emotional connection.

A weekly occurrence was the "crowning" of a Geek of the Week (GotW). It begun from a suggestion by a user to increase sense of community by introducing individuals to the wider community. Later, the event switched to be hosted by BGG but still with a strong user influence. The previous GotW would choose another user to be next week's GotW and so on. They published a forum discussion where the GotW presents themselves and answers questions on the forum from other users. This tradition ran for several years but has recently ended as BGG presented a decision to not allow the continuation. This sparked lively discussion among users who regularly posted on the forum as they felt the reasoning to be lacking. The discussion appeared one sided as not many official statements

were heard. Even though a tradition now in the past it had its place BGG for a long time and is now a part of BGG history.

As board gaming mostly happens in an offline environment with physical games, the discussion is generally connected to the offline world. The "Regional Gaming" forums are forums where people find others to play with. The forums have separate subforums for different countries and even states, in the case of the USA, for example. People use the forum to ask for information on gaming opportunities or game shops in a certain area. Also, people who organise game groups, run board game cafes or host conventions use the forums to advertise and inform other on the possibilities of coming together to play. This is an avenue for many to find other board gamers that would otherwise be difficult. Discussion and interaction on these forums are limited as it is mainly a place to share information. On the other hand, this forum allows for BGG to enlarge the community aspect to the offline world as well.

BGG itself regularly organises offline conventions for BGG users where hundreds of people come together to play board games. These will generally be advertised on the front page which allows for more users to be aware of the events. Often excited interaction takes place discussing about the convention before and after they happen. People discuss accommodation, travel plans and naturally the possibilities for playing board games and meeting others. After the conventions, many post reports on them. Gatherings that bring together members of an offline community will increase the sense of membership among users. It will also add to the shared history of the community and create a type of shared emotional connection for members. These characteristics are part of the community elements offered by McMillan & Chavis (1986).

This section showcased several examples of traditions on BGG. Rituals and events happening on BGG offer a sense of membership to those who participate in any way. Contributing to any occasion supports a sense of belonging and togetherness among users. Others may value participating members as valuable members of the community.

5 Discussion

Through many examples it is apparent that many social situations occur, many participatory activities exist and notions of communal life are present on BGG. All of these are present in various forms and executed differently by different users. The experiences of the users differ as well. Every user is embedded in their own world of BGG, as they use it based on the framework of their own needs and assumptions. Users also use BGG in different ways. Some are very engaged in discussion whereas others might only read discussions. Others use it to interact with others, others to find information. Some contribute the site whereas some do not. Some users most likely feel they are a member of a community, some likely do not. Some might feel a part of the community even though they might not engage with others or contribute to the site. Wenger et al. (2002) wrote that successful communities offer different levels of participation and membership and Malinen (2016) noted that users of the same site experience it in different ways. BGG allows users to use the site in the way the users wish by offering several different participatory affordances and by not demanding any contributions but offering various possibilities to contribute. Also, the site being open to unregistered users as well offers an avenue for peripheral participation.
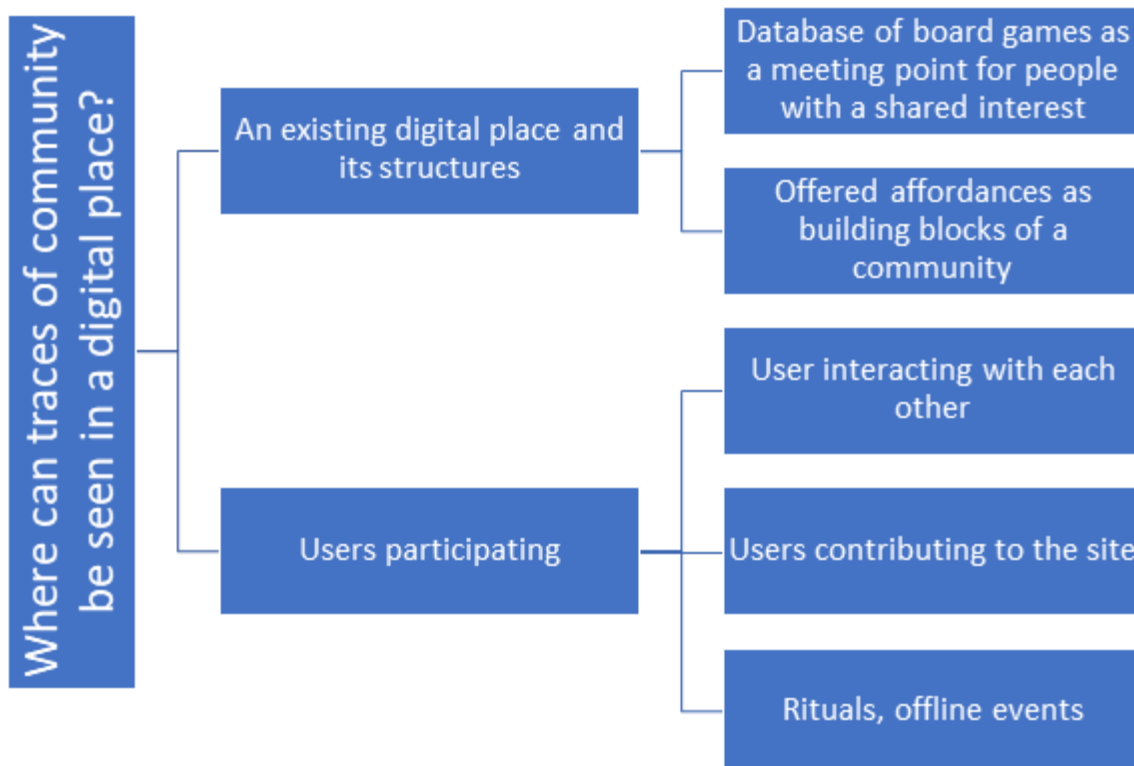

Image 10. A mind map created by the author as an attempt structuralise BGG to locate traces of community.

Image 10 shows a mind map by the author which attempts to describe the structure of BGG. This mind map was the basis for the structure that was chosen for the analysis section. It offers a view

where traces of community are searched. The two branches showcase the two aspects of BGG where community can be seen: firstly, on the website structures and, secondly, in the different actions of the users. The mind map is not a perfect description as some aspects overlap, most notably the affordances offered by BGG that are also used as interactive participatory actions by users. For example, thumbing is an affordance offered by BGG to encourage encouragement between users and, at the same time, it is a function that users use to interact with each other.

Could a community exist if only one of the branches was there? Clearly, the website as a meeting place and the affordances by themselves would not constitute a community as there would be no users. On the contrary, people interacting, contributing and organising online could fulfil the criteria for a virtual community offered, for example, by Herring (2004). Also, if people were found to act in this manner in an online environment, it would guarantee that a virtual meeting place would also exist. Based on the analysis, though, the affordances offered by BGG work towards creating and maintaining a community, as well.

In section 4.2.1, studying the website as a meeting point and a database for games showed that it is a cyber-place that offers technological infrastructure for interactive group-CMC, as was one of Jones's (1997) requirements for a virtual community. Additionally, it is a place where people with a similar interest, board games, have the possibility of gathering. Malinen (2016) mentioned that developing into a community is facilitated by feelings of similarity in online groups that share similar interests and goals. BGG's extensive database for board games will interest people who are interested in board games. Not only a database, BGG offers a significant number of different affordances for the user as discussed in section 4.2.2. Many of them aim at creating possibilities to interact or contribute to the site. First on Herring's (2004) list of criteria for a virtual community is "active, self-sustaining participation" which appears to be a target for BGG as well as they encourage users to participate in different ways, as noted by examples in the analysis.

User interaction appears to be the central characteristic of community, as discussed by scholars such as McMillan & Chavis (1986), Rheingold (1993), Gudykunst & Kim (1997), Herring (2004), Griffith et al. (2013) and Malinen (2016). User interaction, concentrating on different modes of discussion was discussed in section 4.3.1. Analysis revealed a variety of ways in which users interact with others. Interaction between users builds connections and creates a sense of community, of which McMillan & Chavis (1986) discussed. Different affordances for interactions also offer possibilities to interact in different modes as well as allowing different levels of participation. As discussed earlier, the different levels are necessary for a community to exist. Examples showed instances of solidarity,

support as well as criticism and conflict which are elements of a community as discussed by Herring (2004).

Besides interaction, user contributions to site were discussed in section 4.3.2. Users are encouraged to provide information on board games on various avenues. Analysis showed there to be two different types of contributions: those that are visible to other users and those that are not. This again allows for different levels of participation. Visibility allows for interaction with other users and the opposite allows users to contribute without interactional elements. Contributing to the site allows the user the feel a sense of participation or feel a sense of community by doing something for it. This strengthens the tie between the user and BGG, creating a stronger feeling of membership, which is one of McMillan & Chavis's (1986) elements of sense of community. They say a person has the right to be a member of a community when they donate time and energy, i.e., invest a part of themselves for the benefit of it.

Section 4.3.3 discussed rituals and traditions that appear on the site. The examples in the analysis show that historical developments have taken place and rituals have appeared. Herring (2004) regarded shared history and culture as criteria for a community. Ongoing rituals create history and culture to the site and are important in building the culture and the norms of the site. Users from different levels of participation will have different opportunities to take part when several rituals have appeared. A cultural aspect can be seen where several events are communal in nature and bring users together.

Wenger et al. (2009) discussed the importance of stewardship and technology stewards in digital communities who mould and develop the communities into environments that are sensible to navigate and easy to use. While BGG is strongly driven by the community, it appears to be stewarded by the ownership and employees of BGG. The leadership seems interested in constantly developing the community and as shown in the analysis, in offering affordances to the users to build a stronger community. As they aspire BGG to be a community, they are likely to make decisions that help in those aspirations. Most likely, the community gains in having people whose responsibility it is to maintain the site compared to a situation of a community website run solely by volunteers. It can be argued that BGG also has technology stewards that emerge from the community. These are users who voluntarily create opportunities inside affordances offered by BGG for others to interact and participate. For example, some users organise playful or humorous events or competitions as GeekLists, some of which have become regular events.

An ethnographic study of BGG has allowed for an image of a community to be displayed in this thesis. It has shown that actions of people online are needed for a virtual community to emerge and

continue to exist. An adequate cyber-place is needed for the community and has been examined to exist. The infrastructure and affordances offered by BGG support the existence of the community. Users who take part and contribute to the site hold a strong membership and feel a part of something bigger. BGG has succeeded in offering opportunities to interact and to contribute for the users so that a self-sustaining community is alive.

6 Conclusion

This thesis has given an ethnographic description of the BoardGameGeek website. The analysis is based on the introduction of previous studies in CMC and in virtual communities and the selection of virtual ethnography as a research method. Analysis was conducted through participant observation which was based on the ethnographic aspect of the author being a member on the site for several years. Data was extensive and examples for analysis were chosen based on the author's field notes made through the research process. Screenshots from the site were used as direct data points in the analysis. The core of the thesis was the attempt to locate and analyse signs of community and signs of sense of community on BGG. Examples were chosen to showcase the culture and social structure of the site in an adequate manner and from different points of view. Analysis was structured to create connections to earlier research, to show affordances offered by BGG that can be valued aspects of a community and to show the participatory actions of the users on BGG.

Analysis presented and discussed several signs of community. The existence of those signs points to the existence of a community online. As even scholars struggle defining what is a community or a virtual community, it makes it hard to exactly define where a community can be seen. The thesis based the analysis on McMillan & Chavis's (1986) four elements required for sense of community and Herring's (2004) six sets of criteria of a virtual community. The analysis showed those elements to exist and those criteria to be fulfilled on BGG. Based on the findings, an argument can be made that BGG is a virtual community. Though, Malinen (2016) suggested that more important than proving the existence of a community is the study of communal and social aspects of a site. This thesis has attempted to provide those studies and provided ethnographical descriptions of those aspects on BGG.

Credibility of the research would benefit from having more than one researcher collecting and analysing observations and experiences. With only one researcher, there is a risk that some, even important, aspects of the research target are left unnoticed as some might be given too much attention. Also, the scope of the thesis remained limited with only one researcher conducting the study. Hine (2015) mentions that the nature of ethnographic research often produces only partial accounts of the research target even when the aim is to create a comprehensive one. Therefore, research would benefit from studies performed from different viewpoints and by different researchers. Yet, Hine (2015) continues, ethnographic study aims at understanding the world in small portions at a time. Thus, even though not a comprehensive description by any means, this study has achieved describing parts of a community that exemplify human life online. Hine (2015) emphasises the need for an ethnographic researcher to "be there" and be engaged in the community to produce direct experiences instead of

opinions from second-hand sources. This has also been achieved by selecting a research target where the author has been a participating member for several years.

Analysis can be continued to create a more detailed ethnographical description of BGG. Some aspects of the site were not analysed in this thesis and those aspect can provide more insight into the existence and the aspects of a community on BGG. This thesis did not use direct quotations or paraphrases of discussion on BGG. The addition of analysis of discussion based on direct quotations would add to the credibility of the research as it would provide a more in-depth analysis of characteristics of conversational interactions online. This was not performed in this thesis as the selected data was deemed to be sufficient regarding the scope the research. At hindsight, the thesis could have solely concentrated on analysing discussions to reveal aspects of community through textual actions and interactions of the users. Instead, a path of studying structure and ethnographical observations was chosen. Both approaches will produce credible analysis, although from different perspectives. If combined, a more thorough ethnographical description would have been achieved. Even further, as Priest (2010) and Hine (2015) noted, in addition to participant observation, depth interviews are a key ethnographic research method. By conducting depth interviews, insights from members of the community can be added to the analysis to widen the scope of the ethnographic description.

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