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Introduction

More than 15 years after its inception¹, (computer) game studies is a research field shaped by diverse disciplinary traditions and approaches, and therefore characterized by multiple (often implicitly) competing ontologies². For instance, Ian Bogost³ differentiates between four basic premises, i.e. understanding games as narratives, as rule systems, as played experiences, and as software platforms. This article contributes to this debate by proposing to consider games-as-products as another distinct, as-of-yet underrepresented ontology, which e.g. informs studies by van der Graaf⁴ and Nieborg⁵. Using the so-called 'renaissance'⁶ of board games and the pivotal role of *Kickstarter* in the process as a case study, it aims to show how a critical analysis of media distribution platforms can provide a novel perspective on pertinent issues in game studies, such as genre formation or materiality.

The analysis is divided into two consecutive steps. First, the salient features and software affordances⁷ of *Kickstarter* that frame the pitching of game projects are identified, which allows for characterizing the platform and its users as a socio-technical system⁸. Based on these findings, *Kickstarter* campaigns are conceptualized not simply as storefronts or advertisements but as myths with distinct functions for the community, building up developer personas⁹ and producing a narrative arc leading towards a climactic moment, i.e. the funding deadline. Second, the article identifies several recurring patterns in board game

1 E. Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One", *Game Studies*, 1 (1), 2001, pp. 1-15.

2 E. Aarseth, 'Define Real, Moron!' *Some Remarks on Game Ontologies*, in *DIGAREC Keynote-Lectures*, Potsdam 2011, pp. 50-69 (<https://publishup.uni-potsdam.de/opus4-ubp/frontdoor/index/index/docId/5044>).

3 I. Bogost, *Videogames Are a Mess*, Keynote Speech at DiGRA, 2009 ([http://bogost.com/downloads/Videogames are a Mess slides.pdf](http://bogost.com/downloads/Videogames%20are%20a%20Mess%20slides.pdf)).

4 S. van der Graaf, "Get Organized at Work! A Look Inside the Game Design Process of Valve and Linden Lab", *Bulletin of Science Technology Society*, 32 (6), 2012, pp. 480-488.

5 D. Nieborg, "Crushing Candy: The Free-to-Play Game in Its Connective Commodity Form", *Social Media & Society*, 1 (2), 2015 (<http://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115621932>).

6 Cf. https://www.wired.com/2013/10/board_game_renaissance/.

7 M. Curinga, "Critical Analysis of Interactive Media with Software Affordances", *First Monday*, 19 (9), 2014 (<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4757/4116>).

8 S. Niederer, J. van Dijck, "Wisdom of the Crowd or Technicity of Content? Wikipedia as a Sociotechnical System", *New Media & Society*, 12 (8), 2010, pp. 1368-1387.

9 P. Marshall, C. Moore, K. Barbour, "Persona as method: exploring celebrity and the public self through persona studies", *Celebrity Studies*, 6 (3), 2015, pp. 288-305.



creation via *Kickstarter* through a comparative content analysis¹⁰ based on a dataset comprising 3300 campaigns. Basic semi-automated methods like keyword frequency analysis and the calculation of metadata such as the funding ratio are used to provide orientation. Yet, the analysis has a hermeneutic focus and mainly relies on selective close readings of especially successful, unsuccessful or otherwise notable campaigns.

Thus, the article aims to make two main contributions to contemporary game scholarship, a) to establish a connection between game studies and the notion of (software) platforms (as defined e.g. by José van Dijck or Tarleton Gillespie), and b) to emphasize the connection between distribution and game aesthetics, i.e. to advocate a distinct distribution studies perspective on games, complementary to existing production analyses.

Kickstarter and the “board game renaissance”

Kickstarter is arguably the most prominent distribution platform at the moment, yet only a few studies¹¹ acknowledge its impact on board game creation. For instance, at the time of writing, the campaign for *Arranged!*, a board game about arranged marriages¹², was still ongoing. While its \$6000 goal sets it apart from the biggest commercial successes of the platform, the game would likely not exist at all – at least not as an internationally acknowledged phenomenon – without *Kickstarter*, and it demonstrates the relevance of acknowledging games-as-products rather than simply regarding *Arranged!* as another serious game, regardless of its economic circumstances.

Previous cultural analyses of *Kickstarter* and its role within the creative industries, on the other hand, focus on the production side and particularly on interactions between developers and fans¹³. For instance, Smith¹⁴ identifies different types of interaction during the campaign and the post-campaign phase, arguing that during the campaign, user agency might not be as direct as a “rigid publisher-imposed framework” but that backers are an “agent, able to make a deal” (205). Thus, the relationship is one of constant negotiation both among backers, trying to find a unified ‘voice’, and between backers and developers. This ambivalence also characterizes the backers’ relationship with the pitched game; on the one hand, many backers want to experience a spirit of ‘co-ownership’, but – on the other hand – they also want to see the creative vision of a developer they trust and respect. After the campaign, the interaction becomes more formalized, e.g. via “polling” (206) or “playtest[ing]” (208).

10 P. Rössler, *Comparative Content Analysis*, in P. Rössler, F. Esser, T. Hanitzsch (edited by), *Handbook of Comparative Communication Research*, New York 2012, pp. 459-468.

11 E.g. A. Brown, D. Waterhouse-Watson, “Playing with the History of Middle Earth: Board Games, Transmedia Storytelling, and The Lord of the Rings”, *Journal of Tolkien Research*, 3 (3), 2016 (<http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol3/iss3/4>).

12 Cf. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1742402700/arranged-the-arranged-marriage-board-game>.

13 B. Chin *et al.*, “Veronica Mars Kickstarter and Crowd Funding”, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 15, 2014 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0519>).

14 A. Smith, “The Backer-Developer Connection: Exploring Crowdfunding’s Influence on Video Game Production”, *New Media & Society*, 17 (2), 2015, pp. 198-214.

Other studies draw on social psychology and behavioral economics to explain patterns in backing behavior. Accordingly¹⁵, “social information” (2), i.e. knowledge about the behavior of fellow backers, can affect users’ decisions to support a campaign. Most importantly, the perceived “diffusion of responsibility” (4) arguably explains that users are less likely to back campaigns that are already successful, an effect which is often characteristically reversed if a campaign is still falling slightly short of its funding goal shortly before the deadline.

Apart from platforms like *Kickstarter*, the resurgence of board games in popular culture since the late 1990s¹⁶ can be traced back to several other factors of influence. For instance, using the genre denomination ‘eurogames’¹⁷, more recent design conventions exhibited in games like *Settlers of Catan* (1995), *Dominion* (2008) or *Village* (2011) could be discursively ‘separated’ from the formative games of the 20th century such as *Monopoly* (1903) and *Risk* (1959), which had come to be criticized as too unbalanced and static. Furthermore, board games have been positively associated e.g. with entrepreneurialism and as a tool to teach so-called “20th century skills”¹⁸ when their unexpected relevance in various important societal domains made the news, e.g. as popular pastime in startup culture¹⁹ or as a training tool for the CIA²⁰.

One vitally important but often overlooked reason is a continuous stream of innovation in the production process. From a media comparative perspective, production studies have explained similar changes in other media formats²¹. One fairly recent development in board game production is the emergence of online stores for prototyping materials such as dice, tokens and blank playing cards, which lowers the barriers of entry for inexperienced developers. Dedicated software tools for prototyping card and board games²² similarly streamline specific production processes; for example, *NanDeck* and *LackeyCCG* specifically facilitate the creation of collectible card games (CCGs). Finally, the increasing robustness and cost-effectiveness of 3D printing partially explains the spike in mainstream popularity of strategy games with elaborate miniatures, which used to be a highly specialized industry.

15 V. Kuppaswamy, B. Bayus, “Crowdfunding Creative Ideas: The Dynamics of Project Backers in Kickstarter”, *UNC Kenan-Flagler Research Paper*, 2013 (<http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004>).

16 Cf. e.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/nov/25/board-games-internet-playstation-xbox>.

17 D. Wilson, “The Eurogame as Heterotopia”, *Analogue Game Studies*, 2 (7), 2015 (<http://analoggamestudies.org/2015/11/the-eurogame-as-heterotopia/>).

18 M. Romero, M. Usart, M. Ott, “Can Serious Games Contribute to Developing and Sustaining 21st Century Skills?”, *Games and Culture*, 10 (2), 2014, p. 148.

19 Cf. e.g. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB126092289275692825>.

20 Cf. <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/03/the-cia-uses-board-games-to-train-officers-and-i-got-to-play-them/>.

21 E.g. E. Ytreberg, “Premeditations of Performance in Recent Live Television: A Scripting Approach to Media Production Studies”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9 (4), 2006, pp. 421-440.

22 Cf. e.g. <https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/54353/game-prototyping-tools>.

Conceptualizing (board) game distribution

While production studies have been focusing on film and television so far²³ they provide a conceptual framework for understanding the impact of production on media aesthetics. Yet, this article argues that distribution modalities have been just as instrumental in bringing about the board game renaissance and uses *Kickstarter* to outline a way of theorizing it.

For instance, game jams and competitions, which have become an essential component of independent (computer) game culture²⁴ increasingly include board and card games as well, and combine a streamlined production context with new opportunities for winning over and maintaining audiences²⁵. Moreover, open marketplaces like *The Game Crafter*²⁶ offer on-demand publishing of board games, which circumvents the traditional, rather exclusive curation process of established publishers.

Media distribution has received considerably less scholarly attention than production. Perren²⁷ rightly points out that this is impression has been intensified by “definitional inconsistencies and the absence of a conversation across various areas of Media Studies” (165). However, in her proposition to broaden and homogenize these definitions, Perren herself mostly refers to time-based media such as “television studies, film history, political economy of communication, [and] moving-image archiving” while, for instance, game distribution has been primarily assessed in empirical categories²⁸ and not from a critical comparative perspective.

For that purpose, though, previous distribution research can provide valuable conceptual frames. For instance, Bordwell²⁹ foregrounds the political economy of film distribution and argues that digital projectors have led to a notable centralization of power, e.g. among large multiplex theaters or influential filmmakers and producers like James Cameron and George Lucas (64). Therefore, it indirectly alters the programming as well since smaller venues, which are vital for the diversification of film programming, suffer the most. From that angle, *Kickstarter* can be both a boon and a burden. On the one hand, it constitutes an ecosystem that connects smaller board game developers with potential audiences. Yet, *Kickstarter* also imposes its own mode of governance³⁰ on the developers, both formally through its functionality as a software application as well as layers of terms

23 M. Banks, B. Connor, V. Mayer (edited by), *Production Studies, The Sequel: Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries*, New York 2016.

24 O. Guevara-Villalobos, *Cultures of Independent Game Production: Examining the Relationship between Community and Labour*, in *Think Design Play: The Fifth International Conference of the Digital Research Association (DIGRA)*, Hilversum 2011 (www.digra.org/dl/db/11307.08157.pdf).

25 For an overview of past and ongoing competitions cf. e.g. <https://boardgamegeek.com/forum/974620/boardgamegeek/design-contests>.

26 Cf. <https://www.thegamecrafter.com/>.

27 A. Perren, “Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies”, *Cinema Journal*, 52 (3), 2013, pp. 165-171.

28 M. Schilling, “Technological Leapfrogging: Lessons from the U.S. Video Game Console Industry”, *California Management Review*, 45 (3), 2003, pp. 6-32.

29 D. Bordwell, *Pandora's Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies*, Madison 2013.

30 B. Light, J. Burgess, S. Duguay, “The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps”, *New Media and Society*, in press (<http://usir.salford.ac.uk/40327/>).

of use³¹, and informally, e.g. by making visible to both developers and consumers, which kinds of game concepts promise economic success and thereby, by and large, incentivizing the iteration on these ‘formulae’ rather than the exploration of new ideas.

Furthermore, with his investigation of informal (film) distribution channels such as roadside stalls or makeshift video clubs, Lobato³² demonstrates that distribution environments – both informal and formal – produce their own cultural contexts, characterized by shared practices and experiences. With reference to (digital) games, bootleg sales³³ and particularly the Steam Summer Sale aptly exemplify this cultural dimension of game distribution. As a recurring, annual event, the Steam sale has become a media ritual³⁴ within gaming culture and, to a lesser degree, mainstream media culture³⁵. Steam users add to the symbolic sub-cultural relevance of the event (which obviously is primarily economically motivated) by creating numerous layers of back story, parody and self-historicization (e.g. comparing experiences of previous Summer Sales). This applies, to a lesser degree, also to (board game) distribution on *Kickstarter*. Many users constitute their collective identity as backers from a shared self-perception as early ‘discoverers’ and patrons of promising games. For instance, users are identified on the site by how many projects they backed and created, which facilitates a distinction between ‘veterans’ and new members, which exists in similar form among most (sub-)cultural entities, from local sports clubs (e.g. active players taking over training duties later on) to entire cities (long-term residents vs. new arrivals).

Finally, a few studies point to connection between distribution modalities and media aesthetics, yet exclusively with a historical focus. For instance, Quinn³⁶ explains that the creation of early feature-length films in the 1910s was motivated by the need for product differentiation strategies across different territories. The article at hand will contribute to this research trajectory and use the ‘board game renaissance’ as a case study to explore its applicability to more research media phenomena.

Methodology

With its analysis of board game campaigns on *Kickstarter*, this article aims to create a bridge between game studies and software studies³⁷ as two closely related but rarely combined research areas within the (digital) humanities. This requires a two-fold approach as

31 Cf. e.g. <https://www.kickstarter.com/terms-of-use> but also <https://www.kickstarter.com/rules> and, more specifically, <https://www.kickstarter.com/privacy>.

32 R. Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema*, London 2012.

33 For a brief account of bootleg stalls in Russia cf. <http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/GOTW/Russia/AlexFabien.html>.

34 X. Cui, “Media Events Are Still Alive: The Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics as a Media Ritual”, *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2013, pp. 1220-1235.

35 Cf. e.g. <http://nymag.com/selectall/2017/06/the-strange-cult-of-the-steam-summer-sale.html>.

36 M. Quinn, “Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to the Feature Film”, *Cinema Journal*, 40 (2), 2001, pp. 35-56.

37 M. Fuller, *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, Cambridge 2008.

outlined below in this sections, involving both a critical affordance analysis of the *Kickstarter* platform (i.e. of how it's design shapes the process of board game creation) and a comparative analysis of the campaign websites (i.e. of thematic and gameplay patterns in board games pitched over the past eight years).

To investigate how the platform frames the collective imaginary of board games, *Kickstarter* itself will be defined as a socio-technical system. Taking *Wikipedia* as an example, Niederer and van Dijck³⁸ use the term to analyze how platforms organize their own sustainable growth and productivity. For instance, the “organizational hierarchy” (1372), which attributes different permissions depending on the ‘clearance level’ of the user, ensures e.g. that only users with demonstrable experience obtain more authority but also installs a “system of disciplinary control” (1373) since users need to perform their function properly to maintain their status. Even if the community continues to grow, the hierarchy makes it easier for participants to understand their position within in.

Even though Niederer and van Dijck do not explicitly reference the notion of software affordances (cf. above) in their analysis, the socio-technical system effectively describes an assemblage of interconnected affordances that organize how users and non-human ‘agents’. For instance, bots on *Wikipedia* do not force users to create content but create incentives to do so. That is, they ‘afford’ productivity, e.g. creating minimal pages by pulling information on “US cities and counties” (1378) from public databases and compelling human editors to correct or add details (rather than having to create the page ‘from scratch’). Software affordances are broadly defined as “elements of software systems that allow users to take action”³⁹. Curinga compares affordance analysis to the “rules of literary interpretation”, stating that affordances meaningfully constrain the spectrum of potential uses and interpretations of software. They are relational in that they exist in only the interaction between user and software (just like, one might add, interpretations of a text arise from the interaction between the written words and the reader, with all their contingencies). An example the author provides, the “coercive defaults” implement with the changing of *Facebook*’s privacy settings in 2010, illustrates the use of the term. Even though the settings can be reversed and are thus not mandatory, Facebook – by making almost all posts public by default – sent the ‘message’ that interaction on the platform was supposed to value transparency, connectedness and one-to-many communication.

The second focus lies on the actual campaigns, i.e. on identifying recurring patterns of change in board game aesthetics, and tracing them back to the contingencies of the platform. For that purpose, a comparative content analysis of board game campaigns, i.e. *Kickstarter* pages tagged as ‘Tabletop Games’⁴⁰, will be conducted. The data is based on the publicly available *Kickstarter* dataset scraped and provided by data analytics company Web Robots⁴¹. The corpus has been limited to include only tabletop game projects, manually cleaned up and slightly expanded, for instance by calculating the ratio between the original

funding goal and the actual pledges. This helps further contextualize the game campaigns; the particular ratio can differ radically, e.g. between 963 and 87826% within the ten most funded games in the corpus, and some highly funded games barely met their target while less funded games drastically exceeded their own expectations.

The dataset includes 3312 board game campaigns with deadlines between June 2009 and August 2017. Games below will be referenced by name and date; further details, including URLs for the archived campaign sites and metadata, can be found in the Google Spreadsheet, which is available online at <http://tinyurl.com/y9edhrp6>.

First, the highly accessible web-based text analysis toolkit Voyant Tools for a basic semantic analysis that yields relevant metadata. For that purposed, the brief descriptions (‘ad blurbs’) of all campaigns in the dataset have been combined to create a unified text corpus.

As a preparatory method, this kind of textual analysis can be combined with filtering options in Excel. Since Voyant Tools shows clustering of terms throughout the text, this allows e.g. for identifying which terms are particularly common in a) more or less successful campaigns (if previously sorted by pledge amount), as well as b) in recent or older campaigns (if previously sorted by deadline).

For example, this approach demonstrates that “miniatures” is one of the most common terms with 239 occurrences, which disproportionately cluster in the most successful campaign pages. This appears plausible because projects involving miniatures are usually more expensive; however, it also applies to projects with the highest funding ratios (cf. above), suggesting that – inversely – games involving miniatures appear to be particularly appealing on *Kickstarter*.

It is important to note that these findings offer clear indications but cannot claim generalizability due to the limited size of the data set. Thus, while existing analyses⁴², prioritize quantifiable factors and *Kicktraq* data⁴³ or visualize regional clustering of *Kickstarter* projects⁴⁴, the analysis at hand will have a hermeneutic, less data-driven focus. Yet, since the corpus is too large for all campaign to receive equal attention, the content analysis will focus on the (both positive and negative) outliers in the data to infer patterns and on selective close readings of the actual campaign pages for a more in-depth perspective.

Kickstarter as a socio-technical system

As indicated above, similar to *Wikipedia*, *Kickstarter* has proven itself as a sustainable socio-technical system. However, one key difference is the fact that *Kickstarter* is a commercial platform, while *Wikipedia* explicitly embraces a non-profit approach. Thus, commercial aspects such as revenue distribution or opportunities for product differentiation (e.g. through pledge tiers) become part of the affordances that determine the system’s sustainability. Below,

38 Niederer, van Dijck, “Wisdom of the Crowd or Technicity of Content?”, cit. (see quote 8).

39 Curinga, “Critical Analysis of Interactive Media with Software Affordances”, cit. (see quote 7).

40 Cf. https://www.kickstarter.com/discover/categories/games/tabletop_games.

41 Cf. <https://webrobots.io/kickstarter-datasets/>. The version used for this article dates back to June 15, 2017.

42 E.g. M. Smith, K. Smith, “‘All Out War’ on Kickstarter: Reward-Based Crowdfunding in Tabletop Games”, 2016 (Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship).

43 Cf. e.g. <http://www.kicktraq.com/projects/elanlee/exploding-kittens/>.

44 Cf. e.g. <http://avc.com/2016/09/visualizing-kickstarter/> for a data visualization that includes all product categories but focuses only on the US.

the implications of these affordances will be analyzed according to several recurring themes. First, design choices manifested on the web platform foster but also characteristically frame game literacy or “ludoliteracy”⁴⁵ within the broader community of board game backers. Most importantly, by facilitating discoverability, *Kickstarter* enables users to view and compare an unprecedented multiplicity of potential board games side by side⁴⁶; the corresponding page uses an infinite scroll interface showing an (allegedly) endless stream of game pitches, referenced primarily by an image and a short description of two or three sentences. The same description is repeated on the individual campaign pages; even though these pages are usually long, the top is designed in a way that loosely resembles a game box, with a large image, an ad blurb and the name of the designers. By repeatedly checking these pages to find new games to back, users learn to very quickly differentiate between games by certain categories, which over time become stable categories in users’ minds.

“Epoch: The Awakening is a highly strategic, fantasy-themed tabletop board game for 2-5 players. Play time is 15-30 minutes per player”⁴⁷.

For instance, the sample statement above contains the categories “highly strategic” (as opposed to more luck-based, casual games), the theme (fantasy), the number of players and the average play time. Other categories for instance include cooperative vs competitive play (or a combination of both) and specific mechanics (e.g. auctions or collectible cards). Thus, developers use these categories to identify ‘gaps’ in the market and players increasingly organize their understanding of games as a medium around these heuristics.

Second, the affordances of *Kickstarter* aim to create a sense of community among the temporary ‘group’ of backers flocking around a given campaign. While the other categories, i.e. FAQ, Updates, and Comments, can be found in a similar form on other online platforms, the ‘Community’ section is clearly designed to foster a sense of shared identity and give the group an outwardly recognizable ‘form’. The first information, accompanied by an abstract graph background symbolizing connectedness, is the overall size of the group, which ‘anchors’⁴⁸ its perception. Second, backers are quantified in terms of their location, both by city and country, as well as the amount of new vs. returning backers. These data are rather factual and specific, which is to be expected as the value proposition of *Kickstarter* – like any online platform – largely rests on collecting and evaluating data. Thus, it’s even more interesting that the final section shows random profile pictures of backers, accompanied by the casual phrase “Here are a few of the people supporting...” as well as information on how many projects each person previously backed. Since these eight user profiles are visibly not sorted in any way, they are likely interpreted as a cross-section of the community itself. Due to the random selection, they are most likely not representative of the group as a whole and, thus, create a fictional ‘group identity’; regardless, users will generally interpret the profiles and patterns they read into them (e.g. gender distribution, connotations of the profile pictures) as defining the ‘form’ of the community they are part of.

45 J. Zagal, *Ludoliteracy: Defining, Understanding, and Supporting Games Education*. Pittsburgh 2010.

46 Cf. https://www.kickstarter.com/discover/categories/games/tabletop%20games?ref=discovery_overlay.

47 Cf. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/orangenebula/epoch-the-awakening-board-game/>.

48 A. Furnham, H.C. Boo, “A Literature Review of the Anchoring Effect”, *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 40 (1), 2011, pp. 35-42.

Finally, *Kickstarter* affords developers to establish and form a creator persona⁴⁹ and to ‘tell their story’ in a nutshell. On a utilitarian level, this helps to build (the impression of) trustworthiness and convince users that their money is well spent. For most users, the pitch video is the entry point into the campaign, and most videos rely – to some degree – on a personal appeal rather than simply demonstrating the mechanics or the production value. Due to the suggested short duration, project teams often rely on personal anecdotes to maximize recognizability and to quickly appeal to potential backers. While a video is not mandatory and there are no absolute formal requirements, the *Creator’s Handbook* clearly ‘suggests’ short videos (e.g. through the samples it provides) and urges for personalization, e.g. “tell[ing] people how you got the idea, and how much you’ve accomplished so far” and “why you’re passionate about your project”⁵⁰. Finally, to keep the socio-technical system self-sustainable, new affordances are gradually added that readjust the self-presentation of creator personae. One notable 2016 addition was *Kickstarter Live*⁵¹, which enabled campaign organizers to stream live video via their project pages, thereby adding a novel element of performativity.

The Kickstarter campaign as myth

The notions of group identity and creator personas referenced above already indicate that *Kickstarter* is not just an online ‘storefront’ for pre-ordering games but a platform for the formation of micro-cultural communities around board game campaigns. Based on that hypothesis, one of the most important sets of affordances, which will be explored in this section, refers to turning campaigns into myths, i.e. foundational stories that foster cohesion among these communities.

According to Roland Barthes⁵², myths constitute a “type of speech” (261), i.e. a form of lived communication rather than an object or idea. It can include “any significant unit or synthesis” (262); while the author himself primarily refers to images in that context, the definition appears similarly applicable to *Kickstarter* campaigns as ‘multimodal’ myths. In terms of functions, a myth essentially ‘naturalizes’ the story it tells as part of the culture within it is told, i.e. it “transforms history into nature” (268). As such, it serves as an ‘origin story’ within that culture and its continuous retelling becomes a form of performing one’s cultural identity. Therefore, these stories – tales of surprising success ‘against all odds’, narrow failures or spectacular come-backs of formerly prominent creators – perform an important function to stabilize *Kickstarter* as a socio-technical system.

49 Marshall, Moore, Barbour, “Persona as method”, cit. (see quote 9).

50 Cf. https://www.kickstarter.com/help/handbook/your_story?ref=faq_creator_video.

51 Cf. e.g. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/72704-kickstarter-hits-100-million-mark-for-publishing-projects.html>.

52 R. Barthes, *Myth Today*, in J. Storey (edited by), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader, Volume 1*, Harlow 2006, pp. 293-302.

As quasi-narrative structures, myths are characterized by specific rhetorical figures⁵³. One figure that particularly applies to *Kickstarter* is the “quantification of quality” (1160), which refers to the fact that these narratives simplify ‘reality’ by foregrounding numerical information at the expense of ‘messy’ details. For instance, breakout success stories like *Exploding Kittens* are usually retold – among users as well as games media – by referring to the size of the community, the total funding as well as how quickly it met its funding goal, and thereby become formative narratives for board game culture itself.

Due to the affordances of *Kickstarter* campaigns, the emergent stories usually comply with conventional categories of dramatic narrative. These phases, including initial state, complication, climax, denouement, final state, and coda, have been used repeatedly outside they domains of drama or fictional literature, for instance to conceptualize how jurors process information related to criminal cases⁵⁴. Moreover, many campaigns are told and re-told according to the structure of the hero’s journey, that describes the protagonist’s coming-of-age, e.g. a small studio’s first grasp at commercial success, and establishes an antagonist early on, e.g. in the form of the funding goal that needs to be ‘defeated’. Like the notion of narrative phases, the concept has been adapted to real-world phenomena such as professional baseball⁵⁵. A specific affordance that explicitly supports this narrative trope is *Kickstarter Gold*⁵⁶, a temporary project (June-July 2017) that allowed for over 65 previously successful creators to relaunch their iconic projects, i.e. to retell their ‘heroic’ deeds, which simultaneously reaffirms the status of these projects as ‘origin stories’ for *Kickstarter* culture itself.

Several other affordances contribute to the mythification of *Kickstarter* campaigns. Most basically, completed campaigns are still accessible online on the site, which produces a specific ‘history’ of contemporary board games. Economic success becomes a major historiographical category, e.g. since the number of backers and amount raised are prominently displayed on the ‘launch page’, i.e. at the top of the campaign pages that is visible without having to scroll down. More specifically, the default sorting criterion on the discovery page showing live campaigns is called ‘by magic’, an informal algorithm allegedly⁵⁷ based on factors such as backers per day and ‘conversion rate’, i.e. the percentage of visitors that actually decide to back the project.

Finally, a myth is defined by its strong affective quality⁵⁸, which makes it an “elevated, sacred narrative” (4). The author explains this e.g. with reference to the Jungian archetype, describing mythical narratives as “strings of archetypal images – recognizable groups of archetypal images that are ordered in relatively similar patterns of relation” (6). Through its socio-technical design elements, *Kickstarter* campaigns also share similar structures com-

53 J. Bazzul, *Becoming a ‘mythologist’: Barthes’ Mythologies and Education*, in *International Handbook of Semiotics*, Dordrecht 2015, pp. 1155-1168.

54 R.H. Conley, J.M. Conley, “Stories from the Jury Room: How Jurors Use Narrative to Process Evidence”, *Studies in Law, Politics and Society*, 49, 2009, pp. 25-56.

55 D. Porter, “The Perilous Quest: Baseball as Folk Drama”, *Critical Inquiry*, 4 (1), 1977, pp. 143-157.

56 Cf. <https://www.kickstarter.com/blog/announcing-kickstarter-gold-bold-new-takes-on-iconic-projects>.

57 Cf. e.g. <https://www.quora.com/In-Kickstarter-how-does-sorted-by-magic-work>.

58 A. Halpé, *Between Myth and Meaning: The Function of Myth in Four Post-Colonial Novels*, Toronto 2010 (https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/26507/1/Halpe_Aparna_201011_PhD_thesis.pdf).

prising archetypal elements (e.g. the deadline, funding goal, stretch goals, and continuous updates). One major difference compared to traditional myths is the fact that users can ‘inscribe themselves’ into these stories as ‘witnesses’ (regular backers) or even co-creators (with higher pledge tiers, that allow for co-authoring one aspect of the game or its back story). This focus on the narrativization of *Kickstarter* campaigns is useful to complement purely social or economic explanatory patterns such as the aforementioned diffusion-of-responsibility effect posited by Kuppuswamy and Bayus. Accordingly, a decision to back a campaign that is close to missing its funding goal can not only be explained by ‘responsibility’ or economic rationality but it furthermore allows for the user to become part of an engaging, structurally familiar yet personal narrative.

How Kickstarter’s affordances frame board game design

Previous research already tentatively investigated how *Kickstarter* and specifically the agency it affords its backers (as temporarily collective entities) has influenced the design of specific (digital) games. For instance, Smith⁵⁹ argues that the backers of the game *République* convinced the developer to “rethink a design concept tailored for touch-screen mobile devices” (199) and to redesign it to take advantage of desktop PCs. Yet, while these examples refer to changes that result from interactions between people, the software affordances themselves not only reframe the ‘narratives’ of how (board) games get made, but also have tangible implications on game aesthetics as well.

For instance, while commercial board games currently seldom foreground real-world learning goals, several *Kickstarter* campaigns advertise explicitly educational board games, which thus appear as a distinct ‘genre’. For instance, *Blush* (2016) is a trivia game aimed at facilitating discussions about sexual health, *Japanese: The Game – Tokyo Edition!* (2014) is a card game about learning Japanese vocabulary, and *Playing Lean* (2015) translates the logic of entrepreneurship and startup founding into a board game. Of course, educational board games themselves are hardly new; for instance, Christian morality games such *The Mansion of Happiness* or *The Checkered Game of Life* had been explicitly framed as learning tools to teach players how to lead a good and ‘proper’ life⁶⁰. Yet, the novelty lies in blurring the boundary between ‘serious’ and fun-oriented, commercial board games, producing games. *Kickstarter* affords this by acting as an aesthetic ecosystem, in which creators and fans collectively ‘play out’ potential imaginaries of board games. The term is derived from Rosmarin’s analysis of *MySpace* as an economic ecosystem⁶¹, a pre-existing audience large enough for small external developers to identify and occupy functional ‘niches’, i.e. gaps in the value proposition of the platform.

59 Smith, “The Backer-Developer Connection”, cit. (see quote 14).

60 B. Whitehill, *The Checkered Game of Life. Milton Bradley’s First Game, 1860*, in *Board Game Studies Colloquium*, Paris 2010 (<http://thebiggamehunter.com/games-one-by-one/checkered-game-of-life/>).

61 R. Rosmarin, “The MySpace Economy”, *Forbes Magazine*, 2006 (http://www.forbes.com/2006/04/07/myspace-google-murdoch-cx_rr_0410myspace.html).

Most importantly though, features like pledge tiers, the update timeline to narrativize the campaign, social media integration and pitch videos produce a ‘quasi-filter bubble’ effect, fostering the creation of games that are easily communicable and exhibit a characteristically ‘modular’ design approach. Since stretch goals and potential belatedly introduced pledge tiers cannot always be pre-emptively planned, the game’s core gameplay loops⁶² need to accommodate new textual and paratextual elements, e.g. new playable characters/factions, enemies or even game modes.

For instance, *Dark Souls – The Board Game* not only offered stretch goals but also unlockable “add-ons”, that require backers to increase their pledge level, almost all of which need to adhere to the same core systems to preserve the integrity of the game balance. Online discussions⁶³ indicate that players are becoming intuitively aware of this design approach and view it negatively because it does not signify one definitive vision for the game with a fixed number of pieces, rules and interactions between them.

Kickstarter as a playful collective simulation – A comparative view on board game campaigns

The notion of the aesthetic ecosystem and modular design rationality represent macro-level implications of *Kickstarter* on board games as a medium in transition. Below, the key results of the comparative content analysis will be summarized with reference to four more specific themes found in the corpus, i.e. materiality, the creator persona, ‘phatic gameplay’, and the hybridization of digital and analogue game design patterns. While the scope of this paper does not allow for a comprehensive discussion of all findings, characteristic examples have been chosen to selectively back up the main hypotheses.

Reaccentuating and diversifying the material qualities of board games

The first pattern involves a diversification of material qualities in board game design. A recent ethnographic study⁶⁴ illustrates the ongoing importance of materiality in contemporary board games, which actually not only refers to physical components like game boards and tokens but also to aspects such as the “game box” (3961), the “immediate play environment” (3962), and the integration of the games into players’ homes. Yet, the reasons for this valorization of material qualities are not really discussed.

62 E. Guardiola, *The Gameplay Loop: A Player Activity Model for Game Design and Analysis*, in *ACE2016 Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Advances in Computer Entertainment Technology*, Osaka 2016 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3001773.3001791>).

63 Cf. e.g. https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/2euhft/what_are_your_favorite_kickstarter_stretch_goals/.

64 M.J. Rogerson, M. Gibbs, W. Smith, ‘I Love All the Bits’: *Materiality of Boardgames*, in *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems – CHI ’16*, New York 2016, pp. 3956-3969.

Materiality has historically been foregrounded in the wake of novel production techniques, as exemplified e.g. by the adoption of lithographers’ presses for game production in the mid-19th century⁶⁵. More recently, affordable 3D printing and laser cutting solutions⁶⁶ established new standards and benchmarks for material sophistication of board games. For instance, the *Pathfinder & Q-workshop Metal RPG Dice Set*, advertised as “the most unique metal dice set on Earth”, takes advantage of new engraving workflows and compares the dice to existing sets using quantifiable categories such as weight. The campaign includes shipping costs in the (rather high) pledge tier prices, which can be understood as an economic ‘affordance’ since it prevents the materiality of the dice from acquiring noticeable negative connotations.

More generally, design affordances of the *Kickstarter* platform characteristically foster a design focus on materiality. Material qualities can be more convincingly captured in images and videos than gameplay innovations, e.g. via close-ups or camerawork reminiscent of ‘male gaze’. Furthermore, appreciation of material qualities such as the use of wood in *Wootris*⁶⁷ proves suitable to inspire coherence in temporary social communities forming around *Kickstarter* campaigns audiences, not despite the stark contrast between materiality and the genuinely digital nature of the platform but because of it. As hinted at above, shared sentiments like celebrating craftsmanship and handmade products, e.g. of *The Classy Custom Deck Box for Magic: The Gathering* being “created by a bookbinder” and offering “incredible strength”, foster a sense of cultural identity and belonging.

Game campaigns in the corpus – even though most of them are created by amateur or semi-professional developers – inherently replicate the dichotomy of independent vs. big-budget products, which is characteristic of most formal media industries, in a nutshell. That is, on the one hand, games that use resources sparingly (e.g. *STORY WAR: The Storytelling Party Game* (2013)), emphasize small formats (e.g. *Tiny Epic Galaxies – The Universe in Your Pocket!* (2015) and *Tiny Epic Western* (2016)), focus on the experience itself, according to the principle of service-dominant logic⁶⁸. In contrast, other games foreground material, quantifiable values (i.e. goods-dominant logic) such as high-quality miniatures, artwork from famous illustrators and licenses (e.g. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shadows of the Past*).

In some cases, material quality is also framed as an ‘upgrade’ for a pre-existing game, which emphasizes the idea of direct competition between board game brands, since those that prove popular are ‘rewarded’ like movie special editions⁶⁹ such as the “Criterion Collection” (5) receiving material upgrades. For instance, the *Deluxe Changeling* campaign asks backers to “contribute to help give the Deluxe C20 Edition a leather bound, embossed+, silk bookmarked, gold-edged, full-color, deluxe treatment”.

65 Whitehill, *The Checkered Game of Life*, cit. (see quote 60).

66 The latter has in itself been fostered through a *Kickstarter* campaign; cf. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1537608281/lazerblade-the-affordable-laser-cutter-engraver>.

67 Cf. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/784089155/wootris-a-natural-wooden-tetris>.

68 S. Vargo, R. Lusch, *Gaining Competitive Advantage with Service-Dominant Logic*, in G. Lilien, R. Grewal (edited by), *Handbook of Business-to-Business Marketing*, Cheltenham 2012, pp. 109-124.

69 C. Hight, “Making-of Documentaries on DVD: The Lord of the Rings Trilogy and Special Editions”, *The Velvet Light Trap*, 56 (1), 2005, pp. 4-17.

Finally, the economic promise of materiality disproportionately fosters specific genres such as (previously less prominent) horror-themed board games, as evidenced by the detailed miniatures in *The Others: 7 Sins*, *Sedition Wars: Battle for Alabaster*, *Cthulhu Wars: Onslaught Two*, and especially *Kingdom Death: Monster 1.5*.

Sequels and the cultivation of the ‘celebrity developer’ persona

Second, as is the case with video games like *Star Citizen* (Chris Roberts), *Mighty No. 9* (Keiji Inafune), and *Wasteland 2* (Brian Fargo), several prominent board game campaigns on *Kickstarter* involve (spiritual or literal) sequels to popular games or new games by famous developers. Prominent examples include *KULT: Divinity Lost* (2016), a reimagined version of the 25-year-old horror RPG franchise *KULT*, and the *Ogre Designer’s Edition* (2012), a new edition of the 35-year-old *OGRE* by acclaimed board game creator Steve Jackson, who more recently pitched the sequel *Munchkin Shakespeare* (2017).

This approach further cultivates the ‘celebrity developer’ as a characteristic persona. As Marshall and colleagues argue⁷⁰, maintaining a developer persona and managing its micro publics is a distributed activity occurring on multiple platforms simultaneously, including traditional social media platforms like *Twitter* but also *Kickstarter*. It also has historiographical implications since it aims to belatedly augment the historical relevance of the ‘original’ games (and, if the campaign is successful, generally succeeds in doing so) by embedding them in new historical contexts.

‘Phatic gameplay’

The third pattern refers to board games increasingly designed to spark casual, often social media-fueled discussion, e.g. by tapping into popular digital culture and humor. Board games have traditionally focused strongly on exchange, e.g. of information and (symbolic) commodities, between players. Yet, several prominent *Kickstarter*-backed games depart from this convention, and require a different explanatory frame. For instance, while complex game mechanics are difficult to convey on a platform like *Kickstarter*, the fact that *Exploding Kittens* (2015) is defined more by its tapping into meme culture and *YouTube*’s obsession with cats than by its Russian Roulette-inspired gameplay helped it connect quickly with backers.

To explain the game’s appeal and how players approach it, it is useful to consider that the circulation of memes is a prototypical example of what Vincent Miller⁷¹ terms phatic culture. Loosely based on Malinowski’s original definition, phatic culture is characterized by the desire to “express sociability and maintain connections or bonds” rather than to

70 Marshall, Moore, Barbour, “Persona as method”, cit. (see quote 9).

71 V. Miller, “New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture”, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14 (4), 2008, pp. 387-400.

exchange information (393/94). Miller argues that contemporary social media communication, framed by characteristics affordances such as likes, retweets or snapstreaks⁷², particularly fosters this type of communication, especially as the users’ imagined social circles have expanded far beyond traditional face-to-face friendships. The pace, at which communication occurs creates expectations that require users to continually reaffirm their presence and their social connections rather than deliberately shaping meaningful exchange. *Kickstarter* arguably inherently favors the production of board games that frame play as an extension of (phatic) communication, i.e. that are played not primarily to exchange information or ideas but to celebrate connectedness. Because many users are familiar with the game’s humor, play sessions of *Exploding Kittens* double as material for online social interaction (e.g. being recorded on *YouTube*) and the game’s appeal lies as much in presenting it to new audiences than in playing it repeatedly with the same group of people.

Blurring the boundary between digital and analogue games

A fourth and final pattern found in the corpus refers to games that blur the boundary between tabletop and video games. This includes straightforward adaptations such as *This War of Mine: The Board Game*, the aforementioned *Dark Souls* as well as the very recent *Resident Evil 2: The Board Game*⁷³. A few games can be regarded less as adaptations but more as transmedia extensions according to Jenkins⁷⁴. For example, *Pillars of Eternity: Lords of the Eastern Reach Card Game* draws on the (similarly *Kickstarter*-funded) *Pillars of Eternity* computer game franchise. However, unlike the character-driven adventure of the original game, the card game foregrounds Jenkins’ notion of worldbuilding by allowing players to build cities and raise armies, thus fleshing out the game world on the level of political intrigue and military strategy.

More importantly, though, several recent games attempt to translate the specificity of digital games to analogue components (cards, tokens etc.) as a playful self-imposed creative challenge. For instance, *Way of the Fighter* (2016) and *Codex* (2016) challenge the established media identity⁷⁵ of board games by trying to emulate fighting games and real-time strategy games, both distinctly digital game genres. The use of ecosystems as a game mechanics as in *The Evolution Game System* (2015) or *Evolution: CLIMATE* (2016) also clearly draws on digital games and iconic algorithms such as John Conway’s Game of Life. Finally, the blurring of digital and analogue elements appears to become increasingly intricate over time as illustrated by *Hand of Fate: Ordeals* (2017), a loose adaptation of the original *Hand of Fate* computer game, which itself remediates board and card game tropes, e.g. blending aspects of Tarot and deck-building with real-time combat.

72 Cf. <https://support.snapchat.com/a/Snaps-snapstreak>.

73 Cf. <http://steamforged.com/sfg-news-blog/re2tbg>.

74 H. Jenkins, *The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling*, in *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 2009 (http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html).

75 W. Uricchio, “Television, Film and the Struggle for Media Identity”, *Film History*, 10 (2), 1998, pp. 118-127.

Conclusion

As the two interlocking methods employed for this article have shown, considering games-as-products, through the lens of changes they undergo on platforms like *Kickstarter*, can provide useful impulses for game studies as a discipline, and changing the product form of (board) games gradually alters players' perception of the medium itself. Since campaign organizers need to document the design process to maintain trust through transparency, thereby creating paratextual layers around the final game-as-text, players are aware of interim design changes and the final rules appear less 'authoritative' but are viewed against previously discussed contingencies. This stance can be described as implied co-creation. While few backers can actually influence the design process, many users approach *Kickstarter*-backed games with a co-creative mindset, e.g. imagining and discussing potential rule changes, stretch goals or scenarios. Finally, the abundance of board games that reached an audience via *Kickstarter* but otherwise might not have left the prototype stage can alter the epistemic status of individual game mechanics. For instance, cooperative play against the game (rather than a player-controlled opponent) in board games like *Arkham Horror* (1987) and Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (2000) used to be an experimental, almost 'avant-garde' technique employed by few iconic titles. Now, some of the most-backed titles in the corpus pursue a similar approach, which – as suggested above – blurs the boundary between digital and analogue games because the combination of scripted behavior and randomization required to implement it is clearly reminiscent of an AI-controlled video game opponent but limited to analogue components.

Due to its limited scope, the article itself should be regarded as a proof-of-concept, outlining and tentatively validating the underlying methodology. Thus, some relevant aspects, e.g. critical opinions on *Kickstarter* that have gained traction in recent years, had to be deliberately disregarded. For instance, the question whether *Kickstarter* is a platform to invest in ideas, to pre-order products, or a "fourth type of payment"⁷⁶ has not definitely been answered (and probably never will be as the introduction of new affordances can shift that balance in one or the other direction). While *Kickstarter* itself publicly claimed not being a store, pledge data on the most successful campaigns from the corpus shows that users disproportionately choose the product rather than cheaper pledge tiers offering behind-the-scenes information or simply thank-you ecards. More importantly, Daren Brabham indicates that the discourse surrounding *Kickstarter* campaigns can profoundly (and negatively) affect the medium the platform set out to support⁷⁷, by studying how neoliberal rhetoric in public arts campaigns threatens to erode public support for these projects, which would ultimately make them dependent on *Kickstarter* as a marketplace. Another pattern that manifested itself during the research process and could be fruitfully investigate further using the methodological framework outlined above is the fact that *Kickstarter*

affords smaller but vibrant European game development scenes international visibility. For instance, it was slightly unexpected at first to see several Swedish games in the top 100 funded games, a few of them in English but some like *Drakar och Demoner* (2015) exclusively in Swedish. Thus, *Kickstarter* can provide the necessary infrastructure and access to a sufficiently large audience for distinct national gaming cultures to emerge that previously only bigger board game markets like Germany and the US used to offer.

Finally, by using *Kickstarter* as an example, the article constitutes a starting point to investigate the role of media distribution platforms in general, complementary to the existing focus on production. Therefore, the approach is similarly applicable to other platforms like *Steam*, which would require a larger scope, or smaller platforms like *itch.io* that play a crucial role in fostering otherwise marginalized ludic forms, e.g. games with explicit homosexual motifs such as the works of Robert Yang or autobiographical games.

⁷⁶ Cf. e.g. <https://www.theverge.com/2013/4/17/4230440/kickstarter-is-not-a-store-except-when-it-is>.

⁷⁷ D. Brabham, "How crowdfunding discourse threatens public arts", *New Media & Society*, 19 (7), 2016, pp. 983-999.