
Cultural Legitimization

The Evolution of Authorship in Board Games in Europe and the United States (1845 to 1984)

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The authors examine the evolution of board game authorship between 1845 and 1984, based on an analysis of a corpus of more than thirty-seven hundred games from the University Sorbonne Paris North's Fonds Patrimonial du Jeu de Société, a board game collection of more than fifteen thousand titles. Overall, they show that game authors have rarely received credit from publishers, although they increasingly do so now, testifying to the existence of a legitimization process for board games. The authors also discuss the difference in the status of the author for games in Europe and North America, highlighted by the different proportion of games credited or in the terms used for such crediting. Finally, they explore the questions of author gender, transmediality, and the porous distinction between intellectual property and authorship. **Key words:** authorship; auctoriality; board game creation; cultural legitimation; game designer

SINCE THE MID-1990s, there has been an increased interest in board games in France and more broadly in Europe. This phenomenon is reflected in the growing number of titles available and the steady rise in sales of such games over the past fifteen years—around four hundred million euros for the French sector in 2017 (Berry 2017). In 1996 almost two hundred new games appeared on the French market, more than three hundred in 2006, almost five hundred in 2014, more than nine hundred new titles in 2017, while more than one thousand new titles were published per year beginning in 2021. Alongside the increase in production, we are also seeing a rise in the number of publishers and board game players. In 2015 nearly 75 percent of French people declared having played a board game in the past year, compared to over 80 percent in 2018 (Berry and Coavoux 2021).

Along with this increase in the number of new board games offered comes what a number of professionals see as a form of “cultural legitimization” (Bour-

dieu 2015). Board games are now the subject of specialized journals, where experts debate the quality of game mechanics and the gaming experience it provides (i.e. its intrinsic qualities and benefits). More and more international awards acknowledge the originality of a game. Just as with film posters or book covers, the awards the game has received are now often printed on game boxes (Berry and Roucoux 2021).

In the world of board game enthusiasts, a whole culture of authorship has taken root. A number of authors are indeed recognized by the public, sometimes for a particular creative style or for the importance their creations have had in the board game landscape (Barbier 2022). A recent example is Klaus Teuber, author of the *Settlers of Catan*, whose work is recognized by many board game enthusiasts for its importance in the history of the so-called modern board game (Price 2020), and whose death provoked a wave of tributes reaching the mainstream media. As Melissa Rogerson, Martin Gibbs, and Wally Smith point out (2016): “Gamers value the artwork of a game and the design of the box. Boxes of modern European board games typically credit the artist as well as the designer with some—Doris Matthaüs, Franz Vohwinkel, Michael Menzel, Klemens Franz—now household names for hobbyist” (3961).

This article looks at the development of a system of authorship in the world of board games in Europe and the United States and studies its evolution. The notion of authorship as we use it refers to the recognition of an authority at the origin of a work (Foucault 1979; Neeman and Clivaz 2012), which may be legal (moral or property rights) or symbolic (simply credited by text or a picture, without legal ownership). First, this article examines whether or not game authors are credited and how such credits evolve over time (from 1845 to 1984). Are the game authors always credited? Where and how are they credited (e.g., on the box; in the rules)?

For the sake of consistency, we have chosen to use the term “author” in this text, because this word is now widely used in French- and German-speaking board game creation and publishing. However, the importance of this term needs to be put into perspective because it is both recent and rather limited to Europe. The terms “auteur,” “autor” or “author” appear only sporadically over the period studied and, while it may be dominant in the French-speaking publishing sector today, this is not the case in the Anglo-Saxon industry, where the term “game designer” or just “designer” is more widely used.

We hypothesize that the use of the term author versus designer refers not only to linguistic differences and habits, but to a set of cultural representations

on the importance accorded to the author in the creative process. Comparable to cinema or literature, the European perspective (France and Germany mainly) tends to make the director or writer the central figure of auctorality (Bourdieu 1996), while the English or North American perspective more readily values the role of the publisher and producer in the creative process (Sapiro and Rabot 2017).

Methodology and Protocol: Studying the Fonds Patrimonial du Jeu de Société (FPJS, Board Game Heritage Collection)

The data we analyzed is based on the Fonds Patrimonial du Jeu de Société (FPJS). This collection is one of the more important board game collections in France, consisting of more than fifteen thousand titles from the end of the nineteenth century to the present (plus more than six thousand role-playing games). Housed at the Sorbonne Paris Nord University, the collection includes mainly North American (United States and Canada) and European productions (largely from Germany, the United Kingdom, and France, but also from Belgium and the Netherlands). The FPJS covers almost two hundred years of board game production, showing the evolution of production and its diversity from niche or self-published games to mass-market games produced by large companies. This broad representation enables us to draw a faithful portrait of what has shaped the world of board gaming and to observe in detail developments in editorial and artistic practices, representations, materiality, and game mechanics. Though not an exhaustive representation of all games published, the FPJS allows us to observe the growing importance of authors and illustrators, with significant differences depending on the period and country.

The Fonds Patrimonial du Jeu de Société consists of several collections of different origins, assembled into a single documentary resource. An initial collection comes from a game library in the Parisian region (Centre National du Jeu or CNJ, currently Centre Ludique de Boulogne-Billancourt) which has gathered approximately six thousand games from the late 1970s to around 2010. The games comprising the collection include regular renewals of the library's collection, intended to make room for new acquisitions. The collection has been enriched for thirty years at an average rate of two hundred games per year. Its acquisitions actually follow the exponential trend of the industry's production.

A second collection, acquired around 2005 by the CNJ, was assembled by Bruce Whitehill, an American collector, and represents approximately four thousand games from around 1845 to 1990. These games are predominantly American, but they also include French and European games among the older acquisitions.

We have limited our study to the period from 1845 to 1984 to test our initial hypotheses for our analysis, which is still in progress—and for reasons of feasibility. The research work is still ongoing, although we currently have comprehensive and reliable data for this period. The coding we carried out on the games is indeed significant. Over this period, we have catalogued the 3,735 games in the collection. For all of them, we have noted the presence or absence

<i>Period</i>	<i>Number of games</i>
1845 - 1869	5
1870 - 1879	11
1880 - 1889	17
1890 - 1899	49
1900 - 1909	93
1910 - 1919	94
1920 - 1929	194
1930 - 1939	429
1940 - 1949	381
1950 - 1959	520
1960 - 1969	661
1970 - 1979	824
1980 - 1984	457

Figure 1. Number of games listed by actual or estimated release date between 1845 and 1984 (FPJS).

of author credits, presumed genders when first names appear, and the locations of the mentions (on the box, in the rulebook, or elsewhere). We have also identified the publisher and its nationality, distinguishing between what is “localized” (a foreign game translated and adapted) and what is published and distributed locally. The choice to end our study in the mid-1980s indicates the fact that, for many observers, this decade marks a publishing turning point toward what some refer to as the modern board game, which reflects the development of new forms of board games that link a set of rules to specific fictional universes and materiality (Rogerson et al. 2016; Brougere 2021; Barbier 2022).

While the number of game titles produced per decade up to 1899 are low and not significant statistically (the sample size is too small—see figure 1), we find more and more titles per decade as we get closer to the 1980s. The FPJS figures follow an almost continuous growth curve with the exception of the 1910s and 1940s, when production stagnated or even declined. This relative decline can be explained by the two world wars, which limited the production of nonmilitary industrial goods (Whitehill 1999). From 1900 onward, the sample seems both reasonable and sufficient to study the evolution of the auctorial recognition. We have kept the data from before the beginning of the twentieth century mainly to note the quality of the games and the trends they represent. Despite the low number of games, the data provides valuable information about the very beginnings of the board game industry.

The games we studied were mainly distributed in North America (63 percent) and Europe (37 percent). However, when we look at the nationality of the publishers instead of the locality of distribution, the majority of our sample originates from the United States (76 percent). Their prominence in our sample confirms the central place occupied by the North American industry—particularly by major companies such as Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley (Orbanes 2004)—in the worldwide production of board games, from Monopoly and its many annual variations (Fleury and Théry 2002) to Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit (Whitehill 1999).

In our sample, we cannot always tie the date of publication to an exact year. This forces us to estimate, with varying degrees of accuracy, a considerable proportion of the games, particularly the older games. When we can approximate a game’s publication date to within a few years, we code the date often as the first year of a decade (for example, 1910 or 1920) or as the middle of it (for example, 1915), grouping a certain number of games around these dates and introducing false publication peaks in these years. We have therefore chosen to carry out our analyses by decade to compensate for any possible biases in assigning dates.

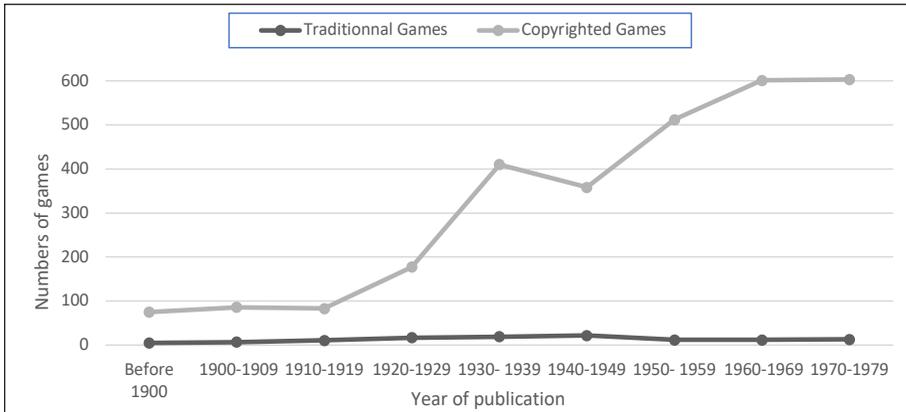


Figure 2. Number of new games published each year, traditional or copyrighted

Sample: Board games between 1845 and 1979 (N = 3181)

Note: In 1910, eighty-three copyrighted board games were published, compared with eleven traditional games.

At first glance, we observe an increase in production in Europe and North America over time. The 1930s and 1950s saw an acceleration in production (more than 30 percent compared to the previous decades), and this progression was maintained over the following decades. We also observe a gradual shift from traditional games to copyrighted games (figure 2).

Crediting an Author

The first game in our sample to present the name of an author, which also happens to be the first mention of a female author, is the *Game of Mythology* (figure 3), published in 1884 by Peter G. Thomson. Its presentation booklet reads: “By Mrs. Nicholas Francis Cooke.” The author’s credit used here (“by”) evokes rather subtly a notion of auctoriality in the broadest sense in contrast to games that are copyrighted or patented by someone (often with a patent date added). Although such a byline can be ambiguous, it does highlight the name of a person considered to be at the origin of the game’s concept.

The first mention of the term “author” appears on the cover of *Our Bird Friends* (figure 4), which bears the subtitle “published by the Author Sarah H. Dudley.” The version we have in our collection has an estimated publication date of 1920, but there are traces of an earlier version copyrighted in

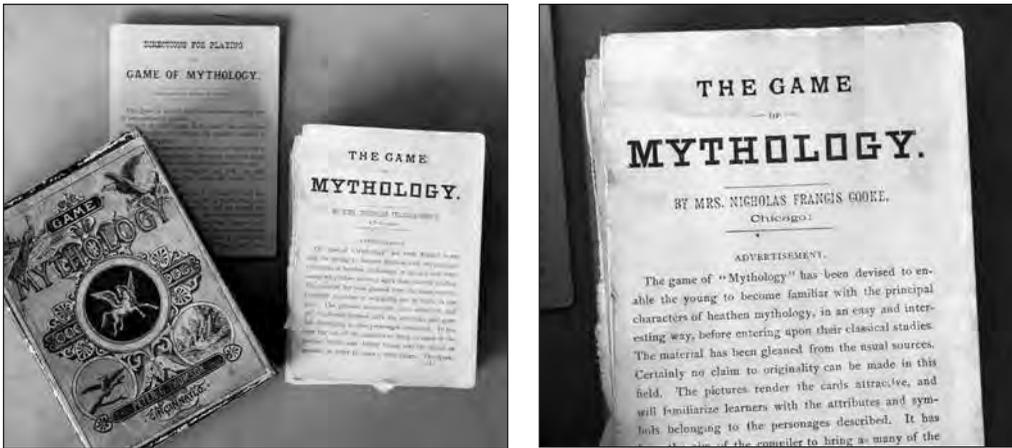


Figure 3. The Game of Mythology (1884)

1901 and bearing the same authorial reference. This undoubtedly involves self-publishing, as indicated by the formula we used. And *Our Bird Friends* is not an isolated case. About 10 percent of all mentions of an author up to the 1970s alluded to self-published games. The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century marked the start of the board game industry in the United States, which came later in Europe (Whitehill 1999). Some self-publishers would eventually become important industrial

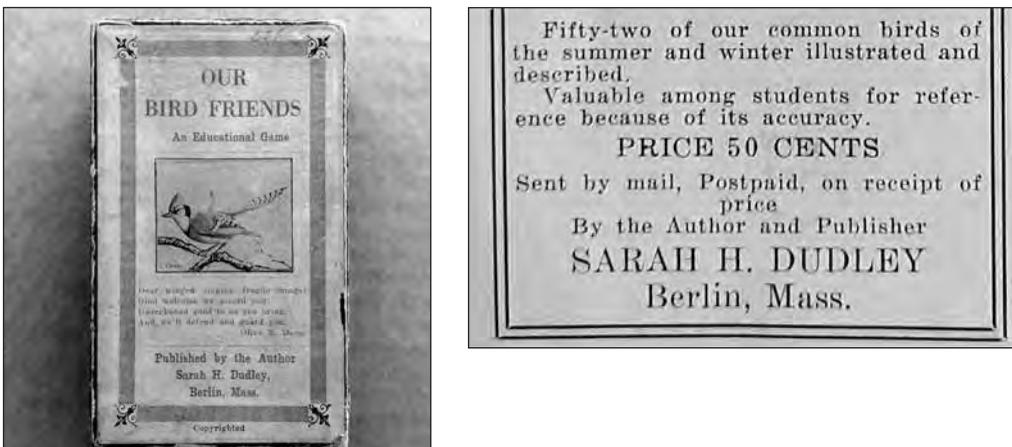


Figure 4. *Our Bird Friends* (1920)



Figure 5. Flying The Beam (1941)

publishers like the Parker Brothers in North America and Edmond Dujardin in France. The phenomenon of self-publishing decreases in our data from the early 1970s and afterward.

Sometimes an author's identification attempts to benefit from some expertise or respectability linked to his or her profession in a way that enhances the realism or quality of a game by invoking technical knowledge or skills. For example, *Flying the Beam*, a *Game of Aerial Transports* (figure 5) published in 1941, includes the basic auctorial statement: "A game by Captain William J. Chapman." It then continues with biographical information about the author: "This game, designed by captain William J. Chapman, an army pilot, is based on actual blind flying conditions." Here, the author's expertise in the specific field covered by the game (aircraft piloting in extreme conditions) offers a guarantee of the information's authenticity. The fields of expertise in our sample cover a wide spectrum from piano teacher to psychologist, from educator to politician and election administrator, and from trader to physician.

The mention of a name can be linked to the author's relative fame, which is then used as a showcase for the game. This (supposed) fame may also be linked to a profession related to the game's subject, as in the case of *The Jury Box* (figure 6), a series of games published around 1936, which prominently featured on their covers the words "developed by Roy Post, famous criminologist." Such notoriety—a status that could be likened to that of a public figure—may also have no connection with the game. Examples include radio



Figure 6. The Jury Box (1936) and advertisement for Tri-King (1946)

host and station manager Roland Dordhain, credited with the game Grand Jeu des Routes de France (1964), or the “internationally known American artist” Yun Gee, credited with the game Tri-King (1946).

From the 1930s onwards, some names began to recur for several years—Jim Prentice and Reginald S. Leister, authors and self-publishers; Arthur Dritz,



Figure 7. Uncle Wiggily Game

whose games are always credited “Game by Arthur Dritz”; and Nathan Reinherz, whose games are labelled “Game designed by Nathan Reinherz” (figure 13). Although it is probably too early to speak of the professionalization of the game authors, these markers could be the sign of a specialization in the creation and production of board games, which would then become an iterative activity, giving us the first examples of authors publishing games with different publishers.

In 1922 the first—and one of the few—mentions of some form of expertise in game creation appeared. The Moving Picture Game credits Howard R. Garis as the author and refers to one of his previous games: “By Howard R. Garis, author of the Uncle Wiggily Game” (figure 7). Interestingly, Garis got credit on the first editions of the Uncle Wiggily Game as the author of both the game and the book on which it is based.

We can also mention the French game, Loto Prudence, published in 1953, which credits author Henriette Roynette on the cover, and states in the rule booklet that “Henriette Roynette specialized in the invention of instructive games” (figure 8). It is interesting to note the presence of an award on the cover, indicating that the game has won two medals. One of these medals comes from the French Concours Lépine and had been awarded since 1901 to inventors, particularly inventors of toys.

Credits can also refer to an author in another media. This dynamic of



Figure 8. Loto Prudence (1953)

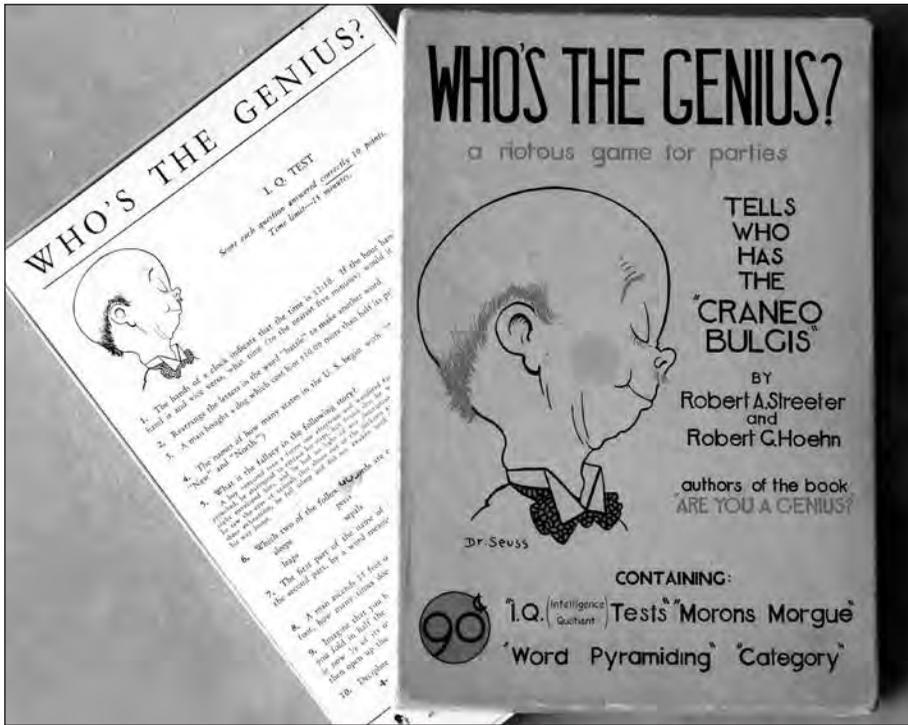


Figure 9. Who's the Genius (1924)

transmediation—the adaptation of a work from one medium to another—concerns around 10 percent of games until the late 1960s (when the practice decreased). In the vast majority of cases, it involved the adaptation of a book into a board game. The author of the original work was usually also the creator of the game and was credited for both game and book. These works may come from the genre of children’s literature, comic strips, or technical books on traditional games, or even detective novels. To illustrate this phenomenon, we cite the game *Who’s the Genius*, published in 1924 (figure 9), which is a board game adaptation of the book *Are You a Genius?* as indicated on the game with “by Robert A. Streeter and Robert G. Hoehn, authors of the book ‘Are You a Genius?’”

One genre well represented by these adaptations is the detective novel. Mystery puzzles are a good example. The original books on which the games are based generally were written by those specializing in the genre, for which they sometimes enjoyed some notoriety. Authors were sometimes credited on



Figure 10. The Crime Club Jig-Saw Puzzle

the cover, or on the booklet, as they would be on a book. This is the case, for example, with *Crime and Mystery*, six games published in 1933, which state “by J. H. Wallis—author of *Murder by Formula*, *Cries in the Night*, etc.”

The Evolution of Credits

Over the period from 1845 to 1984, crediting an author was a relatively rare publishing practice. In our sample, 15 percent of all 3,571 games mention an author or creator somewhere (on the box or in the rules). Over time, this editorial practice seems to have increased. In 1920 only 6 percent of the games in our sample credited an author, compared to 20 percent in the 1970s.

Crediting an author shows the publisher’s intention to promote the former, but the placement of the credit is also an important variable. Mentioning an author on the box or in the rules does not follow the same logic. In the first case,

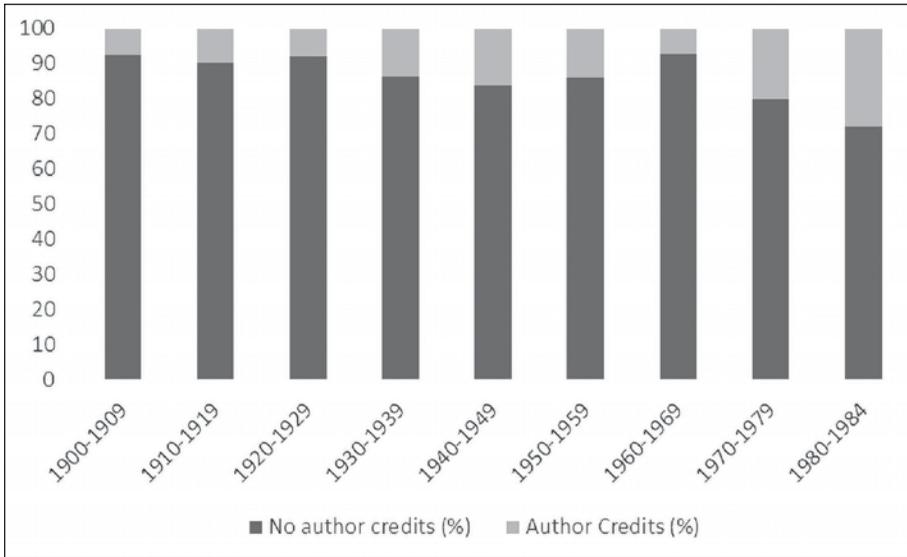


Figure 11. Author credits by decade
 Sample: Board games from 1900 to 1984 (N = 3410)
 Note: In 1900, 7.5 percent of board games credited an author.

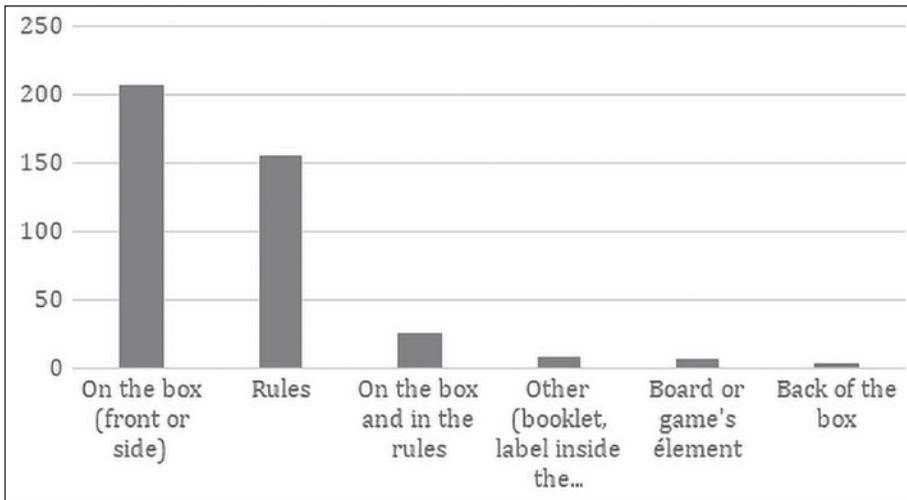


Figure 12. Location of author's credit
 Sample: Board games crediting an author between 1900 and 1984 (N = 457)
 Note: 207 games in the sample mention an author on the box

it becomes a way of highlighting the author, as with a book or movie poster. In the second case, it was a way of mentioning all the actors involved in the game creation process. The author was then one element among others (editor, testers, artists, for example). In detail, when authors were mentioned, nearly 44 percent of them were on the box (cover or side) and almost 39 percent were noted in the rules. An analysis over time also shows that the credit format was becoming standardized, mentioned both on the box and in the rules.

These quantitative data should not mask the highly heterogeneous nature of author mentions. A qualitative analysis of the boxes highlights the diversity of ways in which an author is credited. The font, the font size, and the position of the mention are all different ways of signifying the importance attached to authors. While we have not analyzed the typographic forms in detail (a more detailed analysis of the forms mentioned remains to be done), we have analyzed the status of the mention. In what terms does a publisher give credit? As an author? As a designer? As an inventor?

Over the period from 1845 to 1984, when credits were present on game material, they first of all denoted a general authorship through the use of the term “by” (figure 14). The notion of ownership was the second most employed term by the use of the word “copyright.” Next came different qualifications that

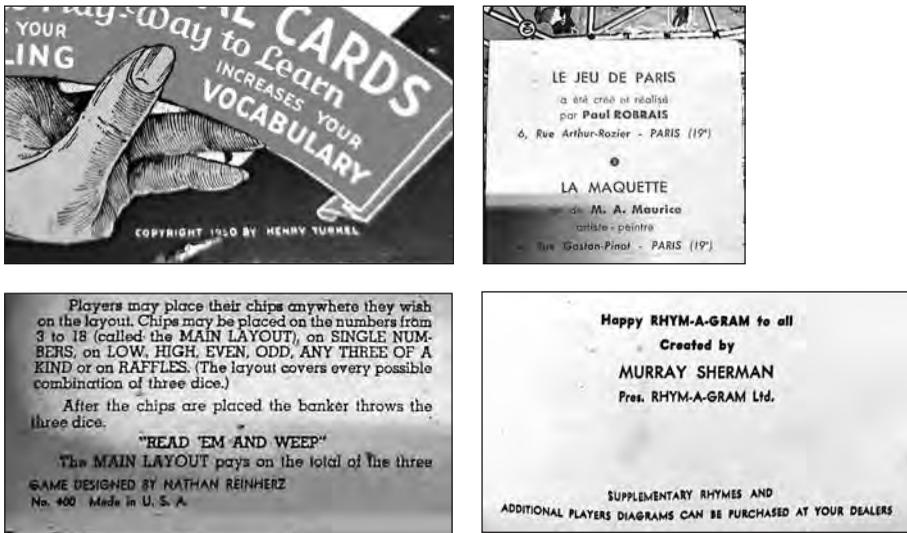


Figure 13. Examples of author's credits



Figure 14. Word cloud: auctorial terms
 Sample: Board games crediting an author between 1900 and 1984 (N = 457)
 Note: Word size is proportional to word occurrence. The term “by” represents 117 occurrences.

define the status of the person behind the game. In order, these were designer, creator, author, and inventor.

Where credits were sufficiently precise, we have coded the presumed gender of the authors, based on the majority distribution of the first name mentioned. For each game credited, we have therefore indicated whether the

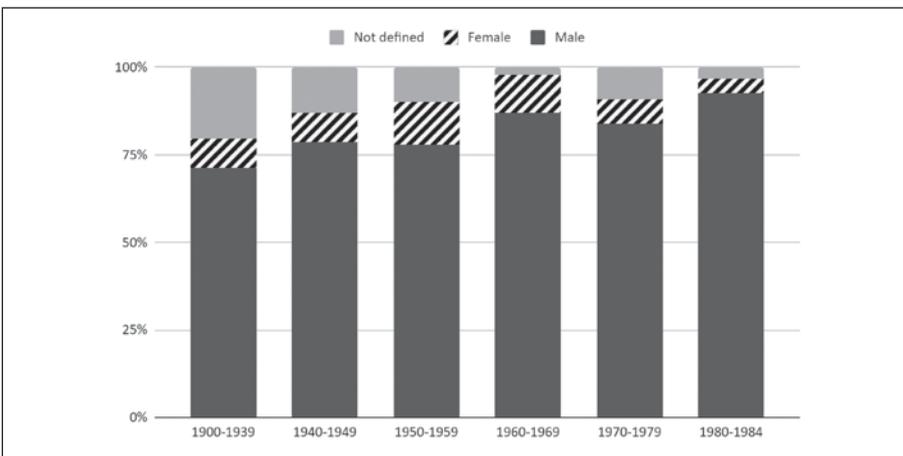


Figure 15. Author’s gender
 Sample: Board games crediting an author between 1900 and 1984 (N = 457)
 Note: Between 1900 and 1939, 70 percent of credited authors were men.

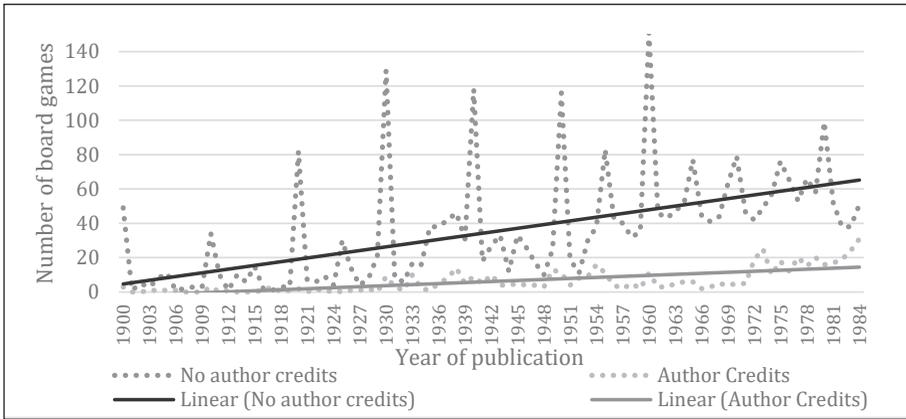


Figure 16. Author credits by year of publication

Sample: Board games from 1900 to 1984 (N = 3410)

Note: Thirty-one games published in 1984 credit an author, while fifty-one games do not.

first name was feminine, masculine, or impossible to identify (initials, surname only, or pseudonym). The results obtained for the gender of the authors mentioned show a male-dominated environment, with men accounting for between 71 percent (from 1900 to 1939) and 92 percent (in the 1980s) of the total workforce. We should note that a considerable proportion of credits did not identify gender, mostly using only initials. This was a widespread practice, particularly in copyrights, but we also note that it tended to diminish, particularly in the 1980s.

Overall, women creators remained in the minority compared to men throughout the entire period we studied. Nevertheless, the data show a limited but steady presence, at around 10 percent over the years included, with what appears to be a substantial decrease in their presence from the 1970s through to the 1980s (at least until 1984, after which the presence of women falls to 4 percent). This decrease remains to be confirmed by an analysis of the second half of the 1980s and beyond.

The Rise of Authorship in the Board Game Industry: Cultural Differences

Figure 16 suggests that the growth of authorship credit in the board game indus-

try has been continuous since the 1930s, but in reality it evolves slowly. Thus, although publication with an author's name became generally more frequent, in any given year, it remained a relatively minor practice. In fact, what distinguishes whether an author is mentioned in our sample depends first and foremost on the nationality of the publisher. Citing an author became more important in Europe than in the United States, as figure 17 suggests. In 1972 for example, more than 60 percent of European games identified their author, compared with 30 percent of U.S. games.

This difference between the countries can also be observed in the terms used to define author status. If we cross-reference (figure 18) the terms used to qualify authorship with the nationality of the publisher, we find that clear differences emerge. The term "by" ("par" in French or "von" in German) was used indiscriminately. European productions more often used the term "author," while North American productions tended first to use the term "copyright," then "designer."

Behind these differences between Europe and the United States lie similar differentiations made by board game enthusiasts. Sometimes referred to in the gaming world as "schools," distinctions are frequently made by players and professionals between North American games, occasionally called pejoratively

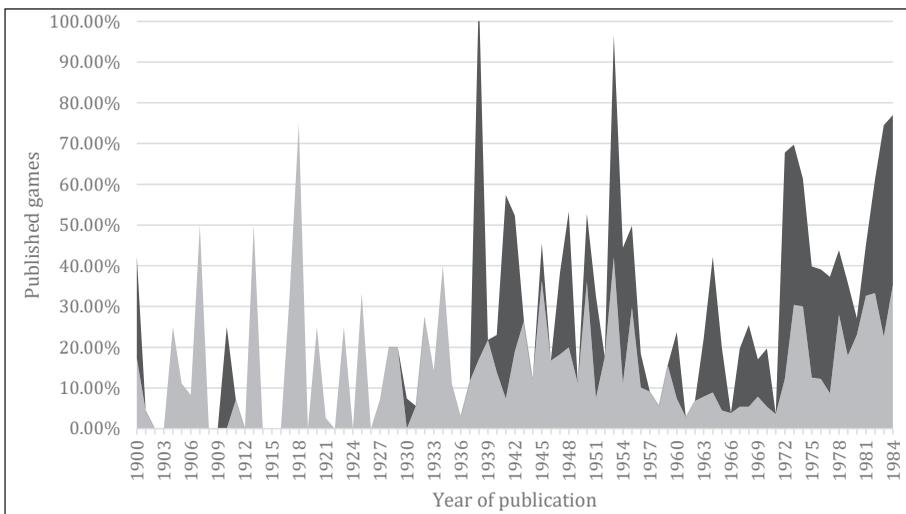


Figure 17. Percentage of authors mentioned by geographic area.

Sample: Board games from 1900 to 1984 (N = 3410)

Note: In 1960, 7 percent of North American games credited an author, compared with 16 percent of European games.

	author	by	copyright	created	designed	imagined	inventor
Europe	14,6%	31,5%	7,9%	28,1%	2,2%	6,7%	9%
USA	1,1%	34,0%	37,4%	6,1%	20,6%	0%	0,8%

Figure 18. Author credits by year of publication
 Sample: Board games from 1900 to 1984 (N = 3410)
 Note: Thirty-one games published in 1984 credit an author, while fifty-one games do not.vb

“ameritrash,” and Eurogames (Woods 2012). The former are presented as more interactive, more often featuring asymmetrical positions, more abundant material, and longer game durations. And they are more conflict oriented, allowing the elimination of opponents during the game. Eurogames are often based on trade and exchange mechanics, favoring score-based logic without eliminating players during the game.

More than a real or supposed formal difference, the data we have at our disposal confirms the observations of Rogerson, Gibbs, and Wally’s (2016) that, by underlining a difference in the cultural status accorded to the game creator, Eurogames place the board game parallel with the artistic, usually literary, world while North American games place it in a technical process, closer to the world of engineering. This alignment with the cultural world can also be observed in the discourse of players (Berry and Roucoux 2020). Some in the industry tend to compare the way they are organized to the book industry. For example, the main institutions studying the actors of the board games industry prefer to use the term author rather than designer. In Germany, the term author (“Autor” in German) is used, as in the case of the board game designer association, the “Spiele-Autoren-Zunft e.V” (SAZ). The same is true of the French board game authors’ union. In its manifesto, the union states, “A board game is much more than a toy with rules. It’s a human experience lived by players, like a book, a film, or a play in which the players are the actors and we are the director. We are neither ‘inventors’ nor ‘creators’: we are authors of works of the mind.”

Conclusion: The Play Must Go On

The analysis of the games from the FPJS confirms the development of the board game industries in Europe (France, England, and Germany) and the United States (Whitehill 1999). The supply of new titles grew steadily between the end of the nineteenth century and the mid-1980s. As the industry grew, a system of board game authorship gradually took hold. This developed particularly at the beginning of the 1970s, and though it increased in percentage, it still remained a minority practice in the context of total production. The data confirms the importance of this authorship phenomenon for European production and testifies to an ongoing process of legitimization. As an indicator of this cultural legitimization, the profession of board game authorship is now administratively recognized by the French government (mainly to facilitate tax filing), while the publishers' union works with the government to have board games recognized as a "cultural good." As such, they are eligible to benefit from a specific value-added tax, lower than that applied to standard goods. According to French professionals, the board games industry seems to follow an evolution comparable to that of comic books (Piette 2015), moving from an undervalued artistic practice aimed at children to a more legitimate and studied cultural practice.

There are, of course, a number of limitations to our analyses. Firstly, production prior to the 1930s is relatively limited in our sample. We need a more fully documented study of earlier production to understand better the industry's development. Secondly, we capped our analysis in the mid-1980s. The upcoming analyses for the following decades will either confirm or qualify the discrepancies we observed. It is quite possible that some of the phenomena we describe may fade over time—for example, the low number of female authors, or the artistic view of the profession of board game author, which is more accentuated in Europe than in the United States. For ease of reference, we have used the term Europe to describe mainly French, British, and German production. A more detailed study of national differences is needed. In addition, such a survey deserves to be opened up to other cultural areas, such as Asia.

Finally, we should note that the differences we observed in the cultural status of board game creators cannot be explained solely by cultural aspects. They are probably also due to the way industrial sectors are organized, as well as to the sociology of gaming practices in different countries. In France, for example, board games are increasingly popular among the educated middle classes and are relatively uncommon in working-class circles, whether played by a family

or among adults (Berry and Coavoux 2021). What characterizes the educated middle classes is a particular ability to defend their leisure activities culturally. This progression may go some way to explaining why board games have become a culturally legitimized practice in France.

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