

Rolling in Fun, Paying the Price: A Thematic Analysis on Purchase and Play in Tabletop Games

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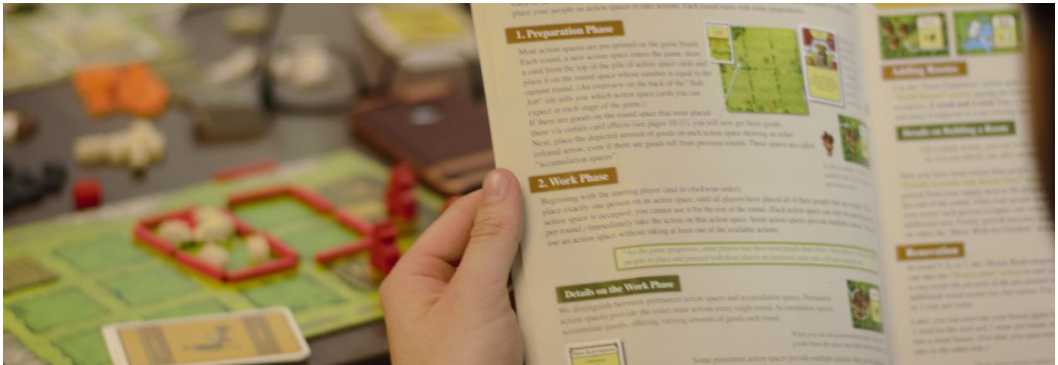


Fig. 1. A player reading the rulebook of a tabletop game.

The tabletop games industry has experienced remarkable growth in recent years. A deeper exploration of the factors motivating players to invest time and money in these games would help game companies better cater to their target audience and increase profits. We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews with tabletop game players. Our analysis revealed five themes concerning purchasing decision

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influences: (1) childhood past experiences and cultural norms, (2) representation and inclusivity, (3) social connections and shared fun, (4) overcoming gameplay hindrances with digital assistance, and (5) economic constraints. These findings suggest that game companies should focus on presenting easily understandable information, minimizing idle time, and exploring opportunities for inclusivity in digital interactions to effectively engage players and drive sales. Based on our valuable insights into player motivations, we offer actionable recommendations for the tabletop games industry.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: decision to play, decision to purchase, tabletop games, marketing

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1 Introduction

The tabletop games industry is experiencing a remarkable surge in popularity, with a projected market value of \$30.93 billion by 2028 [5]. This rapid growth and increased competitiveness suggests that understanding the motivations behind players' decisions to purchase and play tabletop games is crucial for game designers seeking to create games that resonate with their target audience [20, 45, 46, 48, 56]. While research has been conducted on in-game purchases and freemium models in digital games [24, 27, 28, 33, 100], there is a lack of similar research focusing specifically on the tabletop games industry. Understanding player motivations has direct implications for effective marketing strategies in the tabletop games industry [41]. Marketers can gain insights into what drives people to invest in tabletop games, which they can use to develop targeted campaigns that show these games' unique value. This, in turn, can contribute to the growth of the industry and the success of individual game titles and publishers [93]. As the lines between digital and physical player experiences continue to blur with the emergence of companion applications and other technologies, we must examine how these developments might influence player motivations and the overall tabletop player experience.

Tabletop games offer a distinct experience compared to their digital counterparts, characterized by tangible components, face-to-face interactions, and an emphasis on strategic thinking and problem-solving [8]. These unique qualities contribute to the engaging experiences that players seek in tabletop games [101]. The strategic inclusion of design elements that align with player preferences (e.g., physical components, collaborative mechanics [96]) can promote stronger player-game connections and increase the likelihood of cultivating a loyal player base. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is to better understand the fundamental factors that drive players to engage with and purchase tabletop games by answering the research question:

RQ1 *What factors influence players' decisions to purchase and play tabletop games?*

To address this question, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 tabletop game players (Section 3). We used a hybrid approach for thematic analysis, which combined codebook development strategies [12, 31] with while reflecting on our themes [13]. This combined approach lets us use the most applicable parts of several different analytical approaches. Our findings reveal five key themes related to players' purchase and play decisions (Section 4):

- (1) Childhood experiences and cultural norms play a significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes towards tabletop gaming, with positive experiences fostering continued engagement and negative experiences leading to reluctance (● Theme 1)

- (2) Ensuring proper representation and inclusivity in cultural-themed tabletop games is crucial for promoting effective cultural engagement and appealing to a diverse player base (● Theme 2)
- (3) The importance of social connections and fun in driving player engagement, with variations in game preferences depending on the group of players involved (● Theme 3)
- (4) Gameplay hindrances as a significant barrier to enjoyment and engagement, which could be addressed through digital assistance, such as companion apps and clear demonstrations (● Theme 4)
- (5) Economic constraints, particularly among low socio-economic status (SES) families, can lead to delayed purchases, seeking alternative options, or adopting a do-it-yourself approach to gaming (● Theme 5)

Our discussion on gameplay obstacles and design recommendations directly addresses the challenges players face, offering practical solutions to improve their experience (Section 5). These include delivering clear, intuitive information, reducing downtime, and exploring ways to foster inclusivity in digital interactions. By adopting these design principles, game developers can create more engaging and accessible experiences, appealing to a wider audience. Our research offers a detailed analysis of player purchase motivations, which tools and actionable strategies for crafting impactful campaigns that showcase a game's unique value to its intended audience. This approach increase sales, boost player engagement, and contribute to long-term success in the tabletop gaming industry.

2 Background

Tabletop games often come in a box that includes tangible pieces (like cards and/or tokens) accompanied by a rulebook, and played on a table or other flat surfaces. We can further classify these games by prominent features such as primary mechanics and themes. For example, although they both use cards, we would consider *Dominion* a deck-building tabletop card game because play revolves around players “buying” cards for their deck during play, and *Gloomhaven* a role-playing tabletop game because of its focus on role-playing such that cards represent their avatar's abilities. However, some researchers argue that they should be classified as gambling games [2, 53]. While we can consider gambling games such as *Roulette*, *Baccarat*, and *Craps* part of the tabletop game genre, they are beyond the scope of this research due to the nature of these games typically existing in a casino environment and their propensity to be addictive [52, 53].

Although current research continues to explore new interaction and game experiences to enhance natural and enjoyable recreational interactions between users [47, 55], we lack an understanding of why users would purchase these novel tabletop games, whether it is analog, digital or hybrid. Existing research has highlighted some benefits of playing tabletop games such as (1) reinforcing family bonds [19, 62], (2) enhancing reciprocal learning [77], (3) increasing the understanding of other generations [1, 88] and (4) reducing social anxiousness [94]. The face-to-face nature of tabletop games often means that there are logistical challenges, such as finding time to play tabletop games. While the variance in player groups' life stages can create opportunities to continue to play board games by negotiating the context, time, location, and medium of play [69], this can introduce new challenges for game designers because they need to consider a range of cultural, economic, and socio-economic factors when designing and marketing their games.

2.1 Cultural Influences and Perceptions

Tabletop games offer more than just entertainment; they could function as cultural constructs [81]. These games spark discussions on social and cultural issues that extend far beyond the game itself,

highlighting the importance of examining how cultural differences can influence these experiences. Game titles themselves, such as *Secret Hitler* or *Black Card Revoked*, can instantiate our collective imagination, which aligns with Coe [18]’s work on understanding why people play table-top role-playing games (TTRPGs). However, a critical research gap remains: what deters some people from engaging with these games at all? Studies like those by Foster [26], Patkin [65] have shown RPGs’ influence to shape player cultural identities, enrich social bonds, hone practical skills, and boost cognitive abilities. Despite these insights, our comprehension of the full potential of tabletop games as cultural constructs remains incomplete. A more thorough exploration of how cultural perceptions influence the decisions to buy and engage with these games would enable us to design games that not only accurately reflect cultural themes but do so in a respectful manner.

Our research explores how cultural backgrounds shape player preferences, not just in terms of how they engage with the game (i.e. play decisions) but also in how they choose which games to buy in the first place (i.e. purchase decisions). Understanding this relationship between culture, play, and meaning-making can highlight why certain themes, mechanics, or social dynamics resonate with players from specific backgrounds, influencing their decisions to buy and play particular games.

2.2 Economic Influences

Game companies have the potential to foster the culture and behaviours they want to see in gaming communities. However, this also creates opportunities for predatory practices. “Dark patterns” in game design often incentive efforts to encourage player spending in-game [98], such as paying to skip parts of or progress further in the game [100] or using a freemium model approach [59, 60]. Work on problematic monetization techniques demonstrates the impact of understanding player values on these practices [44], implying that understanding the incentives of why people purchase and play is important. Deterding [23] states that “economic platform studies can supply validated best practice business models and design patterns for game companies and recommendations to policy-makers on how to nurture and regulate business ecosystems.”

Historically, tabletop games have not depended on additional purchases, unlike their video game counterparts, such as downloadable content (DLC) to further enhance the gameplay experience. However, as we shift towards a hybrid remote experience market for tabletop games [10, 97], the introduction of supplementary digital components such as game accessories, or expansion sets for hybrid components are plausible. This trend indicates an evolving paradigm for tabletop games and outlines the significance of exploring the implications of these augmentations for the industry and how to apply them in an ethically sound manner.

2.3 Socio-Economic Status Factors Perceptions

Socio-economic status (SES) is a comprehensive measure that includes other key factors such as education level, occupation, and overall living conditions, which affects one’s purchasing behaviour [67]. Hu et al. [37] states: “Little attention has been given to how such inequities and biases might pervade technology user experiences. Without understanding such inequities in user experiences, technology designers can unwittingly introduce inequities tied to users’ socio-economic status (SES).” For instance, low-SES individuals might have less experience and fewer opportunities to engage with technology due to a lack of exposure and access [1, 95].

Investigations with people from low-SES communities concerning their interactions with technology and how technology can create new opportunities for them through digital design elements [91] found that potential impacting factors include purchasing decisions, the influence of their ethnicity, and the cultural context of their lifestyle. Other studies examined how individuals from low-income backgrounds apply innovative creations to make “things work” [89]. However, most studies often

neglect low-SES factors such that their results are not generalizable to this population, creating design barriers [82]. This also means that studies with low-SES participants might be prone to artifact novelty bias [22, 74]. While most research emphasizes social interaction and hybrid remote experiences [10, 97], it is important that we understand the factors driving the decision to play within the context of players' SES, including racial and ethnic minority groups.

3 Method

In this paper, we aim to explore how cultural factors may affect players' (or potential players') decision to purchase and play a tabletop game (**RQ1**), which is a concern for companies and designers in this growing market. To answer this question, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews with tabletop game players to explore their views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, and values with respect to their decisions to play tabletop games.

We adopted the “thematic intensity” codebook approach from Boyatzis [12] and Guest et al. [31] because they argue that coding reliability quality—which impacts the study's overall quality—relies on strong agreement among coders. However, we constructed our themes based on reflexive approaches [13] because we indirectly asked participants our research question in the interview. We also use a reflexive approach because there could be *more than one factor* that contributes to purchasing and playing tabletop games, which requires researchers to be reflexive. We understand that various schools of thought exist for code saturation. Thus, we make this process transparent in our methodology for replicability purposes. Figure 2 outlines our full research process. This study was reviewed by and received ethics clearance through the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB No. #42394).

3.1 Recruitment and Procedure

In line with qualitative method recommendations, we used purposive sampling with the group relevant to our research question. We recruited participants using a combination of the User Interviews¹ platform and social media posts by our research lab (HCI Games Group).

We first asked participants to complete a screening survey, which included the consent process. Following local ethics guidelines, the consent process ensures that participants are informed that they were free to end the survey or the interview at any time and/or not answer specific questions.

We then asked potential participants to “List a few “tabletop games” that you play”. We used this information to screen for their game playing experience by comparing them to a list of tabletop games from the community-driven database on BoardGameGeek². We invited players who listed tabletop games *that are not played in a casino setting* to participate in a semi-structured interview where we asked about their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and cultural influences on their attitudes toward tabletop games, as well as their purchase and play decisions (see our survey questions and

¹UserInterview: <https://www.userinterviews.com/>

²BoardGameGeek: <https://boardgamegeek.com/>, a community-driven database of tabletop games.

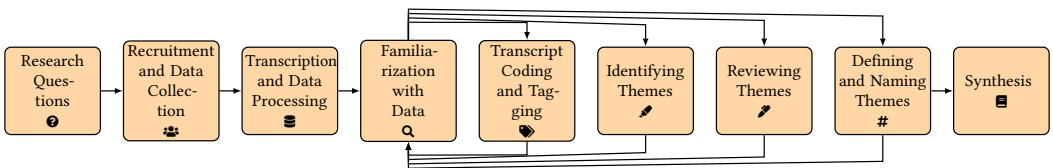


Fig. 2. An overview of our research process using a hybrid thematic analysis (reflexive and informed by a codebook) to synthesize themes into design considerations for tabletop game design.

semi-structured interview questions in the Appendix ³). The interview method also allowed us to dive deeper into participants' personal and sensitive issues revolving around their culture. We audio-recorded participants' voices for data collection. On average, each interview session was one hour.

For the participants who passed our screener survey, we collected their demographics, including their age, gender, ethnicity, education, employment, marital status, and household income. We also asked them how often they played and their experience with tabletop games before and during COVID-19 because the lockdowns and social distancing measures might have led to a shift towards online board game platforms. These differences might not seem relevant to participants, but it is important for us to identify these differences so we deliberately asked these questions to ensure that we captured this data. For our study, participants did not end the survey or interview prematurely, and answered all questions.

On interview completion, we awarded participants a \$10 USD gift card (currency exchanged to reflect their country) on the User Interviews platform and presented them with a thank-you letter. We informed participants to contact the researchers if there was any sensitive information that they wished to retract before publication. This scenario did not occur.

3.2 Participants

Our final sample includes N=20 participants between the ages of 20–54 ($M=31.7$, $SD=7.82$). We concluded the interview recruitment after reaching a meaning saturation point where no new findings were emerging from participants' responses [36]. In Table 1, we list the participants' self-reported ethnicity and gender. In our supplementary materials, we provide the full list of answer options for ethnicity, gender, education, employment, and household income in our demographics survey. Overall, our sample includes 60% ($n=12$) female, 30% ($n=6$) male, and 10% ($n=2$) who identified themselves as other genders. Fifteen percent ($n=3$) of participants had a high school diploma or some college experience, 45% ($n=9$) had a bachelor's degree, and 40% ($n=8$) had a graduate degree or higher. The majority of participants were from North American countries (75%, $n=15$, United States; 15%, $n=3$, Canada), 1 (5%) was from the United Kingdom, and 1 (5%) was from France. Most participants were employed (80%, $n=16$), 10% ($n=2$) were self-employed, and 10% ($n=2$) were unemployed.

3.3 Analysis

We uploaded the interview audio recordings to Dovetail⁴ for thematic coding. We preceded participant IDs 'P' (e.g., P2) for reference purposes to ensure anonymity and privacy. We focused our interview data analysis on players' views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values regarding their decision to play tabletop games. At the time of this analysis, AI tools were unavailable in Dovetail.

3.3.1 Familiarisation. In the first step of our thematic analysis, we focused on familiarizing ourselves with the core data: the interview transcripts. We generated initial transcripts using Dovetail, an automatic transcription software. To ensure accuracy and gain a deeper understanding of the content, all coders reviewed and edited the transcripts. This process served two purposes:

- (1) Meticulously checking the transcripts for any errors introduced by the automatic transcription software;
- (2) By reviewing and editing the transcripts, coders became thoroughly familiar with the data.

³Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/vg8s5/>

⁴Dovetail: dovetailapp.com

No.	Age	Gender ¹	Ethnicity ²	Location	Education ³	Employment	Household Income ⁴	SES-Status ⁵
P1	36	Non-Binary	White	United States	Bachelor's	Self-Employed	\$80,000–\$89,999	Middle
P2	29	Male	Multi-Ethnic	United States	Bachelor's	Employed	\$60,000–\$69,999	Low
P3	30	Female	Chinese	United States	Postgraduate	Employed	\$70,000–\$79,999	Low
P4	27	Female	South Asian	United States	Postgraduate	Employed	\$70,000–\$79,999	Low
P5	54	Male	White Indigenous	United States	High School	Employed	\$20,000–\$29,999	Low
P6	38	Female	South Asian	United States	Bachelor's	Self-Employed	\$40,000–\$49,999	Low
P7	20	Male	African Indian	Canada	Bachelor's	Employed	\$80,000–\$89,999	Middle
P8	41	Female	White Jewish	United States	Bachelor's	Employed	\$30,000–\$39,999	Low
P9	25	Female	White	France	Postgraduate	Un-employed	\$30,000–\$39,999	Low
P10	33	Male	South American	United States	Postgraduate	Employed	\$100,000–\$149,999	High
P11	29	Female	Black	United States	College	Employed	\$50,000–\$59,999	Low
P12	27	Female	White	Canada	Postgraduate	Employed	\$60,000–\$69,999	Low
P13	26	Female	South Asian	Canada	Postgraduate	Employed	\$60,000–\$69,999	Low
P14	37	Female	White Ashkenazi	United States	Bachelor's	Employed	\$40,000–\$49,999	Low
P15	27	Female	Chinese	United States	Bachelor's	Employed	\$40,000–\$49,999	Low
P16	25	Female	Chinese	United States	Postgraduate	Employed	\$30,000–\$49,999	Low
P17	42	Male	South American	United States	College	Un-employed	\$90,000–\$99,999	Low
P18	26	Trans-Male	White	United States	Bachelor's	Employed	\$10,000–\$19,999	Low
P19	29	Female	White	United Kingdom	Bachelor's	Employed	\$50,000–\$59,999	Low
P20	33	Male	Black	United States	Postgraduate	Employed	\$50,000–\$59,999	Low

¹ We included the option to self-identify gender to help participants faithfully represent their gender [30].

² We included the option to self-identify ethnicity to help participants faithfully represent their ethnicity [74].

³ College refers to community colleges, technical schools, and liberal arts colleges.

⁴ The data collected the participant's household income in United States Dollar (USD).

⁵ We did not ask our participants to self-report their SES status. Instead, we based our analysis on self-reported household income (divided by total family members) and other indicators associated with low-SES noted from Humbert et al. [38].

Table 1. Demographic information of interview participants.

P1 9:23

I think the biggest thing would be like replayability. So like, having a cool game is really great, you know, but like, I don't want to throw down \$50 in a game that I'm gonna like, be interested in once you know what I mean. So like, maybe honestly, like puzzle games. Sometimes puzzle games are really fun to play, but you can only play at once. Because once you find the mechanic or like the trick, or whatever it is, like, you can't go back to not knowing what that thing is. So like, I think what I'm looking for is like, Can I play this

replayability 16
quotes about purc... 70
low replayability 1

Fig. 3. A snippet of one coder's tagging in Dovetail

This initial immersion allowed us to grasp the overall themes, language use, and participant perspectives present within the interviews.

3.3.2 Codebook Approach. In our thematic analysis, we adopted a two-step coding approach. First, five coders individually coded the initial first 20% of the dataset (10% each time = 2 interviews) line-by-line (Figure 3). This initial coding generated a preliminary codebook (named coder X's codebook). We then addressed any differences in coding through collaborative discussions until we reached a consensus, and finalized the first synthesized codebook version 1 (Figure 4). We

acknowledge this approach might be unconventional and not in line with common practices for “codebook derivation.” However, we argue that this approach in qualitative research fosters a richer and more nuanced understanding by leveraging the diverse perspectives within the team, especially when trying to understand cultural aspects. Our team includes individuals from the tabletop gaming industry and those with backgrounds outside the dominant culture (i.e. marginalized backgrounds). In addition, relying solely on one or two researchers to create the codebook can introduce bias, and less experienced coders might feel uncomfortable challenging established views in a shared codebook. This approach affords us opportunities to examine our individual biases in coding, and for all coders to record their views for discussion.

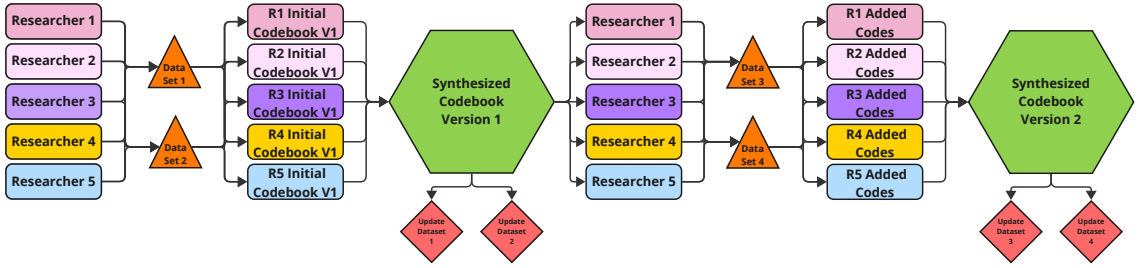


Fig. 4. A flowchart of our codebook approach.

Building on our preliminary codebooks, we developed a hierarchical codebook while analyzing the next two datasets. This resulted in a total of ten individual codebooks (5 coders $\times$ 1 codebook $\times$ 2 iterations) that we used to create our synthesized codebook (version 2). We note that only new codes were added during the second iteration. This codebook explicitly considered cultural factors and purchase and play decisions. We collaboratively resolved any emergent discrepancies during this process. This iterative process enhanced the codebook’s comprehensiveness while minimizing the abandonment of potentially relevant data. In total, there are two synthesized codebooks: version 1 and 2 (Figure 4).

We coded the remaining 14 datasets using the synthesized codebook (version 2). We also updated the four datasets’ previously coded portions to reflect the synthesized codebook (version 2) (Figure 5). No new codes appeared throughout the rest of the dataset in relation to our research question (RQ1). For example, we categorized specific tabletop game titles that appeared as new codes because we are interested in players’ behaviours with respect to tabletop games overall. The final synthesized codebook (version 2) has $n = 155$ codes related to the RQ and $n = 135$ unique purchased tabletop games. These were later clustered into themes on Dovetail (Section 3.3.4).

3.3.3 Collaborative Resolution of Disagreements. We decided on this collaborative process of resolving disagreements to minimize reliance on individual coders and promote a deeper, shared understanding of the data. For this purpose, every interview was coded by two randomly assigned coders, while a third researcher acted as the moderator to resolve any conflicts. Moderated sessions ranged from 2 to 3 hours per interview recording. Using this approach, we developed a merged coded data transcription for which all the coding researchers agreed on the code tag. This formed the foundation for our theme development.

3.3.4 Reviewing, Defining and Naming themes. Our theme development and reporting focused on data directly related to our research question. We used affinity clustering the Dovetail board to construct themes of shared meaning from our codes. To do so, we needed to ensure there were no

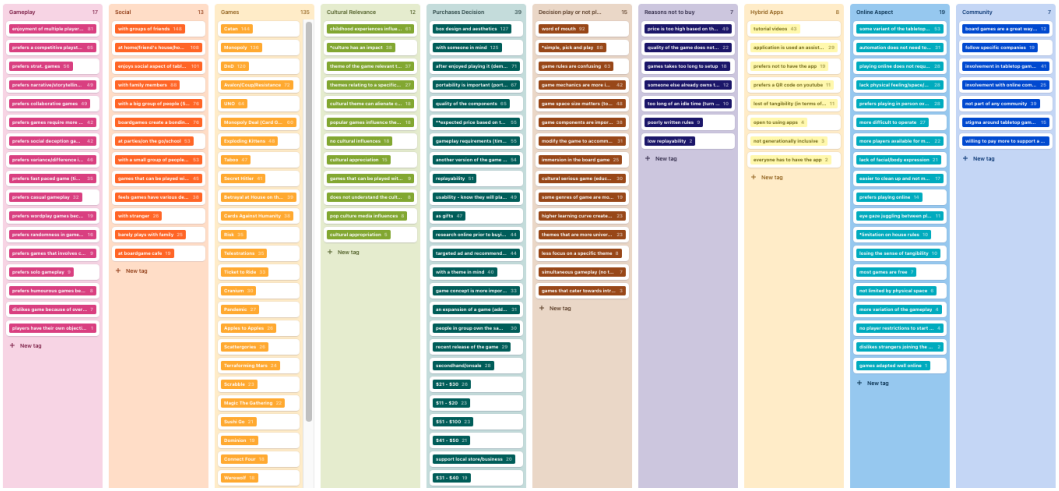


Fig. 5. A snippet of our initial tags in Dovetail.

contradictions between themes, and that they were not too broad. We decided on initial themes based on the frequency of recurring codes. After creating an initial theme, coders returned to each recording to check for missing important points. We refined the themes iteratively.

3.3.5 Researcher’s Positionality. The research team conducting this study brings together a diverse range of expertise in games user research:

- Two team members have over five years of experience developing tabletop games for international partners. This in-depth industry knowledge likely played a role in shaping the study’s focus on design considerations pertinent to game companies, such as marketing strategies and affordability.
- Five members have a background in teaching game design, covering both physical and digital board games. This educational experience likely influenced the emphasis on elements of player experience, such as minimizing idle time, providing clear tutorials, and fostering intergenerational play.
- Two team members have industry experience as UX game researchers, potentially bringing a user-centred approach to analyze player needs and frustrations. This perspective may have contributed to prioritizing aspects like intuitive gameplay and alternative input methods to address potential barriers for players with lower socio-economic status.

We do not include leisure-disposable income levels in our analysis, which we consider to be a socio-economic status (SES) factor. These adjustments are based on researchers’ interpretations of demographic data and the analysis of relevant quotes. This reflexive approach ensured that our tagging process stayed aligned with the study’s goals, focusing on the purchase and play considerations and player needs we found most important.

4 Findings

Through our thematic analysis of the interview data, we identified five key themes relevant to game culture and purchase and play decisions in tabletop games (Table 2): childhood experiences and cultural norms (Section 4.1); representation and inclusivity in cultural-themed tabletop games (Section 4.2); importance of social connections and fun in driving player engagement (Section 4.3);

gameplay hindrances as a significant barrier to enjoyment and engagement (Section 4.4); and low socio-economic status families might delay purchases or seeking alternative options (Section 4.5).

☰ Main Themes	🔍 Sub Themes
● Theme 1: Decisions to Purchase and Play Are Based on Past Experiences Relative to the Cultural Norm Growing Up	➤ <i>Nostalgia Impact Tabletop Game Engagement in Adulthood</i> ➤ <i>Families With Low-SES Will Make Means to Play the Games Through Various Means</i>
● Theme 2: Proper Representation and Inclusivity in Cultural-Themed Tabletop Games Promotes Effective Cultural Exchange	➤ <i>Gaming Preference Differences Prevent Community Involvement</i>
● Theme 3: The Desire for Social Connection and Shared Fun Influence Peoples Decisions to Purchase and Play Tabletop Games	➤ <i>Variations in Preference for a Particular Game Genre Depending on the Group of Players Involved</i>
● Theme 4: Hindrance In Gameplay Could Be Solved With Digital Assistance	➤ <i>Demonstration Of Games Makes It Easier To Understand</i> ➤ <i>Tabletop Games Allows One To Be Disengaged From the Digital World and Offers A Richer Face-To-Face Interactions</i>
● Theme 5: Low-SES Families May Delay Purchases or Seek Alternatives	➤ <i>Space Constraints and Presents An Issue On Playing Space</i>

Table 2. We inferred five themes from our hybrid (largely reflexive) thematic analysis (drawing from codebook approaches) that are relevant to the decision to purchase and play tabletop games. We present a complete overview of the themes and extrapolated subthemes in this table.

4.1 ● Theme 1: Decisions to Play Are Based on Past Experiences Relative to the Cultural Norm Growing Up

We constructed this theme from participants' responses when asked about: "What made you interested in playing tabletop games?" Most participants talked about past experiences and game culture in response to this question. Participants' responses often referenced their childhood playing experiences. Those who reported positive early encounters with tabletop games generally developed a sustained interest that continued into adulthood.

"It's just a childhood favourite of mine. I've always loved that game ever since I was a kid." (👤 P11)

Our analysis revealed that participants were open to playing games in the future that they either had no prior experience with or had initially perceived negatively, particularly when considering a different group of players.

"Secret Hitler? I played it with a bunch of people who hated it so I had a negative connotation around it but after playing it twice in COVID, but I'm fine with playing it again ... So the after COVID time I was around more people who liked it. And I was fine with playing it again." (👤 P4)

These responses suggest that a player's past experiences significantly shape their attitudes towards tabletop gaming overall. This finding underscores the importance of understanding diverse factors influencing individual and family gaming practices. Game designers and companies should focus on creating accessible, engaging, and enjoyable games for all ages, especially children, to sustain long-term player interest in games both old and new. This approach can cultivate a new generation of tabletop players who will maintain their interest in the hobby into and throughout adulthood.

4.1.1 Theme 1.1: Nostalgia Impact Tabletop Game Engagement in Adulthood.

“We play every other Friday night at my grandmother’s house. So, that’s where the love for board games really came from.” ( P20)

The past experiences of the participants significantly shaped their current engagement with tabletop games. Positive childhood memories, often associated with family interactions, fostered continued involvement. These findings align with those by Shaw et al. [76] and Smith [78]. In contrast, negative experiences created lasting preferences. Notably, participants did not report neutral experiences, suggesting that tabletop gaming tends to evoke strong emotional responses.

4.1.2  Theme 1.2: Families With Low-SES Will Make Means to Play the Games Through Various Means. Our dataset employs per capita income as a proxy for socio-economic status within participating households. This approach is standardized to the United States context [32]. However, it is acknowledged that per capita income may not accurately reflect the full financial picture of each participant’s household. Factors such as household size and composition can influence the purchasing power represented by per capita income.

Financial constraints significantly influenced participants’ gaming habits. Most reported prioritizing basic living expenses over game purchases. This led to three creative adaptations, which extends to individuals without families, who shared similar experiences with friends or partners:

(1)  Do-it-yourself (DIY) approach. Many created mock-ups using pen and paper, aligning with Vyas [90]’s findings on low-SES communities’ resourcefulness;

“I remember when the Connect Four game came out, but we used to like draw it on paper and it’s not the same, but it’s kind of similar. So, it was cool when we actually did that.” ( P20)

(2)  Selective purchasing. Participants bought games during sales (or secondhand) or as gifts, supporting Orthner et al. [61]’s observation that low-income families *make things happen* to bring joy to their households;

“Even if I’m excited about it, I will wait for it to go on sale or find it second hand.” ( P8)

“I’ll wait to go until there’s like a sale or I’ll try and like, re-buy it off, like an exchange board.” ( P18)

4.2 Theme 2: Proper Representation and Inclusivity in Cultural-Themed Tabletop Games Promotes Effective Cultural Exchange

This theme mainly emerged from the frequency in our semi-structured interview when we asked: *“What improvement do you think the tabletop games could have to make them better?”*

“I’m always looking to connect more with, with my, my people. So, it was one thing that I have to go pick this one up because I want to learn more. Cause it’s about, like, black trivia and things like that and I’m always looking to learn more about myself in our culture in general.” ( P11)

Participants emphasized the significance of cultural themes in tabletop games. These themes influenced purchasing decisions, sparking curiosity about game titles, gameplay mechanics, and cultural representations. However, some participants expressed reservations about certain culturally sensitive games. For instance, one participant ( P12) stated that they would not purchase ‘Secret Hitler’ because of the *“context of it and history surrounding it,”* citing discomfort with its historical associations.

“We could definitely get influenced about what are the most popular games in North America, because I’m sure, like, even in comparison to Europe ... they have some influence from us here.” (👤 P12)

Participants stressed the potential of games with cultural themes to serve as educational tools and should accurately represent cultural constructs and themes. Tabletop games, in particular, can effectively explain or encourage discussions about complex cultural issues [11, 16, 79]. ‘Black Card Revoked,’ a board game centred on African-American popular culture, exemplifies this approach. Importantly, participants stressed that culturally themed games should be inclusive, welcoming all who seek to learn about the featured culture.

“With culture, I’m not quite looking at the racial culture I’m looking at where my culture was when I was growing up. I was a punk in a goth, so I like those kind of dark games.” (👤 P5)

Specifically, participants who valued cultural representation mentioned buying copies for their family members to enjoy.

“I am Jewish, and I have gone out of my way to find Jewish themed or based games. Spot It! has a memory or icon matching little tin of cards that my nieces and nephew absolutely love. They came out with a Jewish icon theme. And I bought like, three of them, so I could send them to everybody. They did not like it as much as the original, but I thought the representation was incredibly important.” (👤 P8)

Our participants reported that racial culture does not influence their game purchases. Instead, thematic relevance shapes their preferences for specific genres or themes. This insight is crucial for game developers and marketers who want to appeal to diverse audiences. While racial culture might not significantly impact purchases, game themes aligned with players’ interests—which can include learning about cultural themes—do. These findings underscore the viability of creating games with varied themes and genres to accommodate a wide range of player interests.

4.2.1 🟡 Theme 2.1: Gaming Preference Differences Prevent Community Involvement. Many participants intentionally avoid tabletop game communities. They perceive these communities as overly serious, contrasting with their preference for a more relaxed social playing style. This mismatch in the approach of the game leads to limited or no participation in the broader culture of tabletop gaming for these players.

“One of my friends is part of a board game community and they are, like, super snobby about the kinds of games that they play. It’s like, dude, I’m just trying to have fun. So, yeah, I feel like one thing that’s intimidating. And the reason why I would never join them is because I feel like it’s taken a lot more seriously.” (👤 P13)

Participants also reported a stigma associated with tabletop gaming communities. They perceived them as “dorky or nerdy”, which often led to concerns about social judgment. Many participants eventually sought groups that better aligned with their playing style.

“I felt like there was kind of a stigma with it like that. It’s like a very. Kind of dorky thing, which is probably very unfair of me to say. Like, there were kids who did that but I knew that, like, if I got into that, my closer friends would be like, what are you doing?” (👤 P14)

👤 P18 emphasized the importance of “finding a group that shares your goals and values, and with whom you can build trust and collaborate” in deciding to engage in tabletop gaming. Active community members tend to be more serious players, heavily invested in time commitments and adhering to gaming schedules.

“I belong to a monthly gaming club among other things, but I’m focusing on this one. And they always brought their own game so we played something different just about every time.” (👤 P8)

In summary, participants highlighted the tension between personal gaming preferences and the broader tabletop gaming community culture. Many avoided joining these communities due to perceived seriousness or social stigma. Instead, they sought out smaller, more casual groups that aligned with their desire for fun and flexibility, valuing trust and shared goals over rigid commitment to gaming schedules. This divergence in gaming preferences serves as a barrier to deeper community involvement for some players.

4.3 Theme 3: The Desire for Social Connection and Shared Fun Influence People’s Decisions to Purchase and Play Tabletop Games

This theme was largely constructed from the answer to “What is the most important factor on the decision to play the game?” and a follow-up: “What is the most important factor on the decision to purchase the game?”

“The most important factor is maybe who I was playing with. I think I would say that I have usually purchased the game when I feel like really confident in having like a friend group that would actually make that purchase reasonable.” (👤 P1)

Participants unanimously identified companionship as the primary motivator for playing tabletop games. Family, friends, and partners were mentioned most frequently as potential co-players. Participants emphasized purchasing games only if they anticipated actual play, rather than acquiring them as “collection that’s colourful” (👤 P7). This highlights the social nature of tabletop gaming, with participants viewing it as a means to engage and have fun with loved ones.

“I also think about, like, how portable this game is sometimes. I don’t like the boxes that are a little bit bulkier just because it’s not easy to carry.” (👤 P16)

Our participants criticized game designers for prioritizing internal components over portability. Our participants state that portability in board games refers to a game’s ability to be easily transported and played in various locations. Overall, most participants agreed that there is a need for sturdy packaging to easily move games with numerous components without losing pieces. Factors such as the game’s overall size, the weight and quantity of components, and the packaging design all influence portability. Compact, lightweight games with sturdy packaging that protects components while minimizing bulk are considered highly portable. This factor is particularly important for gamers who enjoy playing in different settings, whether it’s at a friend’s house, on vacation, or simply in a different room. Most of our participants preferred easily portable games for their convenience in setting up and cleaning up, especially when playing at friends’ houses, family gatherings, or schools. The lack of portability was a significant deterrent to purchasing certain games.

4.3.1 Theme 3.1: Variations in Preference for a Particular Game Genre Depending on the Group of Players Involved.

“But typically I look at them thinking, is this something that I would enjoy playing with my wife.” (👤 P2)

Participants emphasized that both game type and player type significantly influence their tabletop game purchases and play decisions. Game genre preferences often vary according to the playing group. Before buying or playing a game, participants consider other players’ preferences, game reviews, box aesthetics, gameplay simplicity, and available playing time with family. These findings align with previous research [70].

“You also need to have the right number of people who are willing participants in order to make it fun.” (P4)

Our participants identified two crucial factors in their decision to play: interested players and player availability. Engaged players enhance the gaming experience, realizing a game’s full potential. In contrast, a lack of players can make a game unplayable. Many participants preferred games with knowledgeable players, quick setup, high replayability, and fast-paced gameplay, because these elements maximize enjoyment for them.

“There’s something difficult is like, the designed friction in a way. So you get that higher feeling of accomplishment after you make something work.” (P19)

Participants reported greater satisfaction with complex tabletop games, often characterized by numerous tangible pieces or setup times exceeding 30 minutes. These games typically require multiple sessions and substantial time investment to master. While simple, repetitive games eventually lose appeal, complex games present a different challenge: finding willing players to learn and engage with them. This tension between complexity and player availability influences game selection and purchase decisions.

4.4 Theme 4: Hindrance In Gameplay Could Be Solved With Digital Assistance

Our analysis revealed an unexpected theme: participants expressed interest in digital assistants (e.g., phone apps) during gameplay. This indicates a desire for technology-aided rule resolution and suggests opportunities for integrating digital tools into tabletop gaming experiences. Further research should investigate the specific functionalities players envision and how to seamlessly incorporate these digital aids.

“If there was like a companion app, like a phone app, that would be amazing because ... it’s hard to keep track of, like, everything and then you do things in between turns.” (P18)

Participants reported difficulties tracking multiple game elements, such as life points, character stats, and resources. Participants struggling with complex tracking were less inclined to purchase or play such games. This issue significantly affects game design, influencing both accessibility and enjoyment. Participants advocated for companion apps as optional gameplay aids, not mandatory components. These apps would simplify gameplay by eliminating extraneous actions. Understanding the role of companion apps in facilitating gameplay can guide their development to better serve players’ needs.

4.4.1  Theme 4.1: Game Demonstrations Makes Them Easier To Understand. Participants valued gameplay demonstrations, which provided insights into game mechanics and expected interactions. They emphasized the importance of tutorials for learning game rules.

“I learn more by doing than reading. It looks like a video also kind of helps establish like how is the game played.” (P10)

Participants were more likely to purchase games they could demo or play beforehand, preferring interactive experiences over reading rulebooks. When confronted with confusing or broken rules, most participants created house rules. However, everyone expressed frustration at these disruptions to gameplay and meaningful interactions.

“I would say the hardest part is if the instructions are not clear enough. Because you never want a situation where if it’s a new game.” (P17)

Most of the participants expressed frustration with the unclear or complex rules of tabletop games, which often discourage gameplay. They frequently encounter rules that fail to address

specific game states or are too time-consuming to learn. Participants find independent rule-learning inefficient, preferring guidance from experienced players. This underscores the importance of clear, comprehensive rules in enhancing game accessibility and enjoyment.

4.4.2  **Theme 4.2: Tabletop Games Allows One To Be Disengaged From the Digital World and Offers A Richer Face-To-Face Interactions.** Participants primarily viewed tabletop games as a means of disconnecting from the digital world, offering richer face-to-face interactions that are often absent in digital games [55, 99].

“I think for me playing tabletop games is a way to like disconnect from my phone, disconnect from a screen, and actually get some face time with friends.” ( P19)

Participants reported that these social interactions foster deeper relationships through shared experiences and inside jokes.

“It’s like insane how many inside jokes come up in that game, or it just makes you realize how well you know other people.” ( P14)

“It gets your mind off of whatever is going on in our life. And, you just get to engage with the people that you see maybe on a regular basis, or once in a while in a different way that you don’t when you are just talking.” ( P4)

Notably, participants’ references to “disconnecting from a screen” specifically excluded companion applications, focusing instead on gameplay experiences on mobile devices.

4.5 **Theme 5: Low-SES Families May Delay Purchases or Seek Alternatives**

We constructed this theme through our analysis of responses to questions about participants’ decisions to purchase and play tabletop games.

“When you going to somebody’s house and you’re trying a game I feel it has been the biggest thing and then that makes me want to buy the game.” ( P12)

Price, reviews, gifting, and demonstrations significantly influence tabletop game purchase and play decisions. However, high costs often delay purchases or prompt searches for alternatives.

“I’ll either wait to go until there’s like a sale or I’ll try and like, re-buy it off, like an exchange board or whatever but I would still eventually buy the game.” ( P18)

Given that this participant comes from a low socio-economic background, their response highlights how economic factors shape acquisition strategies without dampening enthusiasm for desired games.

Participants also emphasized the crucial role of word of mouth (WOM) and reviews in their tabletop game purchasing decisions [6, 49]. Positive recommendations often led to exploration and eventual gameplay.

“Like reviews or just word of mouth like, for me, like having friends, say, like, I played this and we loved it is, that holds a lot of weight.” ( P6)

“So, if friend said it was good, I feel like I trust my friends so if they say something is good, then I trust their opinion, so I would be like, okay, let’s play it together.” ( P16)

Conversely, negative WOM discouraged participants from both playing and purchasing games.

4.5.1  **Theme 5.1: Space Constraints and Presents An Issue On Playing Space.** Game size and playing environment significantly influence purchasing decisions, particularly for low-SES participants. These individuals often lack adequate table space for gameplay and storage, inclining them towards simple, compact games like UNO. Such games accommodate the spatial constraints of their homes or preferred playing locations.

“I honestly think, like, size is a factor like, is this like a huge game, which is going to be hard to store?” (P6)

“I think, especially if you have a game where you’re like, this requires a board, and we need to spread it out, and people need to have different things, or they need to sit in a way where they’re concealing their cards from the other players. That could be hard to do in a small space.” (P6)

Some participants view this constraint as an opportunity for “crazy things on tiny tables” (P19), while others find it challenging. Space limitations influence purchasing and playing decisions, as some games are difficult to play in small areas, even though it can be “a little more intimate” (P5). When necessary, participants adapt by using alternative surfaces like the floor. As P19 noted, “you make it work if you need to get on the floor, you get on the floor.” This adaptability demonstrates how players overcome spatial constraints to enjoy tabletop games.

“There’s only so many bookshelves you can have and so yeah. You buy them and then you’re like, okay, now we’re going to need to buy a new bookshelf.” (P19)

Collection aesthetics also influence purchase decisions. All participants value displaying their game boxes at home for visual appeal. Some, like P7, prioritize box design: “the box is really important when it comes to collecting.” Component quality is crucial because participants consider durability. Frequent play sometimes leads to purchasing duplicate copies to replace worn games. These factors—display aesthetics, component quality, and durability—play significant roles in the tabletop game acquisition choices of participants.

5 Discussion

Drawing from our findings, we return to our research question (RQ1) to discuss gameplay hindrances (Theme 4) and proposed design considerations, such as presenting easily understandable information and minimizing idle time during play, which align with the principles of HCI in-game design from Cai [15] and the CSSII model for player motivations [56]. We expand these work by analyzing specific factors influencing purchase and play decisions: childhood experiences (Theme 1), representation and inclusivity (Theme 2), and economic constraints (Theme 5). These themes provide a more nuanced understanding of player motivations in tabletop gaming. However, our themes also indicate underdeveloped areas of knowledge, particularly with respect to socio-economic status (SES). Understanding the interplay between SES and tabletop gaming and acknowledging these disparities is crucial for game companies so that they can develop more inclusive marketing strategies and design games to appeal to a wider range of player experiences. This could involve creating more affordable game options, developing partnerships with community centres to host gaming events, or designing games with a wider range of complexity levels to appeal to players with varying time constraints. Furthermore, these findings have implications for the design and development of tabletop gaming interfaces and systems, as highlighted by studies on the influence of interactive tabletop systems [14] and the acceptance of mobile casual games [58].

5.1 Contrast Between Social, Economic, and Cultural Contexts

Our findings highlight the significance of social and cultural contexts in tabletop gaming. This aligns with previous research that emphasizes the importance of social interaction and collaboration in this domain [14, 17, 51]. Specifically, Theme 3 highlights the critical role that human-to-human interactivity plays in driving player engagement. Additionally, the emphasis on representation and inclusivity in tabletop game design (Theme 2) emerges as a vital aspect that existing literature often overlooks. Our findings suggest that game designers should account for the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their players to create socially responsible and culturally reflective

games. This insight contributes to the growing discourse on diversity and representation in the tabletop gaming industry.

While our study touches upon the influence of socio-economic status on tabletop gaming experiences, it also reveals the need for further research to fully understand the scope of this impact [1, 95]. Our findings indicate that economic constraints (Theme 5) significantly affect players’ purchase and play decisions, although we acknowledge that the evidence presented in this study is limited. We encourage future research to further explore the connection between SES and tabletop gaming, particularly examining how factors such as leisure time, resource availability, and cultural norms might influence gaming experiences across various SES groups. To support this investigation, Table 3 breaks down the related themes and categorize them into purchase and play decisions.

5.2 Factors Affecting Purchasing Targets 🛒

A variety of factors shape purchasing decisions in tabletop gaming, including personal history, cultural relevance, social motivations, and economic constraints. Nostalgia significantly influences these decisions, particularly for individuals with positive past experiences with tabletop games (Theme 1). Participants often recalled fond childhood memories of playing games with family, supporting research by Shaw et al. [76] and Smith [78], which emphasizes the lasting impact of early gaming experiences on adult habits. For low-socio-economic status families, financial constraints necessitate creative approaches to accessing games, such as DIY setups and selective purchasing

☰ Themes	📋 Overview Summary	🛒 Purchase Decision	🎮 Play Decision
● Theme 1	Past experiences and cultural norms shape decisions to play tabletop games. Low-SES families creatively access games despite financial constraints.	Purchases may be influenced by nostalgia and positive past experiences with games. Low-SES families prioritize affordable options like sales or second-hand games.	Willingness to replay games, especially with new groups, stems from familiarity, and DIY setups ensure continued play despite limited resources.
● Theme 2	Culturally themed games promote cultural connection and inclusivity.	Cultural themes significantly influence purchasing decisions for players seeking cultural representation.	Inclusive games foster better engagement and social interaction, especially when aligned with cultural interests.
● Theme 3	Social interactions and shared fun drive the purchase of tabletop games. Game genre preferences vary by the group involved in game-play.	Games are purchased with social interactions in mind, particularly with family or friends, influenced by the preferences of the playing group.	Companionship motivates play, and group dynamics and player availability are crucial to game enjoyment.
● Theme 4	Digital tools simplify gameplay but should remain optional.	Players are more likely to purchase games that include digital aids for easier rule management.	Digital assistance can streamline gameplay, but face-to-face interaction remains the core experience.
● Theme 5	Economic and storage constraints affect game purchases, leading to delays or alternative solutions.	Price sensitivity impacts purchasing decisions, with a focus on affordability through sales, secondhand purchases, or gifts. Game size and aesthetics influence decisions pertaining to game storage.	Space constraints influence how games are played, with participants often adapting by using smaller spaces or alternative surfaces.

Table 3. Contrast between our findings towards purchase and play decisions.

during sales or at secondhand markets. Vyas [90] supports our observations of resourcefulness, finding that low-SES communities frequently employ innovative strategies to enjoy leisure activities despite economic limitations.

SES emerges as a critical factor influencing tabletop gaming experiences, impacting who participates and the types of games they choose to buy and play. SES can restrict access to resources, including financial barriers, as modern board games often have higher price tags than traditional options. Limited access to dedicated gaming spaces, such as cafes or community centers, further restricts opportunities for low-SES individuals to try new games and engage with a wider group. However, our findings also highlight potential issues within some tabletop gaming communities, including gender bias and challenges faced by low-income families [30, 83]. Ideally, tabletop gaming communities should strive to be welcoming and inclusive for all players, regardless of their background. Playing games together can be a fantastic way to build friendships [39, 66]. Therefore, fostering a space where everyone feels comfortable is essential.

From our findings, the impact of SES extends beyond resources, directly influencing purchase and play decisions. Social networks established within SES groups significantly affect exposure to different types of games. Individuals from higher SES backgrounds may belong to circles that frequently host gaming nights, leading to increased awareness of and access to a wider variety of games. In contrast, those from lower SES backgrounds might lack such connections, limiting their knowledge of new releases. Understanding how childhood shapes a person's gaming perspective is essential for designers creating engaging and inclusive games. Equipped with this knowledge, they can develop games that welcome low-SES communities [90]. While players are often inclined to buy games they enjoyed in childhood, seeking to relive those experiences, cultural norms surrounding gaming can also dictate which games are deemed "desirable" for purchase and play. Cultural representation is another powerful purchasing motivator (● Theme 2), as games that reflect players' heritage tend to have a higher likelihood of purchase. Cultural appropriation is a serious concern when including cultural representations in games. Game companies that incorporate themes from specific cultures should actively involve members of that culture in the development process. Cultural themes should be treated with respect, not simply used as a marketing ploy. Encouraging intergenerational play can foster meaningful connections [21, 71, 88, 94].

Social connections also drive purchasing behaviour (● Theme 3), with players typically selecting games that family or friends will enjoy, emphasizing a desire for shared experiences [73]. Modern board games often require a significant time commitment and can be more expensive than traditional options due to their size and number of contents. Economic constraints are particularly significant for low-SES families (● Theme 5), as they prioritize affordability by opting for sales, secondhand purchases, or gifts. Furthermore, storage constraints may also influence purchasing decisions, as players consider the price and the physical space required to store games. Based on ● Theme 3 and ● Theme 5, we infer that individuals from higher SES backgrounds might have more disposable income and leisure time, enabling easier access to these games. Unfortunately, game designers often overlook low-income communities due to perceived lower profitability [34]. However, this perspective can be shortsighted, as it fails to recognize the resourcefulness of these communities.

5.2.1 Implications for Technology-Enhanced Tabletop Games. The inclusion of digital aids in games (● Theme 4) can affect purchasing behaviour, as players may seek games that simplify rule management through technology; however, this consideration tends to be secondary to social and economic factors. Researchers are constantly exploring new ways to make tabletop games more exciting, incorporating technologies like wearables and augmented reality. However, they often overlook the importance of socio-economic status factors [37]. For people with lower incomes (low-SES), these features might be inaccessible due to cost or difficulty of use. Game designers

must prioritize inclusivity by crafting games that are easy to learn and play, even without relying heavily on expensive technology. One approach could involve combining physical game pieces with simple gestures for interaction [87]. Additionally, effective use of music can create an immersive atmosphere in the game's environment [9, 25, 54, 63].

Further research is required to achieve true inclusivity, game companies must prioritize affordability and user-friendly digital interactions. Considerations for factors like age need to be made for gaming experiences created for both children [3] and senior citizens [4]. Digital components, while potentially enriching gameplay, can introduce barriers for those less comfortable with technology. Expensive technology risks creating a divide, where digital integration becomes a novelty rather than a transformative experience for all players [71].

5.3 Factors Affecting Play Targets

Social dynamics, cultural engagement, and resource availability are the primary influences on play decisions in tabletop gaming. Players' past experiences with games (● Theme 1) significantly impact their willingness to replay them, especially in new social contexts. For instance, low socioeconomic status families often adapt familiar games through creative and resourceful means, such as DIY setups, despite financial constraints [89]. Moreover, cultural inclusivity in games (● Theme 2) enhances game play engagement. Games that resonate with players' cultural backgrounds foster meaningful social interactions, increasing the likelihood of participation in group settings.

The social aspect of tabletop gaming (● Theme 3) is central to play decisions. Companionship and group dynamics are at the heart of the gaming experience, as players frequently choose games based on the preferences and availability of their social circle. This shared experience enhances overall enjoyment [19, 62]. While digital tools (● Theme 4) can assist in managing rules [92], they are often seen as optional given that the primary appeal of tabletop gaming lies in face-to-face interactions rather than digital ones [73]. Economic constraints (● Theme 5) also influence play decisions, with space limitations dictating where and how games are played. Players often adapt to smaller environments or alternative surfaces to ensure continued gameplay despite these challenges. Inclusive games promote better engagement and social interaction aligned with cultural interests, reinforcing the idea that social connections significantly enhance the enjoyment of tabletop gaming. Ultimately, the willingness to replay games, especially with new groups, stems from game familiarity.

The social and recreational dimensions of tabletop gaming warrant recognition, underscoring their significance as a means for socializing and enjoying the company of family and friends. Our findings highlight that positive word-of-mouth within gaming communities significantly influences play decisions [68]. Therefore, game companies should prioritize building communities that foster a positive and welcoming environment for players to encourage long-term engagement. However, having companions to play with is a primary motivation for engaging in tabletop games and often requires players to transport their games to a meeting place. Thus, it is essential for game designers to consider factors such as portability (the ability to be easily carried or moved), the complexity of game content, and the diverse preferences of fellow players when conceptualizing and promoting tabletop games. Participants often expressed dissatisfaction with poor game portability, while some highlighted concerns about the complexity of game content, which can involve collectible pieces. These preferences might also reflect financial situations: low-SES families might prioritize a small number of durable, portable games, while high-SES families are more likely to afford new games more frequently. Our study extends this understanding by exploring variations in game preferences based on the player group involved, offering new perspectives to the existing literature [40].

5.3.1 Too Much Idle Time And Not Enough Playing Time. Our findings highlight the critical importance of time in tabletop gaming, echoing findings from Rogerson and Gibbs [69]. To maximize enjoyment during limited play sessions, designers should focus on minimizing idle time—periods when players are waiting without actively participating. This is distinct from strategic thinking time, where players are considering their next moves during opponents’ turns. While some players might remain engaged during the lulls between their turns, others might feel disconnected. This issue disproportionately affects players of varying experience levels. While some use downtime for strategic planning or social interaction, prolonged waiting periods frustrate others. Inexperienced players, who often take longer to make decisions, can feel particularly challenged by excessive waiting, especially when paired with more experienced players who make quick choices. It is vital to differentiate between productive strategic thinking time and unproductive waiting that disrupts gameplay.

One potential solution is automation, which can streamline repetitive tasks like shuffling cards, resolving disputes, or tracking player actions [64, 86, 92]. However, designers must be cautious; excessive automation can detract from the core gameplay experience. For instance, removing opportunities for communication might weaken social connections, a vital aspect of tabletop gaming. The challenge lies in striking a balance where automation enhances gameplay without overshadowing the interpersonal dynamics.

Another possible solution is hybrid experiences that blend digital and physical elements, one innovation in gaming formats catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These formats serve as “social connection architects”, necessitating adaptable design approaches to accommodate evolving player needs [72]. Although participants in our study noted drawbacks in social connection in hybrid formats, further research is warranted to explore remote play dynamics across various socio-economic backgrounds. Investigating matchmaking features within hybrid games could also address challenges related to player availability, presenting an important area for future exploration especially with respect to socio-economic factors (Section 5.2.1).

5.3.2 Presenting Digestible Information. Our findings revealed that players struggle when they encounter situations outside the scope of the written rules [97]. Despite rigorous playtesting, unforeseen issues like game-breaking mechanics or loopholes can emerge over time. These can be difficult for game designers to address post-release because physical rulebooks are inflexible. Compared to their digital counterparts, making updates to physical materials is costly and cumbersome. Players frequently rely on online communities (e.g., Discord, Reddit, BoardGameGeek) for “house rules” to address these complexities [75]. Often, seasoned players act as mentors, passing down knowledge to newcomers, similar to a master and apprentice. This resonates with players accustomed to video game tutorials.

Our findings revealed that players often struggle with complex rulebooks, and suggest that integrating a customized tutorial phase directly into the gameplay experience can help players understand rules that are difficult to explain via text. This could take the form of a gradual introduction to mechanics or an interactive guide for player interaction. The effectiveness would depend on the specific game and player environment. This proposal prioritizes clear and engaging learning experiences, not dumbing down the gameplay itself. Well-designed tutorials can broaden the player base without sacrificing depth or complexity. For example work done by Tu and Durmanova [85], uses electronic sensors to create an intuitive experience, eliminating the need for complex rules. A “tutorial setup phase” could be implemented using digital elements like apps [43] or video tutorials (such as *Dized*⁵ or *Exploding Kittens Tutorial Video*⁶). These tutorials welcome newcomers and

⁵<https://dized.com/>

⁶*Exploding Kittens Tutorial Video* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAkRKuv5Rts>)

🔍 Consideration	📄 Description	🛒 Purchase Targets	🎮 Play Targets
🌱 Game Communities	Promote inclusivity and eliminate discrimination within tabletop gaming communities.	Creates a sense of belonging for all players, regardless of background.	Fosters social connection and friendships, expanding the potential benefits of tabletop gaming.
⌚ Minimize Idle Time	Design games with minimal waiting periods (non-strategic downtime) to maximize player engagement.	Enhances player engagement by keeping everyone actively involved.	Maximizes enjoyment within limited play sessions.
📱 Balanced Companion Apps	Use automation for tedious tasks (e.g. shuffling cards, resolving disputes) but prioritize social interaction.	Reduces time spent on mundane tasks, potentially increasing playtime.	Maintains social interaction, the core of tabletop games, and avoids hindering communication.
📖 Clear & Engaging Tutorials	Integrate a tutorial phase directly into gameplay to address complex rules.	Reduces purchase hesitancy for games perceived as complex.	Improves player learning experience and reduces in-game confusion.
📄 QR Codes	QR codes on game boxes linking to online tutorials and gameplay videos.	Provides easy access to potential game experience before purchase.	Allows players to see game interactions and setup.

Table 4. Table summarizing recommendations for purchase and play targets for tabletop games.

refresh veterans. Players gravitate towards hands-on learning [80], so physical “quick reference cards” can help jog memories during gameplay, although their effectiveness varies across games. Game companies should explore diverse learning methods, as not everyone learns best through reading or videos.

We identified two main key areas for tabletop game marketing improvements that could significantly streamline the buying process for potential players: crafting concise, informative marketing pitches and using QR codes for online tutorials. We suggest a strong preference for QR codes placed strategically on the side of game boxes. This unobtrusive placement avoids compromising the artistic integrity of the box’s front face while offering easy access to valuable resources. By scanning the QR code, potential buyers can be directed to:

- (1) Engaging, step-by-step tutorials that demystify gameplay and showcase the core mechanics clearly and concisely. This can be a game-changer for those hesitant due to rulebook complexity.
- (2) Short, dynamic videos showcasing actual gameplay can be incredibly effective in piquing interest. This allow potential buyers to witness the game in action and get a feel for the overall experience.

This information can significantly reduce purchase hesitancy and lead to more confident buying choices by helping potential buyers to make informed decisions.

Gaming conventions and online marketplaces present a unique challenge: capturing a potential buyer’s attention within a limited timeframe. We suggest that an effective “elevator pitch”⁷ can significantly increase the likelihood of a potential buyer taking the next step, whether visiting a website for further information or making a purchase decision.

⁷An elevator pitch is a brief and persuasive speech for sparking interest in an idea, product, or person. It typically lasts between 30 seconds to 2 minutes—the time it might take to ride an elevator with someone.

6 Limitations

While our sample size limits broad generalizations about cultural influences on purchase and play decisions, it provides valuable insights for future research into socioeconomic status (SES) factors in hybrid tabletop gaming. However, we did not ask our participants to self-report their SES status. Instead, we relied on self-reports of household income and other indicators associated with low-SES [38]. We also used quotes from our semi-structured interviews that focus on purchasing decisions, and our own reflexive lived experiences and identification with marginalized groups also informed our considerations. However, the primary determinant for this study is per-capita income in participant households as a proxy for socioeconomic status, calculated from reported family size. We have not disclosed this information to maintain our participants' anonymity. While standardized to the United States context [32], this measure presents limitations. Per-capita income fails to capture household size or composition, potentially distorting our understanding of individual purchasing power. This limitation might lead to an incomplete analysis of the relationship between SES and tabletop gaming decisions.

We also did not thoroughly explore the relationship between socio-economic status and individual challenges in gaming, nor consider game companies' target audiences, which could influence purchase and play decisions. Therefore, our study opens avenues for future research in two key areas that could reveal essential relationships between tabletop game consumption and design:

- In-depth explorations of how SES factors influence gaming challenges and preferences.
- Examinations of game companies' target audience strategies to provide a fuller picture of purchase and playing decisions. For example, while serious tabletop games may have a niche appeal, their educational value for specific audiences warrants further investigation [7, 29, 35, 50].

We recognize that a quantitative purchase decision involvement scale would have strengthened our analysis of satisfaction [57]. However, adapting this scale to tabletop gaming decisions poses challenges. Future research should investigate how specific player traits correlate with motivations for tabletop game engagement.

We conducted our interviews during the COVID-19 lockdowns, which might have influenced people's current decisions and motives to play and purchase tabletop games. This period presents a fascinating case study of how social restrictions impacted tabletop gaming. We encourage future research to explore the long-term effects of these trends to provide a more comprehensive picture of the tabletop game market.

Additionally, we also conducted our interviews solely on English platforms, and primarily with participants from North America. This resulted in the exclusion of non-English speakers and individuals who do not use these platforms, and limited the representation of cultural backgrounds. As we shift toward a hybrid medium in tabletop games, further research should investigate game culture in these environments for more meaningful interactions. Emerging barriers and factors might arise when merging analog games with digital technology. These design considerations contribute to existing research on hybrid tabletop games, providing essential foundations for inclusive and respectful game design that targets diverse game cultures [42].

7 Future Work

Future work could focus on exploring digital rulebooks as they have the potential to offer a variety of gameplay experiences. Additionally, Games User Research (GUR) should investigate the use of hybrid and/or digital tools to help players learn how to play the game, and how these tools impact engagement and social interaction. GUR could also design adaptive tabletop games to cater to specific play styles.

Another area of future work is using affective game elements, such as physiological measures and sensors, to explain game rules to players. This could lead to the creation of innovative game experiences. Furthermore, future design considerations could include the use of augmented reality scenarios where players interact with game elements in a virtual environment. However, it is important to keep in mind accessibility constraints for low-SES families. Game culture is shaped by all players, regardless of their socioeconomic status. While low-SES families may face limitations in terms of accessibility, this should not restrict game researchers and designers from exploring new ideas and possibilities. Rather, it highlights the need to be aware of socioeconomic status's impact on the game experience.

8 Conclusion

This study explores the factors influencing tabletop game purchase and play decisions through a reflexive thematic analysis of 20 participant interviews. We identified five key themes: *childhood experiences* (● Theme 1), *cultural influences* (● Theme 2), *play opportunities* (● Theme 3), *gameplay hindrances* (● Theme 4), and *game perception* (● Theme 5). Our findings stress the significance of SES and game culture, particularly for low-SES families and intergenerational play. Our main contributions of this paper are:

- (1) Key themes related to players' purchase and play decisions for tabletop games, synthesized from semi-structured interviews about game playing and purchasing decisions (Table 3);
- (2) Design considerations to improve player experiences given gameplay hindrances (Table 4—Play Targets); and
- (3) Actionable strategies for game companies and designers to market their tabletop games effectively (Table 4—Purchase Targets).

Our findings and insights highlight the importance of inclusivity and cultural awareness in tabletop game design. Alongside our promotion of greater accessibility, we advocate for a more culturally conscious approach and contribute to the ongoing conversation around diversity and representation in games. Our findings emphasize the need for game designers to take into account the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their players, crafting games that are not only enjoyable but also socially responsible, reflecting the cultural richness of their audience.

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