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What *Songo* board game can teach us about culture and literacies

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Abstract: Contending that gameplay is a constellation of literacy practices could imply that video/digital games are the only spaces where players engage in literacy practices. Literacies in game environments have mainly been evidenced by video/digital game research. Literature on board game literacies is still scarce. This paper investigates literacy practices in the gameplay of the board game *Songo* and demonstrates that culture shapes literacies.

Introduction

The New London Group multiliteracies theory has reframed and advanced our understanding of literacy in various contexts. Multiliteracies theory explains that there are multiple ways of communicating and brings to light cultural and linguistic (Perry, 2012; Sang, 2017). Game research has used multiliteracies as a theory and framework to investigate, explain, and demonstrate the literacy practices players engage in during gameplay (Ellison & Solomon, 2018). Yet, this research leaves out board games, and specifically African board games such as *Songo*. This study engages the literature from a multiliteracies perspective to start uncovering literacy practices in *Songo* (Figure 1) and shows the cultural situatedness of these literacies.

Literature shows board games as learning spaces. Board games enhance deep learning (Azizan et al., 2018) and facilitate learning of various science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) content (Bayeck, 2020). Computational thinking (Berland & Duncan, 2016); collaboration, scaffolding, and mathematical thinking are other practices board gameplayers engage in (Tsarava, Moeller & Ninaus, 2018). *Songo,* a board game played in Cameroon. It is a competitive strategic game with two rows played by two people, with 70 /seeds^2, equally divided between players and consecutively drop in clockwise direction in the 14holes that make up the game (Bayeck, 2019).



Figure 1. *Songo* board game

Theoretical perspectives and Methods

Multiliteracies serves as a framework to examine literacies in *Songo* board gameplay. Using video recordings of gameplay, this microethnography employs interaction analysis as discussed by Erickson (2006) to investigate the different modes of communication employed by players during gameplay. Therefore, this analysis will include language and other forms of expression (e.g., body movements, or gestures) occurring during gameplay in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Participants were adult players.

Study Context

On the cultural spectrum, Cameroon identifies more with collectivist cultures (Legare &Nielsen, 2015). Cameroon has two official languages, French and English, as a result of the colonial past. However, these official languages interact with local languages. Different languages such as pidgin-English or Camerounism, peculiar to Cameroon have emerged from this interaction (Nkwain, 2014). Camerounism draws on local languages and distance itself from standard French (Biloa, 2012). The communal approach to life and ways of doing facilitates interactions among the multiple ethnic groups that make up the country (Bayeck, 2019). The city of Yaoundé, where the study was conducted, is multiethnic, located in the French speaking part of the country, and has the Ewondo ethnic group as first dwellers. Interestingly, the literacy practices discussed below echo the complex cultural make up of Yaoundé, and Cameroon

Findings

Findings from this study indicate that meaning making is shaped and informed by the cultural context. The following paragraphs highlight the interplay of language use and collaboration with the cultural context.

Language Use. The language used during *Songo* gameplay in Yaoundé, Cameroon was informed by the cultural context. As shown in the excerpt below, in a game opposing Caulet and Abi, language was a combination of local and former colonizers' language, that is, French.

Excerpt 1.

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Caulet : tu auras les pourrissons (plays the second hole on his right)
[You will have pourrissons]
Abi : qui pourrissons ?
[*Who pourrissons?]*
Caulet: tu auras les pourrissons (plays the third hole on his right)
[you will have the pourrissons]

The exchange between both players exemplifies the use of a language that is peculiar to Cameroon. Words like "pourrissons" is the combination of the French verb "pourrir *[to rot*] and the suffix "ssons" which is a form for French verbs conjugated in the first plural person of the present tense. "Pourrissons" is used here as a noun to mean seeds with no strategic importance because they cannot lead to victory. Similarly, "bricole and bricoler *[tinkering*]" is a camerounism that means not doing well or succeeding in the activity one is engaged in.

Culturally-informed collaboration: The cultural practices explain audience participation and collaboration with players during the game. The excerpt below illustrates interaction between players and the audience in a game opposing Nti to Ngibi. Nti, in difficulty, benefits from his collaboration with Pierro an audience member.

Excerpt 3
Pierro: [to Nti] ta case a combien?
[How many seeds do you have in your hole]
Nti: (counts seeds in the third hole on his right)
Pierro: c'est combien?
[How many seeds?]
Ngibi: [to Nti] il faut qu'on te montre
[They need to show you]
Pierro: 23 (gazing the board game)
[23 seeds]
Nti: (plays the fourth hole on his right)
Pierro : [to Nti] eh, pourquoi tu as mis 24 ? Heureusement que lui aussi il est comme ça
[Eh, why did you make it 24? Fortunately, he is not that good]
Nti: [to Pierro] j'ai normalement 16 (showing seeds in his hands)
[I currently have 16 seeds]
Pierro: non va comme ça Nti (points to a hole on the right of Nti)
[No play like this Nti]

Conclusion

Findings in this study show that literacy practices in board gameplay are culturally situated. The field of New Literacies Studies has contributed to our understanding of the cultural situatedness of literacy. However, it only focuses on communities' peculiar use of reading and writing skills (Mills, 2010). This study contributes to research on board games by focusing on literacies. It highlights the influence of culture on literacy practices in games. Game researchers are yet to extensively explored the role of culture in shaping literacies in gameplay. These findings will inform game studies and advance our understanding of meaning making in various cultural contexts.

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