

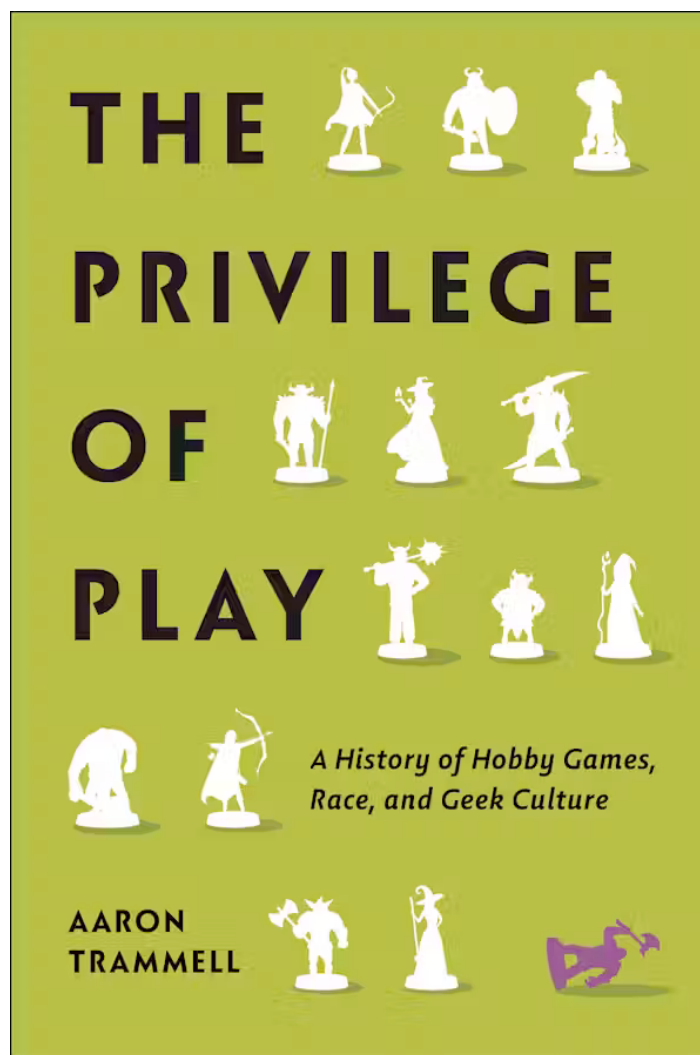
Rezension zu

Aaron Trammell: The Privilege of Play. A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture.

New York: NYU Press 2023. ISBN: 9781479818402. 240 Seiten, 30,00 \$

von **Stefan Sulzenbacher**

Why is gaming central to recent US culture wars? What are historical predecessors of Gamergate rhetoric, claiming games could (and should) be viewed as a purely apolitical refuge? These questions drive Aaron Trammell's deep dive into the history of US board game communities. The book is part of a twofold research project pursued in two separate monographs published the same year. *Repairing Play. A Black Phenomenology* (Trammell 2023) takes a Black reconstructionist approach, questioning theories that frame play only as positive and joyful, neglecting its oppressive potential. In contrast, *The Privilege of Play* shows how US board-game-related geek culture is historically tied to white male privilege. To investigate this claim, Trammell focuses on white geek masculinity, which – similar to nerd masculinity (Kohout 2022) – is defined as an ambivalent subject position that results from experiences of exclusion and highly mediated alternative performances of dominant masculinity through board games. As the study shows, gaming networks entangled with these self-declared outsiders functioned as white male enclaves that maintained autonomy by seeming dull, boring, and frivolous to non-participants, while providing mainly invisible spaces for intergenerational skill sharing and knowledge transfer, sustaining networks of privilege over decades. Presented in three parts (Beginnings, Networks, Mainstream) with two subchapters each, the chronological genealogy covers the fascination with model trains in the early twentieth century, the rise of wargames and role-playing games in the 1960s and 1970s, and developments since the adoption of digital platforms at the turn of the millennium.



The starting chapter reconstructs how U.S. model railroad communities both anticipated and structurally shaped modern board game culture. Trammell centers on MIT's Tech Model Railroad Club, often seen as the cradle of gaming and hacking due the programming of *Spacewar!* (1962) by some club members. Opposing dominant narratives, Trammell reframes the club through white male privilege and positions its members primarily as hobbyists, not just hackers and engineers. Highlighting model-railroading culture, he shows how access to electricity, wealth, and leisure tied participation since its beginnings to race and class. Mid-20th-century suburbanization and white flight expanded the hobby through dedicated stores and magazines such as *Model Railroader*. These codified the consumer as white and male while aligning the pastime with rugged Old West imaginaries, which depicted trains as the pinnacle of commerce, technology, and civilization. This homogenous, self-styled outsider culture could also be

read as geek version of suburban masculinization, simultaneously promoted by *Playboy* magazine (Preciado 2014) – a parallel Trammell does not consider, but would be worth further exploration. In sum, the section shows how model train hobbyists built infrastructural and discursive networks later inherited by board game communities.

The second chapter examines how white supremacy in hobby games was fostered through networks of privilege consolidated by *Avalon Hill General*, a magazine devoted to war games published by *Avalon Hill* such as *Gettysburg* (1958), *Afrika Korps* (1964) and *Origins of World War II* (1971). Trammell highlights the intergenerationality of its editors and readers – teenagers, military cadets, strategists, retired generals – and argues *Avalon Hill's* simulationist design ethos was structurally compatible with white supremacist ideology, offering ludomedia tools to imagine alternative histories. Heroic portrayals of Confederate and Nazi generals on the magazine's cover and revisionist articles further signaled such sympathies. As throughout the book, Trammell notes discursive continuities, explaining how current debates often legitimize enabling players to take on the role of Nazi Germany as part of the simulationist tradition of wargaming *Avalon Hill* pioneered.

Chapter three looks at fan discourses surrounding *Diplomacy* (1961). Analyzing fanzines of comparatively progressive play-by-mail groups, which discussed safe white activist topics (e.g. environmentalism and free speech), Trammell shows how these communities embraced the politics of statecraft and war as serious play while simultaneously disregarding civil rights and Black activist discourses, thus perpetuating white privilege within the hobby. He further links the zine infrastructure to patterns of white suburbanization, mapping publication sites against housing policies to reveal alignment with post-segregationist politics. These networks adopted an "us-versus-the-world" mentality, reinforcing libertarian isolationism. By separating play from politics while engaging in simulated statecraft and war, such communities preserved the racialized privilege embedded in hobbyist culture.

Through an analysis of the *Dungeons & Dragons* (1973) fanzine *Alarums & Excursions*, the fourth chapter illustrates how a libertarian mindset was also remediated by the mechanics of grassroots game design. Trammell argues that sexuality became a key axis of trust and camaraderie, illustrated by debates over homebrew classes such as the Damsel and the Courtesan. The highly informative study of these seemingly sex-positive attempts to quantify interpersonal relationships and to develop "a game mechanics of love, instead of war" (p. 119) shows how consent and sexuality were negotiated in the design of the character classes. While these designs reproduced heteronormative and misogynist tropes, community discourse also negotiated and, at times, resisted toxic masculinity. Rule mastery – central to geek masculinity – could grant limited inclusion to people formerly left out, such as female and Black players. The chapter situates these dynamics within a libertarian, individualist ethos, showing how game mechanics themselves mediated gender, consent and belonging.

Examining recent cultural shifts toward a more diverse and inclusive board game community, the fifth chapter attributes these changes to the rise of online platforms like *The Forge* and *Board Game Geek*, which centralized discussions once scattered across fanzines. While these digital spaces accelerated creative and consumerist dynamics, they also perpetuated traditional white male cultural norms. This digital update of communities was accompanied by a neoliberal reorientation away from prior economic autonomy. Game-related practices like reviewing and event organizing, once unpaid and anonymous, now offer economic opportunities within a precarious, crowdfunded sector shaped by gig economy demands for personal branding and social media presence. Trammell concludes digital platforms disrupted old, exclusive networks, enabling broader crowd engagement to influence representation and participation in the hobby.

The final chapter explores economic and political entanglements within contemporary board game communities by showing how a more diverse and politically engaged generation of designers,

publishers, and reviewers challenges the long-held belief that games should *remain* apolitical. Progressive networks like *Shut Up & Sit Down* and *No Pun Included*, alongside politically outspoken designers such as Elizabeth Hargrave (*Wingspan* 2019) and Eric Lang (*Blood Rage* 2015), repeatedly address intersections of board games with colonialism and racism. A study of a 2020 conversation between Lang and Tom Vassel from the self-declared apolitical network *Dice Tower* highlights frictions between progressive voices and established white gatekeepers. In summary, Trammell shows how technologically savvy and ethically conscious creators form uneasy alliances with neoliberal structures to promote diversity as the hobby's future, yet still face resistance rooted in longstanding power and taste hierarchies.

This book is the first to present a critical genealogy of board games and their communities in the USA with a dedicated sensibility for structural and ideological white supremacy and their intersectional entanglement with politics of class and gender. To accurately reconstruct this history, Trammell employs well-established qualitative methods, such as discourse and representational analysis, alongside interviews and innovative quantitative methods. Of note are steps to visualize networks of privilege by comparing zip codes of hobby game stores and board game fanzines with infrastructural and demographic developments of the time, such as the expansion of electricity networks and white flight. Although the sections are detailed, a sense of lack arises, given that neither the 1980s nor the 1990s have a devoted chapter. From a broader game studies perspective, this is unfortunate, as these decades saw not only the rise of videogame consoles that challenged then-established media of home entertainment, but also the popularization of intricate 'Eurogame' mechanics through influential titles such as *El Grande* (1995), *Settlers of Catan* (1995), and *Tigris & Euphrates* (1997). And while the study provides fascinating insights into

the historical coproduction of geek culture and networks of white male privilege, the argument becomes speculative at key points with phrases such as "we can assume" (p. 46) and "we can infer" (p. 104) being common. From a Foucauldian perspective on discursive historical formations, this seems to stem from an overly empiricist approach, driven by causal thinking that leads to attempts of meticulously categorizing the phenomena in terms of clear cause-and-effect-distinctions. Within the framework of the argument, such instances of speculation seem like unforced methodological flaws, especially since the discursive and material analysis already paints a convincing picture of hobby gaming history, even without attributing every development to specific actors. Nevertheless, its extensive timeframe and heterogeneous objects of analysis make the book an informative read and a valuable resource for researchers interested in the history of board games and their entanglement with intersectional power dynamics that form the subjectivities of their players. Complementary, I highly recommend Trammell's shorter publication "Repairing Play", which takes a more conceptual approach to these questions and (re)considers theories of play from a Black perspective.

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