

## **Kiribati Game Development: Cultural Transmission, Communities of Creation, and Marketing**

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### **Abstract**

The people of Kiribati play a broad assortment of card and board games. The game rules show several innovations that were made outside the purview of the games' manufacturers. The presence and regional development of proprietary board games illustrates product development scenarios that are counterintuitive to marketers. Using game boards and game rules collected in Kiribati, this study offers an explanation on how game development in Micronesia can be understood using cultural transmission theory by locating the Republic of Kiribati both geographically and economically within the Pacific Islands economies and their communities and within their own anthropological context. The findings emphasize the importance of understanding regional and country-specific cultural practices when applying principles of product development, placement and distribution.

**Keywords:** cultural evolution; gaming; Micronesia; play; Tarawa

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## Cultural Evolution and Communities of Creation

In a study by Hirschman (2009, p. 451) on the role of marketing in cultural evolution, she identified three topics of inquiry that could potentially benefit from an evolutionary perspective: “(1) companies as families/tribes, (2) reciprocity versus opportunism in company-to-company and company-to-consumer relationships, and (3) brands as social markers.” In her study, she speaks of the “transfer of information, products, and services across generations and over millennia” and of “*intergenerational cultural transmission* within human groups, which created strong selective pressures for social learning capabilities” (Hirschman, 2009, p. 445).

Colbert and Courchesne (2012) highlight cultural transmission in relation to family, peer and media influence and how they shaped the evolution of consumer behaviour in the arts. They argue that contemporary consumers come from a plurality of social worlds and that this dynamic requires a rethinking of marketing.

This integration of ideas of cultural transmission theory and evolution into marketing processes is of particular relevance when considering board and card games. Games, as opposed to play in general, have a long history of being both products commercially developed using marketing principles (Woods, 2012) and being cultural practices that predate the commercial game industry by millennia (Finkel, 2007; Schädler, 2007). The understanding of a cultural practice and its mode of transmission not only informs marketing strategies for particular culture groups, but also refines our general understanding of the cultural transmission of games of which only few studies exist.

In a study on cultural variation in Africa, Guglielmino et al. (1995) argued that games follow a vertical transmission principle, where they are mainly taught within families and from one generation to the next. If this transmission mode is dominant across cultures, then games will not easily transmit across large areas of space, in particular across cultural and linguistic borders. In a study of Near Eastern board games in antiquity, de Voogt et al. (2013, p. 1728) found for certain games:

that expansive areas and long periods of time do not necessarily change the physical appearance of a game board. These games, therefore, were transmitted with high fidelity and only minor subsequent innovation or experimentation, despite the passing of dozens of generations and transmission events across cultural, linguistic and enemy borders.

Other games, however, showed “a distribution confined by the expansion of a single empire, and subsequent changes when these borders were crossed.” (de Voogt et al., 2013, p. 1728) Although two different cultural transmission mechanisms, in each case board games showed a remarkable amount of stasis over time, while changes in appearance were only found in some but not in all cases where borders of empires were crossed.

Groups that span different cultures, languages or geographic regions may seem akin to the concept of consumer tribes as it is used in tribal marketing (Shankar, Cova, & Kozinets, 2007). This concept, originally used to describe postmodern counter-culture movements, states that members are related by “shared feelings and (re)appropriated signs”, while membership is “ephemeral” and can be of several such tribes (Cova & Cova 2002, p. 6). In this way, a player could be part of several groups, identify with the passions of that group as well as leave that group as membership is not defined by “kinship or dialect” (Cova & Cova 2002, p. 6). Although such player groups may exist today and can be construed as postmodern counter-culture movements, for instance in online gaming communities, the concept is inappropriate for groups in antiquity or outside this counter-culture realm since in those cases the games are considered part of society. Even though the players are found across different societies or culture groups, each of these societies has appropriated the games as their own. Players are not seen as alien to or distant from society even though their peers may reside in other regions or contrasting culture groups.

While perhaps not consumer tribes, groups of players could be adequately captured by the model of “communities of creation” as defined by Sawhney and Prandelli (2000) and further developed by Sawhney, Verona and Prandelli (2005) for internet communities. Their ideas go back to the general observation in strategic marketing that companies should collaborate with consumers to create value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Thomke & von Hippel, 2002) and ultimately through product innovation (Dahan & Hauser, 2002). They suggest a mechanism for managing knowledge in companies for the purpose of innovation where intellectual property rights are owned by the entire community. This relates to Hirschman’s suggestion to see companies as families or tribes for which cultural transmission theory could become relevant. Indeed, innovation in games that occurred in history are rarely attributable to individual players as the success of the innovation is dependent on the players group that needs to test and accept such a change before anything changes within the community of players. It is for this reason that stasis in board games is particularly common and expectedly so in cultural transmission theory as this cultural trait is shared before it can be transmitted. In other words, innovations may seem simple to make, but they are particularly difficult to introduce across a large players group. As a follow-up to communities of creation, Coakes and Smith (2007)

introduced communities of innovation that are dedicated to the support of innovation. However, their concept runs counter to our understanding of board and card games in history as the players are especially conservative and are not playing *in order to* innovate.

In sum, board and card games show a remarkable stasis throughout history while at the same time crossing cultural, linguistic and geographic borders. The players of these games form groups that are part of their respective societies as opposed to forming a counter-culture movement. They act as communities of creation when it comes to innovations as it is not up to an individual to change the rules of the game whether they are online communities or not. It requires a change of practice of all players, which makes these games especially conservative.

The development of proprietary games started with the industrial revolution (e.g., Hofer, 2003; Whitehill, 1999) and these board and card games only behave marginally differently. The written rules suggest an innate conservatism when it comes to rules while the manufacturer or producer acts as a dominant force to introduce the game to as many consumers as possible.

But occasionally, the producer loses control over this process and games are introduced without the conservative influence of written rules or even without the sale of the physical board and pieces. In such cases the game and its players still follow the dynamics outlined above where groups of players determine the history and development of the game and where the game may cross multiple borders to extend its reach. Its distribution commonly becomes more involved and more extensive than what a manufacturer could accomplish, but at the same time there is no profit to be gained as the players have also taken the manufacturing, with the possible exception of playing cards (which are rarely produced locally), into their own hands.

It is rare that a proprietary game becomes a “classic”. Companies such as Parker Brothers (Orbanes, 2004) ultimately aspire to such success and have geared their marketing with that aim in mind. In the golden age of board games (Hofer, 2003) several games in the United States achieved that status but the manufacturer kept control and profited from its triumph. Leaving aside other gaming cultures, such as video games, that are beyond the scope of this study, the Pacific Islands, specifically the people of Kiribati, show that board and card games can become especially popular, but without profiting the manufacturer. This process of diffusion and innovation then becomes close to what is expected in cultural transmission theory and in communities of creation. Since players of Kiribati present a contemporary example, the relevance of cultural transmission theory in understanding the distribution and development of a

product, in other words understanding marketing, is highlighted in a geographical context that has received little attention in the literature.

While cultural transmission theory gives insight into why stasis and innovation may take place, literature on product innovation has conceptualized how the process of new product design (NPD) is supposed to take place. Commonly described as a five-step process, it includes ideation, concept development, product design, product testing, and product introduction (Ulrich & Eppinger, 2003; Urban & Hauser, 1993). Sawhney et al. (2005) contrasted NPD in the virtual environment, but in both cases one may argue that the process is too formulaic for players in Kiribati. The purpose of this study is foremost to show *that* product innovation takes place outside of the manufacturer's reach, while the process seems to show that product introduction is *followed* by product testing with incremental innovations that require only limited ideation and concept development in the initial stages.

## Methods

This research is part of a larger project that aims to understand the cultural transmission of board games both for contemporary games and for games in antiquity. For this purpose, Kiribati was visited together with the Marshall Islands in the months of December 2017 and January 2018 with approval of the Institutional Review Board of the American Museum of Natural History in New York and with research permits for each country.

Board games were studied using three lines of inquiry. In the first, game boards, which are either privately or communally owned, are located on the islands. The owners were then interviewed about the use and history of their boards. In addition, locations and occasions where game play is taking place, were sought. During the Christmas holidays, the islands that offered several occasions with groups of people engaged in play, were visited. In these cases, observations of game rules and game settings were central with limited occasions for questions in order not to interrupt the players. Finally, in either situation and if the opportunity presented itself, it was helpful to participate in play to gain a detailed understanding of the game and its strategies. All three of these approaches were used in Kiribati but limited to the islands of North and South Tarawa.

This approach cannot answer the question of why people play games, a question that has eluded scholars for over a century (Sutton-Smith, 1997), but may illustrate the context of play in Kiribati society. It documents the often abstract rules of card and board games that in the case of Kiribati, have also been attested in neighbouring

Micronesian countries.

## **The Regional Understanding of Kiribati Board Games**

Board games facilitate interaction like wine and feasting (Crist et al., 2016), but unlike sports, they do not “rely on the circulation of people, media and capital for their endurance” (West, 2014). In Tarawa at least nine card games were found to be popular as well as the board games generally referred to as Sorry!, Checkers, Ludo and Snakes & Ladders. They are a popular choice of interaction, but even though general conversation may also take place, during more complex or competitive games conversations are limited to strategy. When people play games, they are commonly doing so at the exclusion of other social activities such as feasting, drinking or conversing. Other games, such as Chinese Checkers and Carrom, were also attested but the complexity of manufacturing these boards precluded a wider distribution. It suggests that board and card games are specifically chosen for their accessibility, requiring few people and materials, in a society where extensive communal interactions facilitate their advance.

The game of Sorry! is an American proprietary game patented in 1934, that is currently not much known outside the United States. It is a version of Parcheesi but instead of dice, playing cards are used to propel the pieces forward. Ludo and Snakes & Ladders were first marketed in the United Kingdom, based on games found in India during colonial times. They are often found on each side of one board and introduced widely and cheaply across the world on double-sided printed sheets of paper or on plastic versions made in China. The U.S. American version of Ludo is called Parcheesi and has a number of elements that distinguish it clearly from Ludo, mainly the introduction of a second die and an alteration of the board. Similarly, the American version of Snakes & Ladders is called Shoots & Ladders with obvious graphic distinctions as to distinguish it from the UK trademark games. Ludo, Parcheesi and Sorry! are historically related games but with different markets, either British or American. Similarly, Snakes & Ladders and Shoots & Ladders differ very little apart from the markets they are reaching (Murray, 1952; Parlett, 1995; Whitehill, 1998).

The Marshall Islands have a strong link with the United States both politically, for example, the Marshallese island of Kwajalein is used as a military base by the US, and economically, for example, they are using the US dollar as local currency and are allowed to work in the US. Their stores are supplied with multiple American proprietary games that include Sorry! as well as Candyland, Monopoly and others. In contrast, Kiribati is part of the British Commonwealth and uses the Australian dollar as currency with cars driving on the left side of the road. Their stores mainly

have Australian goods rather than American ones, including, for instance, Marmite and white beans as well as Snakes & Ladders. The historical ties and continued interchange between the Marshall Islands and Kiribati have led to a cross-over when it comes to games so that I-Kiribati reported having bought the game of Sorry! on their main island Tarawa while Marshall Islanders have bought Ludo on their main island of Majuro, suggesting that these games were introduced by their neighbours. Although outside the scope of this study, based on interviews with players of the games, this interchange of players and playing materials seems to include the countries of Nauru, Tuvalu and at least part of the Federate States of Micronesia. They are likely part of more general cultural exchanges.

Within Kiribati, the exchanges of players transcend the nuclear family targeted in the marketing strategies for the United States. The I-Kiribati have close ties with extended families, often living together in large households. Family keep in close contact across villages and islands suggesting a larger players' base than in the United States. Within small communities, women are known to gather in the quiet hours to play cards for stakes (Kirion, 1985). They do so at the fish market or near their own homes, significantly extending the players' network. In addition, villagers make use of a *mwaneaba* or meeting house both for socializing and for decision-making at the local level (Kazama, 2001). Tabokai (1985, p. 184) already noted that "In its social functions, the *maneaba* now accommodates such new forms of entertainment as movies, bingo and 'island nights' with string bands." Churches also feature *mwaneaba* (*mwaneaba n te aro*) so that communities, for instance, during Christmas and New Year's, may congregate and stay overnight at a large *mwaneaba* on the island, a place where several board and card games can be witnessed during the quiet hours (see Figure 1). These examples of interchanges between peer-groups explain for an important part how the popularity of games may travel across families, villages and islands without any governing marketing strategy from a games company.



Figure 1. Four men Playing *Kanetita* in a Church *Mwaneaba* on South Tarawa, 2017.



Source: Author

## The Games of Kiribati

The games of Kiribati provide a unique case study of contemporary transmission of games since their appropriation is not guided by the games industry. On the contrary, the games that are present in the islands have not been marketed other than that they are sometimes available in stores often without accompanying playing rules. Kiribati players rarely own commercially produced games, although these are not entirely absent from the islands. Boards are commonly homemade, drawn on plywood and using coral or stones as gaming implements. The tools available determine the colour scheme of the board and usually only one or two colours are distinguishable. The game of checkers can be found throughout Micronesia next to Ludo and Sorry!, the other wide-spread board games on Kiribati. Ludo refers to two games, one is the commercial game Ludo and the other is Snakes & Ladders. The popularity of the latter is much higher so that nowadays Ludo mainly refers to Snakes & Ladders. The game of Checkers is mostly played by men while children are more commonly seen playing Ludo. Most people in Kiribati, however, are familiar with Sorry! and this is by far the most popular game on the islands.

In contrast with board games, card decks are all imported using French suits (i.e., Hearts, Diamonds, Clubs and Spades) as is common both in the United States and the British Commonwealth. Games played with cards include many recognizable rule sets, sometimes with their English names, such as <kanetita> as it is spelled in Kiribati (pronounced *kanesta*) “canasta” and <rami> “rummy”. At least nine popular



card games were documented to which a series of solitaire games can be added as well. Most card games are played with points and often use small stakes (twenty cents) as opposed to board games, which are only rarely played with stakes. Although men, women and children can be seen playing cards both together and separated by gender and/or age, it seems that elderly women are particularly adept at playing a wide variety of games for stakes. It should be noted that none of the card game rules are written down and that it is no mean feat for any player to be able to distinguish the highly diverse point scales and playing rules within the nine game rule sets that were collected. All Kiribati people that were asked about playing cards confirmed, however, that the games are especially popular together with the abovementioned board games. In addition, although some did not or no longer owned a playing board, they will readily make one if desired while card decks, imported from China (Shanghai), are widely available even on the outer islands of the country.

From the perspective of cultural transmission theory, there are a few expectations. In relatively small communities only a small number of games can be supported. In other words, it is difficult to play so many games all the time unless the community is large enough. It would require an unusual popularity of these games. When games are introduced the playing rules are expected to remain static or simplified to facilitate the retention of diversity. If they become more complicated, then the distribution of that innovation is thought to be limited both over time and across peer groups unless frequent contact and players' interactions are present. The situation of the Kiribati board and card games require the assumption that the games are not only popular but that players from different groups, islands or island groups regularly interact and play each of these games at regular intervals. The complex innovations found in Kiribati illustrate why this should be the case: The relatively complex rules of Canasta were adjusted by the Kiribati players. Since the rules are not written, it is expected that some rules were lost and this would explain, for instance, why not all rules for the black 3s were followed. But the point system was made more, not less, elaborate mostly to complicate the possibility of creating an initial meld in the game. A minimum of 50 points for an initial meld gradually increasing to 90 and 120 depending on one's overall score (1500 and 3000) in the original game was changed to 120 as an initial meld going up to 140 and 160, with lower overall scores (1000 and 2000) that prompted the increase. When encountering four men playing this game, it was found that their initial meld was 180 going up to 200 and 220 indicating that this was not based on confusion concerning the original scores but that players are intentionally introducing a complication in the game. The rules for taking the stock were also made more difficult so that jokers were not allowed for taking a stock and three instead of two matching cards would be necessary when a joker or 2 was added to the pile.

Although these details may sound obscure to those unfamiliar with Canasta, a game that would require several pages of explanation, what is relevant is the process of making a game more complex. Rather than simplifying the rules so that they are more easily memorized and transferred, the game's popularity led to a number of changes that adapted the rules to local tastes. Although one may speculate why these specific changes were made, it is noted that some games, such as Sorry!, became more competitive while others, such as Canasta, adopted rules that leave winning more to chance. The playing rules were subsequently attested in North and South Tarawa, among different players' groups including groups with different age and gender.

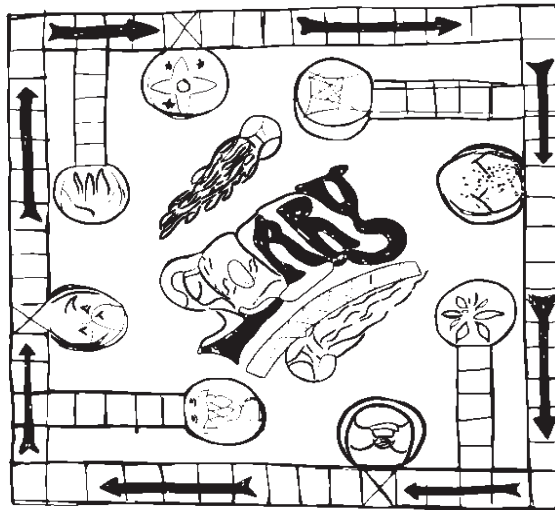
The same process can also be illustrated with their board games. The game of Sorry! is homemade but requires a rather elaborate playing board. It includes so-called slides (represented as large arrows), a specific number of squares, a separate track to one's home square and fields for placing the pieces at the beginning of the game (see Figure 2). The slides have different colours on the commercial version of the game but these are not present on Kiribati boards, hence the slides are used by all pieces instead of those of one colour. The pieces are moved by a draw of the cards but in Kiribati each player is dealt five cards. On each turn a player chooses which card to play (McLeod, 2011).

This innovation turns the game of Sorry! from a simple race game based mostly on chance into a much more strategic game. The values of the cards are identical to those in the original game despite their complexity. Instead more rules are added especially since the game in Kiribati is exclusively played with partners who sit across from each other, only an advanced option in the original game. A playing piece landing on an occupied square of a partner or yourself may move the two playing pieces as one. When such a combination of playing pieces reaches the home of one of them, the two pieces need to be separated, which can only be done with the seven card. Again, the details may escape those who are not familiar with the game but it should be clear that again the complex game board and the detailed rules were not simplified but extended by the Kiribati players. Finally, the game of Sorry!, originally marketed to be played by families and children, is particularly popular among adults in Kiribati whereby men were found to be especially skilled in playing the game fast and strategically.

A final example of a different kind is a Sorry! board (see Figure 3) that was found on Tarawa South with a game that according to the owner was already played on the outer island of Abaiang in the early 1950s. It shows the game of Sorry! surrounded by two more tracks with Snakes and Ladders. Pieces were moved using cards as in

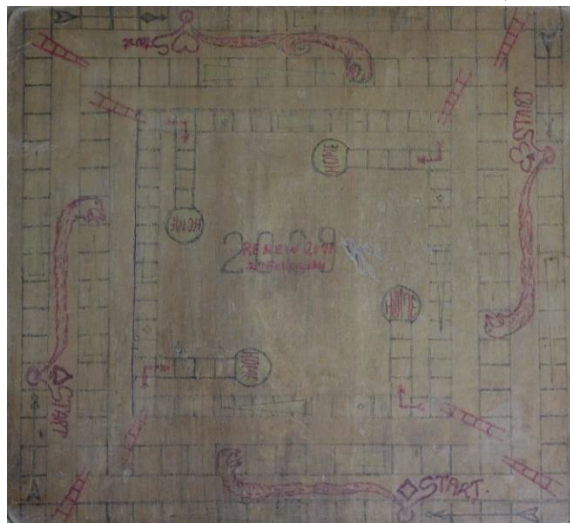
Sorry! but cards 6 and 9, absent in Sorry!, had been added with additional rules and exceptions. In other words, two proprietary games with complex board designs had been integrated into a new board with rules that had minor adaptations to play the full game. This game did not conquer the rest of Tarawa and despite its suggested long history on Abaiang, it was not recognized by most players on Tarawa. Innovation, therefore, was successful only for a limited players' group.

Figure 2. Outline Based on a Kiribati Design of a Sorry! Board. Note the decoration of the 'start' and 'home' fields, the absence of colour for the slides (arrows) and the decorative English name of the game in the centre.



Source: Drawing by Kayla Younkin, 2018.

Figure 3. Homemade Board Design that Includes a Sorry! Track Combined with Tracks used in Snakes & Ladders. South Tarawa, Kiribati, 2017.



Source: Author

Cultural transmission theory allows for local innovations, but sustaining such innovations requires either a particularly large community, organized play or, in the case of Kiribati, remarkable popularity. High popularity and players across peer groups interacting, as opposed to only families, then explains how these rules are consistent across the islands and for several decades. McLeod (2011) mentions similar rules found in Nauru and Tuvalu and this close contact between the islands was confirmed both on Kiribati and the Marshall Islands when it came to checkers. The community of players made innovations, which consistently made the games more complex, mostly to increase the tension in the game by complicating the finish rather than just adding possible strategies.

In the United States and elsewhere, the games are consistently marketed as “family” games. As soon as such games are played across peer groups the demand for innovation increases, particularly when the game is then played among adults. Implementation of a more accommodating marketing strategy that would mimic this structure can be found with the proprietary game “Settlers of Catan” where the players actively communicate with the board game producers to influence the kind of innovations that were brought to the market. In the words of Hirschman, they acted as “family” of the company in that case with “reciprocity in company-consumer relations”. But rather than communities of creation, the Settlers of Catan players are seen as “brand communities” (Ouwensloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). In the case of Kiribati, the game producers are absent in the development of the game. The opportunity of a company-consumer relation was not identified and since the games are now homemade, the market has been lost to players who have taken over the process of development.

### **Implications for Cultural Transmission Theory and Marketing**

The study of games in cultural transmission theory has largely focused on game boards in archaeology (de Voogt et al., 2013). Changes in board shape and configuration then allude to possible changes in rules. The Kiribati examples suggest that the basic assumptions and predictions of cultural transmission theory also hold true for game rules and in a contemporary context. This underscores the relevance of the study of Hirschman (2009) and others (e.g., Eyuboglu & Buja, 2007) who have opined that cultural evolution and hence cultural transmission theory is relevant for today’s marketing context.

Marketing theories approximate the context of game development in Kiribati with the concept of communities of creation. That concept suggests a company as the

overarching entity of the community. In the absence of the company structure, the community still exists. With the structure of the community (or communities) in Kiribati, it is shown that these players groups can also be particularly innovative and effective in maintaining and distributing a relatively large number of games. With this widening of the concept of community of creation, it shows companies that their role is optional. If a company wishes to stay in control of such a community, it needs to take an active role and cannot assume to reap the benefits of creation automatically. This implication is especially relevant in contexts such as Micronesia where companies have taken only a minor role in marketing and other than distributing their product they do not interact with their consumer base at the risk of losing an entire market as well as the benefit of highly successful product innovation.

The loss of control mentioned above is not due to a lack of marketing theory or practice. Successful implementation of company-consumer relations in the games industry is already present in the Western context (e.g., Pedersen & Buur, 2000). The advance of this study is to generalize a process already recognized in marketing theory but not followed in overseas or non-commercial contexts such as the Pacific Islands. Companies, however, underestimate that the Pacific Islands communities have been especially effective at innovation and due to their close and intensive contacts, it means that their market is not limited to one island or island country but quickly spreads across Micronesia as a whole. This process provides opportunities for all those organizations using marketing, from nonprofits and NGOs to companies, both in Micronesia and the Pacific Islands as a whole.

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