

# Only for You: Relevant Board Game Suggestions from BoardGameGeek.com

Sanni Isokirmo<sup>1</sup>, Ahti Katiska<sup>1</sup>, and Miika Mäki<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Helsinki*

October 8, 2025 7:41am

## Introduction

Play—coming together to engage in a common recreational activity—is a human universal [1] and essential part in human development [2, 3]. Board games are a popular and accessible form of play that bring family, friends and strangers alike together, and promote well-being across the life-span [4, 5].

But what if a group of people have outplayed the games they own and would like to find some new ones? There are at least 150.000 different board games out there [6] so finding a good match can be a time consuming process. A service that would suggest new board games based on the individual taste could come in handy on such occasions.

This technical report will outline the steps we made and lessons learned to create a recommendation system for new board games based on the user's ratings in BoardGameGeek.com (BGG) database as well as the technical details of setting up a webpage \*LINK TO WEBSITE\* through which users can find recommendations for new board games. To achieve this, we used non-negative matrix factorization (NMF) with a selected users' review scores to create tailored suggestions for new board games.

## Data

We chose the biggest board game ratings database BoardGameGeek.com to fetch user ratings and board game metadata, such as playing mechanics and category. As it is openly available, it having a data access was simple and there were no data privacy issues to be addressed.

Since there are 2.7 million users and 150.000 boardgames in BGG [6, 7], fetching all of them would not be feasible with the API interface, at least within this project. Since many users have left no or few reviews, the data would be too sparse if we had taken a random sample. To get a compromise between training matrix sparsity, time constraints and selection bias, we decided to choose  $x$  guilds (online discussion groups) that represent different geographic regions, target audiences (teens, parents, seniors), genres as well as general and special interest groups. This way we could get  $X$  reviews from  $Y$  reviewers about  $Z$  games. The sampling strategy did bias

our distribution towards active users, but also allows for reliable training. Users with only few reviews would make the estimation computationally intensive and possibly unreliable.

We decided to load our data via the BGG XML API [8]. While the data is well preprocessed and clean, getting the data was no simple task.

First, the API has rate limits that we had to find out by trial and error. We used a base delay of .75 seconds and if the rate was limited, increased the delay exponentially and waited for the maximum of one minute. The maximum batch size for games was 20 and it took some time to find out why the game metadata coverage was so low on larger test runs.

Second, since the game metadata fetching was unreliable even with the exponential backoff time, we used a game metadata cache file to make sure that if a game metadata had been fetched successfully once, it was stored on the project home directory.

Finally, we included only users with at least 25 reviews and fetched the most popular games first to avoid training data matrix sparsity.

## Methods

Using review scores is the single best way of generating recommendations [9]. It seems counterintuitive as one would think that categories, genres, sales or other available metadata would be equally helpful. Based on this empirical finding and the scope of the project, we chose to focus solely on the review scores. Upon fetching the recommendations, we did, however, provide game metadata for the user to help in determining which of the recommendations to use. These included publication year, weight (difficulty), average rating (based on all reviews), number of all ratings, categories (genres), and mechanics (how the game is played).

## Results

## Discussion

We created a board game recommendation webpage based on a sample of 200,000 board game reviews from 1000 active BoardGameGeek.com users to help BoardGameGeek users—or anyone—find new boardgames that match their taste. Below we will reflect on the lessons learned from our project.

We found it interesting how simple it is to create a recommendation algorithm that works fairly well. It is reassuring that one can first build something that works and then make it more complex. That is essentially what we did, and will definitely use a similar routine for future data science projects.

Setting up API was a valuable learning experience. If we were to redo this, it would probably be better to rely on a ready made data dump. This is because the rate limits were very restrictive and getting the data in tidy format involved quite a bit of work. If this project was expanded, we would use the whole BGG database as a training data to get even better estimates. For the scope of this mini-project, 200,000 reviews should be enough.

We also learned how using everyone's strengths can contribute into a great product. One of us had solid experience from front end and boardgames; another from creating appealing user interface and keeping repositories organized; yet another from statistics and managing projects more generally. Combining these abilities allowed us to have a clear division of labor among the group and make a steady progress with weakly checkpoints.

Other than using a larger training data, future work could try out different recommendation algorithms and optimize them with more rigor.

This project serves as a good example that when the problem definition is clear cut and the product creates true added value for the user, it is easy to manage a complex workflow like ours. With a clear purpose and goal in mind, it is easier to stay on track and strive for a product that will bring added value to users.

## References

- [1] D. E. Brown, “Human Universals, Human Nature & Human Culture,” *Daedalus*, vol. 133, no. 4, pp. 47–54, 2004, ISSN: 0011-5266. JSTOR: 20027944. Accessed: Sep. 18, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027944>.
- [2] P. K. Smith, “Play: Types and Functions in Human Development,” in *Origins of the Social Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and Child Development*, New York, NY, US: The Guilford Press, 2005, pp. 271–291, ISBN: 978-1-59385-103-3.
- [3] A. D. Pellegrini, *The Role of Play in Human Development*. Oxford University Press, 2009, 289 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-536732-4. Google Books: y03zr\_0iFYIC.
- [4] L. Dell’Angela, A. Zaharia, A. Lobel, O. Vico Begara, D. Sander, and A. C. Samson, “Board Games on Emotional Competences for School-Age Children,” *Games for Health Journal*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 187–196, Jun. 2020, ISSN: 2161-783X. doi: 10.1089/g4h.2019.0050. Accessed: Sep. 18, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/g4h.2019.0050>.
- [5] S. Solway, “Wellness through board games,” M.S. thesis, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology, 2011.
- [6] WordsRated. “Board Games Statistics – WordsRated,” Accessed: Sep. 18, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://wordsrated.com/board-games-statistics/>.
- [7] M. Didymus-True. “BoardGameGeek’s support drive numbers fall for third year running -,” Accessed: Sep. 18, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://boardgamewire.com/index.php/2024/01/09/boardgamegeeks-support-drive-numbers-fall-for-third-year-running/>.
- [8] BBG. “BGG XML API2,” BoardGameGeek, Accessed: Sep. 19, 2025. [Online]. Available: [https://boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/BGG\\_XML\\_API2](https://boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/BGG_XML_API2).
- [9] D. Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2021, 368 pp., ISBN: 978-0-7352-1450-7.

# Appendix