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Dungeons & Dragons & Dewey: Toward a Ludic Pedagogy of Democratic Civic Life Through the Philosophy of John Dewey and Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS & DEWEY: TOWARD A LUDIC PEDAGOGY OF
DEMOCRATIC CIVIC LIFE THROUGH THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN DEWEY AND
TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

SUSAN HAARMAN

CHICAGO, IL

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Every good DM knows there is no such thing as playing alone, I want to acknowledge the debt of gratitude I owe the people who helped make this possible. My chair, Dr. Amy Shuffelton, provided support of my unique perspective and voice that was invaluable. I also want to thank Dr. Noah Sobe for his thoughtfulness and enthusiasm for this project. Additionally, the entire community of the Role-play Study Group (especially Sarah Lynne Bowman) provided true support and collegiality throughout. The CELTS office team kept me laughing, grounded, and sane. James Mendez Hodes' writing was an initial inspiration of how important this work is and he was deeply generous with his time in being in conversation with me. My deepest thanks goes to Dr. Patrick Green has served as a committee member, the best boss I have ever had, and a constant cheerleader for me. He has embodied for me what compassionate, mission driven scholarship and leadership is supposed to look like. Scholar-practitioners like him keep my faith in academia alive. He is a colleague par excellence.

This work was born out of hours of laughter, chaos, and storytelling. In a strange twist of fate, the COVID-19 pandemic let me play games with people who transformed from acquaintances to friends to beloved family. My experiences with the Scoobies, the Crossaintwhich Crew, and the Poppin' Ladies not only informed this work, but were a curative for loneliness and a reminder of why "life together" is so important. So my eternal thanks to Alyssa Bailey, Elizabeth Olson, Alex DiVirgilio, Jim Vozzella, Matt Kidd, Vinny Tangherlini, Tara Egan, Heather Scholl, Chip Aucoin, Emily Cukier, Todd Page, Keith Whipple, Becca

Lauffenburger, Lucy Arlit, and Maddie du Breuil. No, you may not throw a hand grenade at ghosts. No, I did not check for traps. Yes, this would not have happened without you.

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To Leslie,
My person, forever and always.

We are what we pretend to be.

- Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, which uses philosophical inquiry, I posit that tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) can provide an educative experience for democratic civic life in the Deweyan tradition. Tabletop RPGs present an invaluable resource for ongoing civic formation by encouraging deliberation and consensus building across shared goals and circumstances. Philosopher John Dewey emphasized that democracy is defined by civic habits and collective action, not formal governance structures. The experience of playing tabletop RPGs can cultivate habitus and space for future and current citizens to practice democratic skills and commitments. Therefore, these games are a means that align with the ends of a civic life that is rooted in an understanding of democracy beyond just a form of governance, and instead, as a process and interactions of a community.

Understood this way, tabletop role-playing games can facilitate a ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life. This approach is not just focused on using novel tools to deliver information or a gamified approach to learning. Instead, it calls for an autotelic approach to citizenship formation that prioritizes committed collaboration with others, imaginative and emergent approaches to problem solving, and the ability to critically negotiate systems of power.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Just over two years ago, over 257,000 people watched in real time as a group of six companions negotiated the difficult decision of what to do next after a tragic loss.¹ The group engaged in an emotional deliberation alongside logical analysis and even attempted some creative problem solving. At the end of a twenty-minute conversation and heated argument, the six had come to a tentative consensus, ultimately deciding to pursue the specific goals of one person on the potential that it might result in a solution and provide new ways forward. The event in question was an episode of *Critical Role*, a weekly web series that broadcasts seven voice actors as they play the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*.² The dynamics on display were some of the complex negotiations that tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) typically demand of their players in order to ensure that a game moves forward in a way that is effective and enjoyable.

Is this an example of simple amusement and leisure or is there more at work in this space? The efficacy of tabletop RPGs as an educational and therapeutic asset has been extensively studied, and many middle and high schools already employ these games as extracurricular activities because of their positive impact around identity formation, empathy,

¹ Over 1.7 million people have since viewed the episode. Their channel is the single most profitable channel on Twitch and made just under \$10 million in 2021.

² Of note, the group has also formed a 501c3 non-profit called the Critical Role Foundation where they use their platform and the social capital to raise money for a variety of other organizations and causes.

and social skills building.³ Wizards of the Coast, the parent company of *D&D* (easily the best known of tabletop RPGs) recently released created a website dedicated to the game's implementation as a teaching tool in partnership with the International Literacy Association.⁴ Moreover, more recent iterations of tabletop RPGs games are being intentionally designed to encourage thoughtfulness, experimentation, and creative problem solving. The designers of game playbooks⁵ detail cooperation, compromise, the importance of direct action, consensus building, and imagination as explicit goals of playing tabletop RPGs.⁶ While their primary purpose may be leisure and community, these games are also creating spaces in which people are being formed, and, in many cases, building essential skills for citizenship.

The viewers of the Critical Role live stream mentioned above were not only watching individuals play a game, they were also witnessing an unintentional enacting of many of educational philosopher John Dewey's principles around democratic civic life, educative experiences, and their impact on the civic and moral habits of individuals. Players modeled the dynamic of a Deweyan public as they debated around shared consequences. They practiced dramatic rehearsal as they imagined what outcomes were possible and allowed emotion and

³ Mike Cook, Matthew Gremo, and Ryan Morgan, "We're Just Playing: The Influence of a Modified Tabletop Role-Playing Game on ELA Students' In-class Reading," *Simulation & Gaming* 48, no. 2 (2017): 202. Brent Ruben, "Simulations, Games, and Experience-Based Learning: The Quest for a New Paradigm for Teaching and Learning," *Simulation & Gaming* 30, no. 4 (1999): 500.

⁴ "Educator Resources," Wizards of the Coast, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/educators>.

⁵ Playbooks is the term often used for guidebooks that detail game rules and settings.

⁶ Brent Jans, "Creator One-on-One: Olivia Hill," *The Rat Hole*, last modified January 21, 2020, <https://therathole.ca/renaissance-gamer-01-21-20>.

relationships to influence their thinking. The dynamics of the game gave players a chance to experience collaboration and deliberation around something they were personally invested in within a low risk environment.

This dissertation claims that the experience of playing tabletop RPGs can provide an educative experience for democratic civic life in the Deweyan tradition. These games are an underutilized teaching and formation tool that is already present in many schools and an increasingly popular pastime (especially after COVID).⁷ Recognition and utilization of the games' capacity would provide another resource for educators to help staunch badly hemorrhaging citizenship and civic education curriculum. However, beyond serving as another tool for engaging content delivery, these games are capable of cultivating democratic habits and values in players. They present an invaluable resource for ongoing civic formation beyond school settings through encouraging deliberation and consensus building across shared goals and circumstances.

Current Civic Education: A Subject In Search of Curriculum and Consequence

The educative capacity of tabletop RPGs should not be dismissed as a simple gimmick approach to sharing citizenship content. The challenges to the already beleaguered and often ignored field of civic education continue to mount, especially in the face of diminishing faith in, and increasing threats to, democracy. As a result, finding new ways to approach civic formation and education is becoming imperative. For instance, in 2020 researchers from the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at Cambridge University found that across the globe, younger

⁷ 2020 was the one of the biggest years of sales for tabletop RPGs. Paul Scriven, "From Tabletop to Screen: Playing Dungeons and Dragons during COVID-19," *Societies*, 11, no. 4 (2021): 125.

generations are becoming steadily dissatisfied with democracy.⁸ This “democratic disconnect” has led many to believe that democracy is less effective than more autocratic forms of government. In the United States, a 2022 study by the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School showed that 56% of 18-29 year olds polled did not believe that political involvement could solve current societal problems, 36% said that political involvement did not yield tangible results, and 42% believed that their vote did not matter.^{9 10} Although voting rates amongst 18-29 year olds in the 2020 presidential election were the highest they had been since 1972, it was still only 55% and the lowest amongst all voting age groups.¹¹ Additionally, while Gen Z has shown itself to be more active at the polls and in protest actions than their Millennial counterparts, John Della Volpe found that many of these young civic actors are taking action as a way to channel overwhelming fear they feel about their future - not out of a sense of civic duty or membership.¹² This lack of confidence in the value or strength of democracy has led to the January 6

⁸ Roberto Foa, Andrew Klassen, Daniella Wenger, Alex Rand, and Michael Slade, “Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?” (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy 2020): 1.

⁹ “Harvard Youth Poll, Spring 2022,” *Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics* online, April 25, 2022, <https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/spring-2022-harvard-youth-poll>.

¹⁰ This belief is incredibly ironic, as polling in the immediate wake of the 2022 midterm elections showed that Jon Fetterman owed his razor thin 3% win in the Pennsylvania Senate election to the 18-29 demographic who supported him 4 to 1 over Mehmet Oz. “2022 Election: Young Voters Have High Midterm Turnout, Influence Critical Races,” Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, accessed November 18, 2022, <https://circle.tufts.edu/2022-election-center>.

¹¹ “2020 Presidential Election Voting and Registration Tables Now Available,” *United States Census Bureau* online, April 29, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/2020-presidential-election-voting-and-registration-tables-now-available.html>.

¹² John Della Volpe, *Fight: How Gen Z is Channeling Their Fear and Passion to Save America* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2022), 28.

Insurrection being called a “Sputnik moment” for civics education. Scholars and political pundits saw it as a warning sign of failing preparation of students to become thoughtful citizens who believe in the value of a democratic process and dialogue, and instead turned to misinformation and violent protest. In the wake of the sedition at Capital, author Andrea Gabor said there should be a full revival of civics and called for, “Not your father’s bland civics, with its how-a-bill-becomes-law tedium.”¹³

While events like the January 6 insurrection show how timely conversations around civic education are, even the most passionate civic educators bemoan the state of civics and citizenship education in the United States.¹⁴ Judging the impact and efficacy of civic education is complicated by the fact that there are a multiplicity of similar, but different and shifting terms for this formation. Citizenship education, community civics, and social studies are all terms that have been used to refer to efforts to educate or prepare students of a variety of ages for participation in their national community. Current civic education in United States schools usually takes the form of courses on the structure of the government typically offered in high school or as intermittent parts of a social studies course throughout a student’s education. However, approaches to civic education are decentralized, with each state determining the content of the curriculum and when it occurs. While the National Standards for Civic and

¹³ Andrea Gabor, “Democracy Needs to Be Taught in School,” *Bloomberg*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-01-14/classroom-civics-revival-can-help-heal-u-s-democracy>.

¹⁴ John Cogan, "Civic Education in the United States: a Brief History," *International Journal of Social Education* 14, no. 1 (1999): 56.

Government were developed in the 1990's, they are voluntary and not implemented consistently across states.¹⁵

There is also less formal assessment of the success of what civic education is offered as compared to other compulsory subjects. Social studies and civics were not included in 2001's education reform bill *No Child Left Behind*, and thus not implicated in resulting mandatory performance testing. This often meant that the already too small amount of time given to civic education and social studies would likely be ceded to subjects in which students would be tested.¹⁶ John Cogan said that he believes truncated time in the classroom leads to further apathy in students.¹⁷ Conversely, when there is time for dedicated civic instruction, the curriculum is often little more than narrowly scoped history class, with typical civics class covering Constitutional amendments, major Supreme Court decisions, and salient social and civil rights movements. There have been movements to implement mandatory civics tests at the high school level by the Civics Education Initiative and some states have included it as a high school graduation requirement. However, civic education scholars have also raised concerns about the efficacy of the test and unintended consequences; including narrowing a conception of

¹⁵ The Education Commission of the States compared all fifty states and found that forty-seven states and the District of Columbia address civic education in state law. Every state requires some civics or social studies education to graduate secondary school. Only twenty states provide curriculum aids. Alyssa Rafa, Dave Rogowski, Hunter Railey, Jan Brennan, Paul Baumann, Stephanie Aragon, "50-State Comparison: Civic Education Policies," *Education Commission of the States*, last modified December 12th, 2016, <https://www.ecs.org/citizenship-education-policies/>.

¹⁶ Anne-Lise Halvorsen, *A History of Elementary Social Studies: Romance and Reality* (New York: Peter Lang Publisher, 2013), 166.

¹⁷ John Cogan, "Civic Education in the United States: a Brief History," *International Journal of Social Education* 14, no. 1 (1999): 58.

citizenship to simple fact memorization or having students who failed the test mistakenly believe they were no longer eligible to vote.¹⁸

Even as formal in-class civic instruction struggles for prioritization and better coherence, not all hope is lost. Civic scholars also recognize that a significant amount of civic education and formation occurs outside of formal instruction, whether through student council programs, extracurriculars, or even habit building practices like the Pledge of Allegiance.¹⁹ Carole Hahn emphasized the importance of extracurriculars in civic education and said that some students reported learning as much, if not more, about democratic life outside of the classroom through community-based opportunities as opposed to classroom instruction.²⁰ Joel Westheimer questioned prioritizing a “knowledge only” approach to civics, saying that “democratic societies require more than citizens who are fact-full. They require citizens who can think and act in ethically thoughtful ways.”²¹ Westheimer claims that deeper civic formation occurs when students are exposed to the ambiguity present in important societal struggles in a functioning

¹⁸ Kristina F. Brezicha and Dana L. Mitra, “Should We Be Testing Civics? Examining the Implications of the Civic Education Initiative,” *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94: no. 1 (2019): 72.

¹⁹ Walter Parker, “Citizenship Education in the United States,” in *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*, ed. Larry P. Nucci, Darcia Narváez, and Tobias Krettenaur (New York: Routledge, 2008), 348.

²⁰ Carole Hahn, “Education for Citizenship and Democracy in the United States,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy*, ed. James Arthur, Ian Davies, and Carole Hahn (London: Sage Publishing, 2008), 268. The practice of using activities outside the classroom to educate for civic formation is also not a new phenomenon. Patrice Preston-Grimes did a study of civic education activities between 1930 and 1954, focusing on the actions of black teachers. She found that teachers used a variety of outside activities to expose students to affirming civic education such as 4-H clubs, talking to Black veterans, and running voter registration drives. Black teachers and students demonstrated the power of non-curricular elements of civic education to form and shape students as well as creating public displays of civic engagement from their students.

²¹ Joel Westheimer, “Can Education Transform Our World?: Global Citizenship Education and the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” in *Grading Goal Four: Tensions, Threats, and Opportunities in the Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education*, ed. Antonia Wulff (Brill, 2020), 287.

democracy. He claims civic education that utilizes community-based learning (such as service-learning or action civics) provides students with relevant examples of these complex issues and encourages students to take an action-oriented approach to problem solving. Because of this different approach to civic pedagogy, students form the habits necessary to be healthy and concerned citizens and do not merely acquire historical knowledge.

However, reliance on what happens outside of a classroom for civic education also has its challenges. Relying on large-scale extracurricular activities like community-based learning or service projects to be the primary conduit for civic education can often disadvantage low-income students. Meira Levinson identified what she called the “civic empowerment gap,” where low-income students are highly unlikely to develop the leadership and communication skills needed to advocate for themselves in public arenas. Because schools are the best place to foster their skills, poorly resourced civic education programs at low-income schools exacerbate the gap. Community-based learning practices like service-learning or the action civics (which Levinson advocates) present dynamic ways to engage students’ civic sensibilities and connect their community to the classroom. Unfortunately, these programs typically require dedicated staff and funding in order to run them effectively and yield desired educational outcomes. As a result, effective civic formation can often become an educational privilege, not a guarantee.

Additionally, the question of what happens to civic formation *after* compulsory school ends also presents a challenge. Tony DeCesare points out that there is little opportunity for intentional civic education for adults after they exit a school unless they are actively seeking

citizenship.²² DeCesare also highlights the ongoing challenge that even when quality civic education is present in schools, it is primarily future-oriented. The civic education available focuses on what the individual will do in the future when they are *full citizens* (either through age or status) and not on what a person can do in the present. This can invite a checklist mentality that sees citizenship only as a series of privileges or licenses for activities to be gained, rather than an active way of being involved with ones' community or others.

Deweyan Democratic Civic Education: Habits For and From a Community

This personal “responsibility focused citizen” hardly seems like a robust model to buoy up failing faith in democracy. This concern is shared by educational philosopher Gert Biesta, who believes that some of the weakness of current citizenship education is rooted not just in its delivery (or lack thereof), but in this emphasis on the individual’s relationship to democracy and lack of attention to communal membership. Stemming from a traditional Enlightenment mindset, a civic education focused simply on ensuring that individuals have the requisite information on personal rights often fails to incorporate questions of how those rights and habits impact (and are impacted by) others in the broader political context.²³ Biesta’s concerns echo an older approach to civic education from the beginning of the 20th century called community civics.

²² Tony DeCesare, “What About ‘Current’ Citizens? Challenging the Future - and School - Orientation of Democratic Education” (paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, Brown County, IN, September 25, 2021).

²³ Gert Biesta, “Education and the Democratic Person: Towards a Political Conception of Democratic Education,” *Teachers College Record* 109, no. 3 (2007): 742.

In contrast to a more individualistic frame, community civics focused civic education not on political participation and rights, but on themes of cooperation and communal belonging.²⁴ Also called the “new civics”, this approach departed from the former focus on governmental structures, used progressive pedagogies, and often started with much younger students. Historians Anne-Lise Halvorsen and Julie Reuben see community civics as a radical departure from traditional notions of citizenship, with community civics programs encouraging students to see themselves as connected to the larger community even if they themselves were unable to vote because of age, race, or gender.²⁵ Arthur Dunn, an originator of the new civics, claimed that citizenship went beyond adherence to the law or voting and instead was reflected in a broader approach to living in society.²⁶ Dunn was influenced by John Dewey’s idea that democratic activities such as voting or running for office do not sufficiently determine whether or not a society was democratic. Instead, democracy was a way of life that extended to how an individual cooperated with others and negotiated public discourse.²⁷ In response to Dewey’s philosophy and conception of democracy, community civics focused on the common welfare and encouraged students to see themselves as members of communities instead of autonomous individuals.²⁸

²⁴ Julie Reuben, "Beyond Politics: Community Civics and the Redefinition of Citizenship in the Progressive Era," *History of Education Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1997): 400.

²⁵ Halvorsen, *A History of Elementary Social Studies*, 58.

²⁶ Reuben, "Beyond Politics: Community Civics," 401.

²⁷ Vučina Zorić, "Fundamentals of John Dewey's Concept of Civic Education," *History of Education and Children's Literature* 10, (2015): 431.

²⁸ Carolyn Weber and Sarah E. Montgomery, "The Emergence of Elementary Citizenship Education: Insights from Iowa’s Rural Schools, 1910–1935," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 47, no. 2 (2019): 268.

In the face of increasing distrust in the efficacy of formal political structures and the anemic and undeveloped state of current civic education in schools, a Deweyan framing of democracy as process-based and communally rooted provides an approach that could revivify a belief in the importance of democratic commitments. Because Dewey emphasized that democracy is defined by the way that people come to live together (not simply by a formalized listing of rights and procedures), relationships between individuals as fellow citizens become essential to defining how a citizen should act and understand themselves. Consequently, the civic habits and collective action that help communities live together and flourish are just as central to effective democratic formation as information on governance structures. It adds foci to civic education and formation through an emphasis on building and practicing the habits that help people live together. The Deweyan approach to civic education encourages citizens to see themselves as just that - citizens part of a larger whole, and not just beleaguered individuals adrift in a hostile and partisan political sea.

Dungeons & Dragons & Dewey

When broader civic and citizenship educational outcomes move beyond simple memorization of the three branches of government or a yearly trip to the polls, there is room for more dynamic educational approaches to civic formation. One of those potential approaches can be facilitated through tabletop RPGs. These games are able to create educative experiences that also capture the broader Deweyan understanding of democracy - seeing democratic life as the habits and interactions people have with one another and not just a list of protections from and

duties to the state. The experience of playing these games can cultivate that habitus and space for future and current citizens to develop and practice these democratic skills and commitments. Therefore, tabletop RPGs are a means that align with the ends of a civic life that is rooted in an understanding of democracy beyond just a form of governance, and instead, as a process and interactions of a community.

Understood this way, tabletop RPGs can facilitate a *ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life*. More than just using novel tools to deliver information or a gamified approach to learning benchmarks, a ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life is process-oriented and educative in the Deweyan tradition, inviting deeper reflection on ones' understanding of democracy and civic life in a community. Ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life calls for an autotelic approach to citizenship that prioritizes committed collaboration with others, imaginative and emergent approaches to problem solving, and the ability to critically negotiate systems of power.

Defining Role-Playing Games

Because tabletop RPGs are a unique subset of broader role-playing games, it is helpful to define role-playing games as they are broadly understood. Scholarly work around role-playing games is highly interdisciplinary, with scholars researching the subject matter in psychology, philosophy, theology, media studies, anthropology, sociology, and game design. A role-playing game is generally a game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting.²⁹ RPGs are delivered across a variety of platforms such as video games (with games like Final

²⁹ Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 2.

Fantasy or Skyrim), or Live Action Role Play games, where individuals physically portray their character within a fictional setting represented by real world environments. Within the game, players take responsibility for acting out the actions of those characters within a narrative, either through literal acting or through a process of structured decision-making regarding character development. Actions taken within games succeed or fail according to a formal system of rules and guidelines. The outcome of a success or a failed action triggers consequences and responses, and then the narrative continues. Rather than clear win conditions that end the games, role-playing games are autotelic, with players engaging in the game for the experience of playing itself. Players often seek to improve their characters (if game mechanics allows), which thereby opens up further options to continue the narrative, often with more agency than before.³⁰

Role-play scholar Sarah Lynne Bowman has narrower qualifications for RPGs with a large emphasis on the role-play aspect. She says that to be considered an RPG, a game must establish a sense of community through a ritualized shared storytelling experience; include a form of game system which frames scenarios and the solving of problems within them; and the players must alter their primary sense of identity in at least a small way and create an alternate self via the character through the process known as identity alteration.³¹ These alterations can range from their gender, appearance, race, sexual orientation, class, or personality. The size of the alteration can be drastic or small. The important element is that the player must feel they are

³⁰ Sean Winkler, "Incorporative Discourse Strategies in Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, eds J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler, (McFarland, 2014), 41.

³¹ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 1.

playing someone else and not simply an altered version of themselves. Bowman believes that role-playing games function to build community, encourage skill development, and allow for identity exploration.³²

³² Because of the wide range of disciplines writing about RPGs, terms like role, self, identity are widely used in the scholarship and one scholar's discipline or theoretical or philosophical approach may cause them to define the scope or understanding of these terms slightly differently from other scholars writing from a different positionality. Rather than a liability or problem, the author of this dissertation sees the diversity of approaches to these terms and these games as one of the most interesting aspects of the field and evidence that it is a subject ripe for further academic study. The complex dynamics behind many of these terms highlights the interesting history and wide range of influences on their development. For instance, the term 'role' in role-play games has roots in the practice of psychodrama, a therapeutic approach developed by Jacob Moreno popular in the 1930's. It involved the acting out of scenarios from a person's life in which participants acted out the role of someone from a person's life the same way a stage actor would act out a role. At the same time, the practice utilized a Freudian approach and the roles participants played were also meant to stand in as functions in the person's life or larger force like lust, ambition, etc. These therapeutic interventions did not have formal scripts and invited the participants to improvise using some cues from the patient whose life they were portraying. Originally called the "theater of spontaneity" by Moreno, the practices of psychodrama began to move into educational circles in the United States after Moreno immigrated and began working with groups of children in local public schools.

Independently, wargaming groups in the 1970's began to shift and experiment with the way they played the games, sometimes assigning a player to a particular figurine on the board that was also typically associated with a specific purpose in the regiment or group. As this practice became popular, they began to be called role-playing games because players took on specific roles or functions through their assigned piece. Later, as these games evolved, the practices of creating a "character" to play rather than being assigned one gained traction. As games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, which used a high fantasy setting influence by the works of J.R.R. Tolkien became popular, more players became interested in creating a character similar to the ones they read about in the source material that influenced the game. These earlier game iterations were focused on more mechanical application of the character skills to different challenges and primarily involved math and strategy. More evolution occurred in the gaming community and players were encouraged to 'role-play' their characters, both a reference to the name of the category many of these games were being classified in and to the practice of 'role-play' from psychodrama that was now being practiced in many educational circles.

Further complicating the usage of the term is the work of Gary Fine, a sociologist who wrote *Shared Fantasy* in 1983, an in-depth study of fantasy role-playing games. As will be discussed later, Fine incorporated the work of Erving Goffman, symbolic interaction sociologist who wrote *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* and discussed how people perform a variety of roles in their life that both reflected a function they may be serving (doctor, lawyer) or reflection a relationship they may have to another (mother, son). These roles were elements and aspects of the broader self, but the situation both limited how much of the self could be shown and the individual often felt tension when one role was fronted more than others were, leaving them to feel potentially alienated from that aspect of themselves. While the majority of current playbooks for games talk about playing a character, the games are called role-playing games. This could simultaneously be because it is the historical name for the games or because it refers to the skill of role-play utilized in the game or because of the ways that players take on a role that they portray in the game and perform the function associated with the role or because of the influence of Fine's scholarship and application of Goffman's work. There is no consensus in the field as to which is the dominant reason and all of the application are highlighted in varying degrees in the current construction of the games. The larger ontological question of whether or not these games should be called 'Character-Play' instead of 'Role-Play' is an interesting one, but beyond the scope of this dissertation.

This development is facilitated through a game system or set of rules that establishes the reality the game occurs in. Game systems help the players design and build characters, highlight and bound possible action, and indicate how the game and narrative proceed. Bowman says these “rules of reality” aid in players immersion into their character and the game world by reducing cognitive dissonance.³³ Therefore, the structure of agreed upon rules is also what helps distinguish RPGs from simply playing pretend. Game systems and mechanics also outline what dictates success and failure (e.g. rolling high on a die means success and rolling low means complications or abject failure).

In addition to the explicit game system and rules, there are also implicit rules that occur in and through the role-playing aspect of RPGs that Markus Montola believes are common across most games. They shape the games as social processes as well as a structure with a set of formal rules.³⁴ Montola believes game rules and goals are either endogenous - defined in the game’s structure - or exogenous – brought to the experience by players, who also give them meaning. These goals and rules interact with one another especially through role-play, where there is yet another set of goals and rules- the diegetic goals which are the goals of the character as articulated in the narrative. These rules and goals begin to intersect as players personify their characters and define the game world by how they interact with it.³⁵ Therefore, the game world,

To that end the author will try to clarify, if necessary, what the scholars being cited mean when they say character, role, identity or self in order to better highlight their unique approach to the material, but will not be providing an exhaustive definition for these terms so as not to lose the important nuances presented.

³³ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games*, 105.

³⁴ Markus Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-playing: the Social Framework of Role-playing Process," *International Journal of Role-playing* 1, no. 1 (2009): 22.

³⁵ Montola, “The Invisible Rules of Role-playing,” 25.

initially bound by the rules of the game system, becomes more fluid and is constantly redefined and reconstituted by the players' characters actions and choices. Rule enforcement is also contingent on the players and Game Masters themselves (whose role is explained below), as players are typically able to do whatever they please in a game as long as the others agree that it is reasonable.³⁶ At the same time, the game's rules still bound many decisions and actions, keeping change from being arbitrary. This leads to an iterative web of interactions whose balance Montola describes as “moving from creating fiction externally to acting within it.”³⁷

Coming to the Tabletop

The aforementioned web of interactions is where much of the discussion, negotiation, and collaboration of RPGs take place and is a hallmark of tabletop RPGs specifically. Because that dynamic interplay is where rich opportunity for formation and habit creation occurs, this dissertation is focusing specifically and intentionally on the genre of tabletop RPGs. The adjective of “tabletop” comes from the fact that these games intended for a group of people to gather together around a “table”³⁸ and play together collaboratively while sharing that space synchronously. Aaron Hollander defines tabletop RPGs as group storytelling with each player

³⁶ Dennis Waskul, "The Role-playing Game and the Game of Role-playing," in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, eds. Patrick J. Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler (McFarland & Co.: Jefferson, N.C., 2006), 20. This is reflected in the “rule of cool,” an unofficial, but widely recognized rule in tabletop RPGs. If a player comes up with an action or approach to a situation that is exceptionally creative, interesting, or clever, but also not specifically allowed by game rules, a game master abiding by the “rule of cool” will typically negotiate the formal structure of the game to allow the action to be attempted or make it more likely to succeed. It functions to encourage creative and engaged play, as well as improving the experience for everyone at the table.

³⁷ Montola, “The Invisible Rules of Role-playing,” 24.

³⁸ Or a zoom call.

responsible for the actions of a character of their own design.³⁹ Everyone responds to and with narrated action to the effects of chance through a flexible system of rules and probability mechanisms. While they take any number of permutations, the tabletop RPG with the largest general recognition and cultural footprint is *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*. However, *D&D* is only one game setting amongst a multitude. Not all tabletop RPGs require a 20-sided die (or die at all) and there are as many settings and subject matter as there are genres of any other art form or media. What distinguishes them from other games is that the goal of the game is not a win condition to fulfill, but simply playing the game. Furthermore, while there may be opportunities for successes, the “winning” in a tabletop RPG is typically simply keeping your characters alive to continue to explore and develop. At their core, these games are fundamentally autotelic and these autotelic experiences emerge from the collaboratively created narrative of the game.

According to Hollander, the players create

unrehearsed and unrepeatable narratives through collaborative improvisational oral storytelling. These narratives that are distinguished by their participatory quality, not only in the imaginative buy-in of the audience, but in their very existence being generated primarily for the benefit of those taking part.⁴⁰

While there are exceptions, most tabletop RPGs feature individuals playing together in a small group, dealing with shared circumstances, and (potentially) moving toward a shared goal.

The presence of consensus (as indicated by the example I shared at the beginning of this dissertation) is usually highly contingent and continually re-established through ongoing

³⁹ Aaron Hollander, "Blessed Are the Legend-Makers: Experimentation as Edification in *Dungeons & Dragons*." *Political Theology* 22, no. 4 (2021): 317.

⁴⁰ Hollander, "Blessed Be The Legend Makers," 328.

dialogue. Moreover, players are forced to react to changing circumstances, a responsive world, and both the individual and social consequences of actions they take.⁴¹ Montola describes this as a "continuous cycle of iterative reinterpretation of the world in the communication loop of the game."⁴² Players serve as co-creators of the narrative of a role-playing game, with their actions serving to construct some if not all major aspects of the plot. They, along with the game master (discussed below), author the narrative as they experience it.⁴³ The choices players make (whether they yield success or failures) can continue to impact a player long after, resulting in consequences and repercussions that are often shared by the larger party and ripple to impact the relationships a character has to others within the group.

The Role of the Game Master

The final distinguishing element of tabletop RPGs is the existence of some form of game master (or GM)⁴⁴ - an individual who is both organizer and participant. They are in charge of creating the initial structure, details, and challenges of a given adventure, while maintaining a realistic continuity of events. They typically use source material provided by game designers called playbooks, or guides that contain information like game rules, setting, and even potential plotlines to use. These playbooks vary widely, with some spanning volumes of books sharing pre-provided information on nearly every aspect of the game. Others can be as short as one page,

⁴¹ Daniel Carlson, "Beyond Bikini-Mail: Having Women at the Table," *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 7, no. 3 (2020): 39.

⁴² Markus Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing," 27.

⁴³ Bowman, *Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 13.

⁴⁴ It is also known as Dungeon Master or DM in *D&D*.

with a brief description of game rules and a line or two about setting. In both cases, anything not stipulated comes from within the GM's mind (and eventually the players as well). The GM can use or ignore the furnished information as they typically have the power to control any element in the game other than the character's choices.

While style of play and level of influence can vary from game to game, GMs must juggle a variety of information and skill sets. They must respond to players in real time, determine how their actions impact the game world, and think ahead about where players may go or be led. Daniel Carlson says that a game master has to be able to serve the roles of world builder, adjudicator, and supportive narrator - all of which require skills around creative authority, collaboration, and the discernment when to know when to use each.⁴⁵ However, opinions regarding the necessity of the GM vary, with Jerzy Kociatkiewicz claiming it is, at best, an unnecessary outside authority, and at worst, a privileged individual who exerts coercive power over others.⁴⁶ Timothy Christopher claims that game masters tend to fall into one of four categories - guide, host, arbiter, or puppet master - each with its own benefits in the running of games and experience. Thus, he believes the value of the role is in how it corresponds to the desired experience of players, and not to an inherent set of abstract gaming values or principles.⁴⁷ For instance, a game master who dictates a large amount of action and choices

⁴⁵ Daniel Carlson, "Beyond Bikini-Mail," 42.

⁴⁶ Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, "Dreams of Time, Times of Dreams: Stories of Creation from Roleplaying Game Sessions," *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* 6, no. 1 (2000): 71.

⁴⁷ Timothy Christopher, "Justice is Not Blind, Deaf, or Willing to Share its Nachos," In *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, ed. Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (Chicago: Carus Publishing Company, 2012), 260.

could remove the stress of having to create them from more inexperienced players who might be intimidated by the game's structuring.

The GM, players, and chance (manifested by the die) form a web of interactions that serve to drive the gameplay and narrative, while also serving as checks and balances for each other. The action of one element instigates a reaction from another that typically amplifies or limits the aforementioned catalyzing action. This interplay also frames the structure and limits of power within the game. In most games, the GM has control over every aspect of the world and plot *except* character choices, feelings, and reactions. At the same time, players have no direct control over anything beyond their characters, but high levels of influence on the narrative and world (and by proxy the behavior of the GM), as the game milieu is forced to define and redefine itself based on player choices.⁴⁸ Consequently, this interplay creates a narrative that stays in flux and cannot become fully determined or rigid unless there is a significant use/abuse of power by one of these elements. While a tremendous amount of that power resides in the hands of the GM, they remain constrained by *the pure necessity of having players*. Because the game does not exist without the players, their choice to “leave the table” (to stop playing) ends the game.⁴⁹ Thus the nearly limitless power that a GM holds over their players ultimately originates in the players themselves.

⁴⁸ Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing," 24.

⁴⁹ There are RPGs without game masters (such as *Fiasco* and *The Quiet Year*) in which storytelling and moving the plot along collaboratively is the focus. This dissertation will not focus on these games, but they are also a thought provoking example of shared governance.

My Intention

This dissertation aims to spark more serious conversations about the ways tabletop RPGs (already a recognized educational tool and increasingly popular participatory hobby) can function as tools for civic formation. I want to encourage broader utilization of tabletop RPGs in educational settings, direct educators to the thoughtful construction and intention of many of these games, and invite reflection around civic habits and gains amongst those who already play them. While scholarship exists around civic education and games, none is specifically focused on tabletop RPGs.⁵⁰

This dissertation seeks both to address this gap and argues that tabletop RPGs foster civic formation so adroitly because they facilitate the growth of democratic habits in the *Deweyan understanding of democracy*. Tabletop RPGs can move beyond simply functioning as an engaging conduit for civic content, and toward facilitating experiences that can spark deep reflection and promote democratic habits. According to John Dewey, these habits - the ways that people live and flourish together as they negotiate competing needs - are the core elements of democracy. Rather than a static concept or specific form of governance, Dewey believed that democracy arose through what he called a “convergence of consequences and adjustments” as people lived together in society and negotiated competing needs and concerns. Democracy lives and breathes and changes as its citizens live together.

⁵⁰ Of note, Kat Schrier’s *We the Gamers* is an extraordinarily well organized and written book that connects video games to civic education and utilizes a range of rubrics and standards that are currently available. It focuses almost exclusively on video games.

For Dewey, the *experience* of behaving democratically together is better formation for democratic life than education focused on operating in a fixed governmental structure. Beyond just preparation, Dewey understood education for democracy and formation of habits as “doing democracy.” This dissertation posits that tabletop RPGs are uniquely positioned among both games and educational methods to create space for people to learn, practice, and create the democratic habits that create democracy itself. This dissertation introduces the idea of a *ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life* in the hopes that educators will more intentionally and broadly utilize tabletop RPGs and consider how aspects of gamefulness (an autotelic orientation, collaboration, imaginative problem solving, etc.) might enliven civic habits and citizenship.⁵¹

Chapter 2 focuses on further defining and clarifying tabletop RPGs, as well as their impact on players. It touches on the history of tabletop RPGs, tracing their development first as Prussian war games to its most familiar form, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and beyond. The chapter will then include the recent history of tabletop RPGs, the creation of new and inclusive designs, their wide use as therapeutic tools (especially within schools), and the rise of massively popular “actual play” streams such as *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20*. It also examines the question of

⁵¹ While the dissertation identifies tabletop RPGs as a tool for this pedagogy par excellence, it seeks to leave the door open for the identification of other ludic methodologies that form democratic habits in the Deweyan vein. Additionally, the author believes that it is possible to identify methods and approaches that are not games, but still have a ludic spirit or aim. Game scholar Miguel Sicart specifically calls for the playfulness to be brought to bear in political life. He says, “What we want is the attitude of play without the activity of play. We need to take the same stance towards things, the world, and others that we take during play. But we should not Play, Rather, we should perform as expected in that serious contact with that serious object. We want play without Play. We want playfulness, the capacity to use play outside the context of play.” Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 21. Playfulness, understood as a way of engaging with particular context in a manner that is similar to play, but respecting the purposes of goals of that context, presents a ludic attitude that could easily fit within the framework of ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life. Especially because an attitude of play focuses on experience and process, it captures the Deweyan approach. Further development and elucidation of these possibilities is another line of flight that could stem from this research.

whether or not a game genre rooted in mechanics of warfare and developed in an echo chamber of white privilege could easily be used as a tool to promote a collaborative and liberatory approach. The chapter clarifies how the mechanics of tabletop RPGs (i.e. collaborative storytelling, co-creative world building, and the role of game master) demand levels of imagination, participatory commitments, self-reflection, creative problem solving and collaboration from players. These skills support the creation of engaged imaginative discourse, which ultimately serves as the primary driver of the games. As a result, these games become places of potential educative formation around moral and social commitments. As players utilize the raw skills around conflict resolution and negotiating competing needs while moving toward a common goal, the lines between play and preparation for political life blur.

Chapter 3 pivots to introduce the work of John Dewey into the conversation, focusing on his understanding of experience and imagination's role in education. It also examines Dewey's understanding of the role of teachers in education and relationality in this process. This emphasis on ongoing discourse around essential topics as opposed to the simple application of abstract moral principles bridges to a discussion of Dewey's understanding of the formation and actions of "publics" in his work *The Public and Its Problems*. Importantly, Dewey regarded publics as contingent - forming over shared consequences and continually made and unmade by discourse and consensus seeking. Likewise, Dewey's conception of the role of the State in relation to publics, as distinct from political structure, will also be discussed. This underscores his broader understanding of democracy as being a co-creative act and way of life, not simply a form of governance. This dynamic and process oriented approach to democracy informs arguments in later chapters for how and where individuals may experience civic formation.

Chapter 4 examines how the experience of playing tabletop RPGs creates a space that fosters these Deweyan principles of education for and through democratic action. Player “adventuring” parties can be understood as publics, with disparate individuals uniting over shared consequences and interests and working toward a shared goal. Just as Dewey believed that publics come in and out of existence, the consensus within a group of players is equally as contingent. This demands both strong self-advocacy and deliberative skills from players as they seek to strike the balance between working together towards a shared goal and prioritizing their own needs. As a result, intentionality in the practice of a GM is crucial to facilitate healthy, respectful, and challenging game experiences.

When viewed through this lens, a GM’s role in a tabletop RPG campaign strongly mirrors not only Dewey’s view of a teacher’s role as articulated in *Experience and Education*, but also his conception of the relationship of the State to publics. A GM does not serve as an autocratic ruler or a dispassionate adjudicator, but rather co-creates the world alongside players and actively fosters opportunities for their individual and collective growth. Also similar to the State, a GM’s approach should be reflective of and responsive to the desire of players, as the existence of the game is predicated not upon the existence of players, not the will of the GM. When they leave the table, the game ends, no matter how “correctly” the GM may have been running it.

The chapter goes on to highlight the unique way that tabletop RPGs foster the habits of Dewey’s dramatic rehearsal in an individual, while allowing them to play out the process in a group setting, enhancing the individual's understanding of the social repercussions of their choices. This capacity for imagination, affective deliberation across conflict, and a valuing of

collaborative action found within both tabletop RPGs and Deweyan approaches to democracy points to an understanding of citizenship education and democratic commitments oriented around process and conversation in community. Conversely, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, much of current civic education is static and focused on individual rights and duties. In the face of this disconnect, the dissertation then calls for a *ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life* - an approach to the formation of civic outcomes and identity that utilizes games and their essential elements as dynamic and effective teaching tools to inspire democratic habits, thinking, and values.

Chapter 5 builds off the Deweyan definition of democracy, with each choice made by the polity to each unique situation over time moving towards a common outcome. Dewey understood democracy as a step-by-step process, absent “foreknowledge of ultimate results” and constantly responding to try to correct harm it may have done before.⁵² As a result, education for democracy is education for process and ongoing, contingent growth. A shift in understanding of civic formation away from simply memorization of governmental procedure and historical facts, and instead toward responsive action with other citizens and self-reflexivness will require flexibility, imagination, patience, a relational disposition, and discursive skills. Experiences like tabletop RPGs cultivate that habitus and can create spaces for future and current citizens to develop these skills and commitments.

Understood through Dewey’s conception of experience as educative for democratic life, the dissertation identifies ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life as process oriented and

⁵² John Dewey and Melvin L. Rogers, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2012), 122.

educative, inviting deeper reflection on ones' understanding of democratic life. It is an autotelic approach to citizenship that prioritizes committed collaboration with others, imaginative and emergent approaches to problem solving, and the ability to critically negotiate systems of power. The chapter identifies the ways in which tabletop RPGs can foster all of these behaviors, before closing by arguing for an autotelic citizenship infused with Deweyan spirit.

CHAPTER TWO

AN ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORY AND IMPACT OF TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Because tabletop RPGs engage players to utilize imagination, critical thinking, and group discourse, the impact of playing can go beyond mere amusement to become formative experiences for players on a cognitive, social, and affective level. The development of skills around frame analysis and self-reflection intersect with the group bonds and discourse dynamics found at the table. This creates unique opportunities for players to negotiate moral and ethical decisions as they balance group interests with their own and think through the reasons their character approaches a decision. However, for all the empathy that playing may encourage, tabletop RPGs also carry a long legacy of relying on violence as a primary mechanic. They can also reinforce racist and sexist ideologies in both formal game materials and the behavior of players at the table, but recent movements within the gaming community have challenged this through innovative design and broader representation.

In order to better understand how tabletop RPGs can serve as tools for democratic civic formation, it is important to first understand how these games are defined, how they function, and how they impact players. To situate the discussion, I will first examine what scholars of games and play have said about the relationships of game play to everyday reality, including addressing whether or not playing games is truly considered an escapist activity.

The Nature of Play and Games

Johan Huizinga's 1938 anthropological study *Homo Ludens* is the seminal work beginning the modern history of research on the social significance and impact of games.⁵³ Huizinga argued that games and play were necessary to the formation of culture as it is currently known. Play was a civilizing force that eventually pushed humans to imaginatively represent their world and structure social interactions.⁵⁴ Play, for Huizinga, was identified as free, distinct from "ordinary" life, not connected to material interest, and sustained by the creation of internal order. Believing that Huizinga's definition lacked nuance, Roger Callois later developed an expanded definition that to include four basic categories (*agon*: competition; *alea*: chance; *mimicry*: simulation; *ilinx*: vertigo).⁵⁵ Play also ranged in purposefulness as well, ranging from *ludus* (controlled play) to *paidia* (spontaneous play).⁵⁶

One of Huizinga most significant contributions to the study of play's role in human life was the introduction of the idea of the "magic circle" - the player-created space where games occur and in which a temporary play reality exists within the ordinary world.⁵⁷ The term and its

⁵³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; a Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1938), 65.

⁵⁴ Critics held that Huizinga's claims went too far and that held that play was a necessary, but not sufficient element of culture. Additionally Jacques Erdmann and Tara Fickle both point out that Huizinga's understanding of culture is rooted in a western ethnocentrism. Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: from Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 114.

⁵⁵ Roger Caillois and Elaine P. Halperin, "The Structure and Classification of Games." *Diogenes* 3, no. 12 (1955): 64.

⁵⁶ Callois also said that categorization and defining of games was not as simple as it appeared. He called it despair inducing because of the range of variety and contradictions within games. Ehrmann claims that Callois was guilty of smoothing over contradictions as soon as he established his categorization system. Jacques Ehrmann, Cathy Lewis, and Phil Lewis. "Homo Ludens Revisited" *Yale French Studies*, no. 41 (1968): 43.

⁵⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.

interpretations vary greatly across scholars. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman expanded the conception of the magic circle in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, saying that the magic circle was essentially the experience of the game itself.⁵⁸ Focused less on precisely defining what the magic circle is, Jaako Stenros holds that the value of the term is how it is intuitively understood and accepted as the way which play is separate from non-play and calls it “a handy metaphor that acts as intellectual shorthand for a more complex set of social relations.”⁵⁹ This framing of the magic circle is useful when discussing tabletop RPGs because of the ways in which players knowingly create and then engage with a separate reality from their current one. Stenros highlights the ways in which this acceptance – and the differentiation between is real and imagine - is intuitive to players. Players do not need to yield their understanding and consciousness of their current reality to participate and enjoy another. Comparing it to a picture frame that helps an onlooker separate the art from the wallpaper from the picture frame, Batesone says the magic circle functions as metacommunication that lets the player more easily make these distinctions.⁶⁰

Callois cautioned that a failure to fully separate between play and daily life would lead to what he termed corrupted play - play that lasts beyond its intended duration and becomes focused on either then means or ends rather than the experience itself. It becomes compulsory,

⁵⁸ Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 96.

⁵⁹ Jaako Stenros, “In Defense of a Magic Circle: The Social, Mental and Cultural Boundaries of Play,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association. Vol 1*, No. 2 (2014): 147.

⁶⁰ Laurie Schick, "Breaking Frame in a Role-Play Simulation: A Language Socialization Perspective," *Simulation & Gaming* 39, no. 2 (2008): 188.

overly structured, and all-consuming, with the frame of the game being lost and reality and the game blurring in ways that become potentially harmful and disorienting and dispiriting to the players.⁶¹ In contrast to the view that play occurs in a separate space, Jaques Ehrmann believed that both Huizinga and Callois drew too much separation between play and reality, thereby treating “reality” as an unquestioned given that is neutral and has no effect on play.⁶² He highlights play and games’ creative, disruptive, and discursive qualities, positing that when play is understood as discursive, it avoids trivializing the activity as purely escapist and allows play to critique reality. Consequently, not recognizing that the experience of play can impact how a player then engages with the world outside the game limits its transformative capacity.

Victor Turner expands on Ehrmann’s challenge to not fully separate play and “normal” life. He argues that games have a liminoid⁶³ quality, especially those that induced flow state or other forms of immersion. The experience of moving through these spaces allows for what Turner identified as a ‘ludic’ recombination in any and every possible pattern, however weird,” of set social patterns and structures.⁶⁴ The experiences of these new pattern or interrupt the set

⁶¹ Joseph Laycock illustrates corrupted play with the example of a wrestling match between siblings that somehow turns into an actual physical fight. There is no stop point where someone says, “Ok, now we are just trying to hurt each other,” and often any responsibility for harm will be dismissed upon it occurring during a “game.” Professional athletes may also find themselves moving in and out of states of corrupted play as what started out as a joyful game they could excel at shifts to become their primary source of income and no longer optional. I would argue that Donald Trump’s candidacy for presidency, the aftermath of his victory, his reaction to losing the 2020 election, and the 1/6/2021 insurrection are another example of corrupted play and the dangerous results. Jon Glover also connects conspiracy theories to corrupted play and highlights that movements like Q-Anon have been connected to and even posited to have begun as alternative reality games. Jon Glover, “This Is Not a Game: Conspiracy Theorizing as Alternate-Reality Game,” *Reallifemag.com*, last modified July 13th, 2020.

⁶² Ehrmann, Lewis, and Lewis, "Homo Ludens Revisited," 34.

⁶³ For Turner, liminoid is distinct from liminal.

⁶⁴ Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology," *Rice Institute Pamphlet-Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974) 61.

cognitive frames that primarily order ones understanding of the world. During imaginative play activities, a new frame, or metacognitive context, is formed in order to make sense of the activities.⁶⁵ These frames can often shift the meaning of symbols and objects (i.e. a stick becomes a magic wand to an imaginative child). Games create and amplify places and opportunities for contingency and new meanings. This can support the creation of emergent ways of living and personal change.⁶⁶

Thinker Miguel Sicart broadened this approach unbifurcated view even further, stridently denying the opposition of play to reality and claiming that it should be better understood as not just an activity, but a “way of being in the world” - a complex social frame with value claims, regulating principles, and cultural constructions.⁶⁷ As a result, Sicart believes that play functions similar to carnivale traditions and can draw attention to paradox and critical truths in society. It is ways of behaviors in the world that both please and challenge players and their daily reality and habits. He also believes that play is not inherently fun or positive saying, “Play can be dangerous, and can be hurting, damaging, antisocial, corrupting.”⁶⁸ It is better understood as pleasurable rather than fun and can continue to be pleasurable even as it frustrates, agonizes, and even damages the player. The recognition of the complex range of emotions that play elicits

⁶⁵ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 175.

⁶⁶ Thomas Malaby, “Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games,” *Games and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2007): 104.

⁶⁷ Sicart, *Play Matters*, 2.

⁶⁸ Sicart, *Play Matters*, 3.

complicates attempts at its trivialization and reinforces its capacity to be educative. Play is not merely a frivolous flight from the here and now.

Play, Games, and Escapism

At the same time, for many people, the experience of play and games as separate from daily routine is part of their power and appeal. This surfaces questions about whether or not participation in tabletop RPGs is a form of escapism from current reality. If a person primarily participates in a game to escape the world, it would be difficult to make the claim that this same participation could lead to deeper civic commitments. Additionally, most of the traditional settings of role-playing games were heavily influenced by fantasy or science fiction - both genres in which the world does not replicate exactly the current reality, but instead includes a fantastical setting.⁶⁹ Exploration of both the purpose for escape into games and the term escapism itself are necessary in addressing this.

Because early tabletop RPGs were based in a traditional fantasy setting, it is worth noting that famed author J. R. R. Tolkien famously wrote in his essay “On Fairy Stories,” that fantasy stories were meant to allow readers to escape the current reality. Equally important is that Tolkien went on to clarify the “escape” was to be understood not as a flight from responsibility, but an escape from the prison of the real world that was often cruel and hope crushing.⁷⁰ This “escape” was meant to be restorative so that an individual could return to the world refreshed and

⁶⁹ However, there is also extensive research and writing that claims science fiction is often intended and especially adroit at critique of current cultural.

⁷⁰ Of note, Tolkien lost his father as a child, grew up in poverty, and served in World War I in the nightmarish Battle of the Somme. There was much he may have wanted to escape from.

ready to carry out one's commitments with more hope and imagination.⁷¹ Tolkien's framing presents the experience of escape through his stories not as escape *from* one's life, but escape *for* one's life.

At the same time, Tolkien's view was not monolithic amongst fantasy writers. Nearly forty years later in 1978, British fantasy writer Michael Moorcock wrote "Epic Pooh," a critique of the escapist, provincial, and often conservative attitudes he saw present within fantasy worlds, using Tolkien, *Winnie the Pooh*, and *Watership Down* as examples.⁷² In it, he called for fantasy that was set in urban and diverse environments, avoided black and white moral choices, and did not automatically allow people to avoid the issues facing their daily life and instead included complex issues that face all societies. While these authors disagreed on the purpose, both still acknowledged that the experience of reading fantasy should impact how the reader later engages with the world. Ironically, both had a profound impact on the creation of early tabletop RPGs, with Tolkien's Middle-earth and Moorcock's "Elric" stories inspiring much of *Dungeons & Dragons* universe.⁷³

Furthermore, game scholars do not deny the desire to escape as a motivation for playing RPGs, but they also argue that reasons for escape vary wildly.⁷⁴ In addition, the intensity of time

⁷¹ John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretation: JRR Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings"* (2008): 15.

⁷² Michael Moorcock, "Epic Pooh," *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy* (London: Orion Publishing Group, Limited, 1987).

⁷³ Tolkien's estate famously sued TSR, *D&D's* initial publisher which is why the games now feature halflings and not hobbits. Moorcock's "Elric" stories were so popular amongst early players, an entire set of rule revisions was published so that players could incorporate elements of his world building into their campaigns more directly.

⁷⁴ Harald Warmelink, Casper Harteveld, and Igor Mayer, "Press Enter or Escape to Play - Deconstructing Escapism in Multiplayer Gaming" (paper presented at DiGRA Conference, West London, September 1-4, 2009).

spent is also a factor in whether or not the behavior can be considered harmful, neutral, or even therapeutic.⁷⁵ Harald Warmlink, Casper Hartevelde, and Igor Mayer argue that the interpretation of what qualifies as escapist activity as opposed to simply reflective or solitary is unclear. As a result, they believe the term “escapism” is unlikely to elicit helpful data in research or surveys and cautions against generalizing game play as escapist behavior.⁷⁶

Conversely, gaming scholar Jane McGonigal is explicit that the appeal of games and their power lies in the capacity to provide escape. She argues that games do provide an escape from a world that is largely unsatisfactory, citing the ways in which games provide both broader epic narrative and give immediate feedback and a sense of completion that most people do not experience often in daily life.⁷⁷ However, McGonigal then turns the conversation around on its head, saying that this massive turn to escapism points to erroneous approaches to *daily life*, not to unhealthy interactions with games. Claiming that “reality is broken,” McGonigal argues that non-game life should then be reinterpreted as through a gaming lens, using gameful practices to make things like daily living, personal health, etc. more meaningful.⁷⁸ This supports the claim that games and gameful practices can improve on current practices.

⁷⁵ Dongdong Li, Albert Liao, and Angeline Khoo, "Examining the Influence of Actual-Ideal Self-discrepancies, Depression, and Escapism, on Pathological Gaming Among Massively Multiplayer Online Adolescent Gamers," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 14, no. 9 (2011): 536.

⁷⁶ Warmelink, Hartevelde, and Mayer, "Press Enter or Escape to Play-Deconstructing Escapism in Multiplayer Gaming."

⁷⁷ Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, (London: Penguin, 2011), 5.

⁷⁸ Jane McGonigal, *SuperBetter: The Power of Living Gamefully*, (London: Penguin, 2015), 10.

Other scholars have argued that the escaping into games (especially role-playing games) is done to take advantage of the space the games create for identity formation that often exists apart and detached from broader oppressive systems.⁷⁹ Sarah Lynne Bowman nuances this claim, arguing that this should be seen as healthy escapism when it is a reflective stage during which an individual is focused on their own conception of self-hood and identity, negotiated through their character.⁸⁰ As a clinical psychologist, Bowman's research has examined how participating in role-playing games has impacted the participants' mental health as well as their sense of self-integration. She writes about how characters that players create and later role-play in the games become spaces in which they can try on different identities (e.g. gender, personality, or sexual orientation). For instance, a player who had not been comfortable expressing a sexual identity beyond heterosexual in their daily life may do so within the game. As a result of this experience, they may decide they are more comfortable identifying as pansexual or identify that their initial sexual orientation was strongly influenced by their cultural upbringing and did not accurately reflect how they felt. As a result, they may feel able to express a more authentic or integrated sense of self as a result of playing the games. This experience can either be fostered through the larger game and group, encouraging self-integration; or it can stall out at a surface level and function as an escape rather than a process of growth. When players role-play their character,

⁷⁹ Nathaniel Rogers, "'A World Where They Belonged': Queer Women's Use of a Dungeons & Dragons Game to Experiment With, Express, and Explore Identity," (PhD diss., San Diego State University, 2020).; Kimberly Brown, "Slaying Dragons: The Therapeutic Value of Tabletop Gaming," (PhD diss., City University of Seattle, 2018).

⁸⁰ Identity experimentation and formation within games will be discussed at further length later in this chapter.

Bowman believes they are experimenting with identities and becoming more cognizant of the ways in which they take on various roles in everyday life outside of the game.⁸¹

Bowman's argument is rooted in the work of sociologist Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman highlighted that every person is enacting a variety of roles throughout their daily life that structure their social interactions and support social cohesion. People move back and forth through these roles as settings and expectations shift even as they also remain themselves. Role-play within games allows a person to intentionally front, or dominantly present, different role or traits to others. As a result, they may become more aware of the ways in which they unconsciously take on roles in normal life. Within the experience of "escape" in the game, players can cultivate a different theory of mind by intentionally trying to think as though they were someone else. This both expands a player's imagination and builds skills around critical problem solving, as they may become more aware of their own bias in thinking or gaps in knowledge.

History of Tabletop RPGs

Having showcased the significance of play and problematized the claims that it is only used as an escape from life, this work will now examine the development of role-playing games over time. The history of the games development over time illuminates the ways in which game mechanics and intentionality within players and GMs impact the level of reflection and formation that may occur in the games. As discussed in chapter one, tabletop RPGs are distinctive from other games in that they have the element of the player taking on the role or

⁸¹ Bowman, *Functions of Role-playing Games*, 47.

persona of someone else. When the author plays ultimate frisbee, they do so as themselves – Susan Haarman. Whereas when the author plays *Call of Cthulhu* (a tabletop game based on cosmic horror tropes), they are both themselves AND their character Linnea Hammersmith - an heiress with too much time and money and an unhealthy obsession with the occult.

Tracing the history of role-playing games is complex because of the ways in which narrative creation and role enactment are omnipresent in human life. For instance, Bowman and Gary Fine both draw upon Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In it, Goffman argues that role performance occurs in everyday life and that all people perform roles and shift identity as the stage in their life and circumstances demands. As a result, although formalized versions of what could be considered tabletop RPGs games did not appear until the 1700's, it is important to note that essential elements to the role-play of these games mirror behavior present in everyday life.

Tabletop RPGs, as they are currently understood, have their roots in a late 18th century Prussian war game called *Kriegspiel*.⁸² Prussian army commanders were given a board, materials, and historic and fictional battle scenarios to solve as a group in hopes of training them to be better military strategists.⁸³ While much older games like Go and chess were also used to build skills around strategy, *Kriegspiel* differed because it did not use abstract principles. Instead, soldiers were given specific situations, terrain, and regiments sizes to manipulate. Additionally, this wargame was not understood as leisure or escapist distraction. The officers who played were

⁸² The translation literally means “wargame.”

⁸³ Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012), 720.

expected to translate what they learned from the game and immediately apply into the real world and the battlefield.⁸⁴ They were utilized heavily during the Napoleonic wars by troops on both sides and, as early 1880, a modified version called *Strategos* was being used in classes in the United States Naval Academy.⁸⁵ From the beginning, these games were designed to be realistic educational tools that could simulate the unexpected events and conditions that could occur in war.

Games like *Kriegspiel* that focused on martial training shifted off the battlefield and into the commercial leisure market when science fiction author H. G. Wells created a wargame called *Little Wars*. Intended for children, it included miniatures and a book with numerous photos of battlefields and soldiers to encourage imagination.⁸⁶ The United States during the 1950's saw the creation of *Tactics* and *Gettysburg*, two commercially successful wargames specifically intended for civilians and leisure play.⁸⁷ Laycock argues a significant contributor to the broad success of these games was because they took a reverential tone around significant American historical events like the battle of Gettysburg. Play was seen as not just leisure, but a way to honor history. This intentional tone setting in early iterations of tabletop RPGs highlights the ways in which games have long been designed and intended to curate a particular emotional response or viewpoint in players.

⁸⁴ Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games : What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says About Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, Calif: University of California Press, 2015), 35.

⁸⁵ Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 79.

⁸⁶ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 34. Wells was actually a pacifist and created the game in hopes to provide an outlet for the impulses.

⁸⁷ Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 104.

Wargaming became particularly popular in the 1960's on college campuses, where students of both history and hard sciences played for fun and (perhaps unintentionally) honed skills that served them in the classroom. Play required a highly focused interest in military history and frequently utilized complex mathematical calculations and tables. Laycock described this often tedious and very particular form of entertainment as an “unlikely midwife for the genre of fantasy role playing.”⁸⁸ While the execution of these early games was initially centered around mathematical calculation and probability tables, eventually play began to evolve to include elements of personal role-play as well as basic simulation. The shift toward role-play within these games occurred in a variety of places, but one of the best documented occurrences was in the Twin Cities wargaming community.

In 1968, a University of Minnesota physics major named David Wesley created an experimental wargame called “Braunstein” that was intended to involve more players and be more collaborative rather than simply competitive. He included the role of an impartial referee and (instead of just two players facing off) around twenty people were each given a specific role as a soldier or inhabitant of the village of Braunstein, each with their own unique goal in addition to a faction loyalty. Rather than pursuing in an orderly fashion, the players leaned into their own motivations and caused havoc in the scenario. It may also be the first documented case of the now sacrosanct tradition of players taking a GM's meticulously crafted world and unleashing total chaos. Wesley saw it as a total failure, but his players loved the changes.⁸⁹ The Twin Cities

⁸⁸ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 31.

⁸⁹ Michael Tresca, *Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2014), 60.

wargaming community would continue to encourage the innovations, shifting traditional strategy games towards role-playing games by extending battles into longer connected campaigns, having players identify with one specific miniature on the board, and giving players options beyond simply attacking or retreating.⁹⁰ From the beginning of its modern iteration, innovation in tabletop RPG gaming has been driven by the imagination and input of the local community. This emphasis on responsiveness to player desires and player generated content would continue to skyrocket over the decades until it became a central feature of the game.

Dungeons & Dragons, perhaps the best known iteration of tabletop RPGs, was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974, with Gygax taking inspiration for the setting from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and other high fantasy writers.⁹¹ It included archetypal fantasy characters and the use of magic. This specific tabletop RPG became very popular amongst hobbyists, with numerous imitations and variations being created by other companies. This early iteration of *D&D* experienced an initial peak in popularity in the 1980's, but play began to diminish in the 90's with both the rise of video games and a moral panic from many conservative Christian organizations around the fantasy content of the game.⁹²

As *D&D*, the prototypical tabletop RPG, began to wane in popularity in the 1990's, other game designers began to experiment with different structures for game rules (known as game systems). These newer game systems began to further emphasize more role-playing and

⁹⁰ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 18.

⁹¹ Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 109.

⁹² Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 16.

collaborative problem solving approaches. Games like *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* offered systems that did not require extensive probability tables and centered dialogue over math in their mechanics. White Wolf Publishing (the publishers of *Vampire: The Masquerade*) also created a larger ecosystem of lore where all of their games co-existed. These “World of Darkness” games also intentionally used the term “chronicle” to refer to ongoing games sessions, and not “campaign” — the typical term used that was inherited from RPG’s genesis in wargaming.⁹³ Adventures were chapters, not adventures, and they were run by a Storyteller, not a Dungeon Master. The shift in terminology was meant to shift players into a more narrative frame of mind, which would allow a story to unfold instead of approaching the game like a chain of loosely related tactical missions.⁹⁴ Play dynamics in “World of Darkness” games were darker and more modern, reflecting the broader anxieties of Gen X players and broader society, especially around climate change, the dehumanization of capitalism, and eroding traditional social structure.⁹⁵ These shifts in terminology and mechanics point to both the adaptability of these games as well as the ways in which they are able to present a viewpoint through gameplay along with narrative.

⁹³ Joe Garrad, “Fluff Ain’t Rules: Absence, Presence and Haunting in Game Design,” (conference address given at *Absent Presences* at Manchester Metropolitan University on June 27, 2019), <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:25087/>

⁹⁴ Laycock believes that this was also a deliberate step to distinguish *Vampire* as something other than wargaming. Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 145.

⁹⁵ William J. White, Jonne Arjoranta, Michael Hitchens, Jon Peterson, Evan Torner, and Jonathan Walton, “Tabletop Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, eds. José Pablo Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 68.

The widespread availability of the internet in the early 2000's led to broader dissemination and conversations around tabletop RPG game designs by independent designers. Online forums like The Forge becoming places where independent RPGs were disseminated, narrative driven game structure was encouraged, and theory around the design of games was developed.⁹⁶ Games innovation shifted toward even further stripped down mechanics that allowed for a bigger focus on narrative and story. There was also an emergence of what Bowman called “distribution of creative agency,” in which game structure and mechanics allowed players themselves to have more control, impact, and ownership of the narrative world and characters.⁹⁷ The role of the GM in these games was more as a lead author amongst peers, rather than the traditional God-like arbiter of all game events. This turn toward co-authorship also began to invite the reflection on how power played out in games, as well as how they might be used as tools to critique current power structures. The Forge fostered the writing and design of independent creators such as Meg Baker who emphasized that games are places to explore larger social issues and produce alternative narratives as an act of creative resistance.

The latest innovation in tabletop RPGs came in the last ten years as the digital tools and the internet fostered easy access to game materials and long distance play. Tabletop RPG play grew exponentially in part because of the exposure that open access web platforms like YouTube and Twitch facilitated through “actual plays.” Actual plays are podcasts and/or videos, in which

⁹⁶ William J. White, *Tabletop RPG Design in Theory and Practice at the Forge, 2001–2012: Designs and Discussions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 67.

⁹⁷ Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Introduction to Tabletop Role-playing Games,” *Transformative Play Initiatives*. December 30, 2021. Video Lecture, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsRG0cRuJ7M>.

role-playing games are played for an audience, rather than just the enjoyment of the group. Shows like *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* also became enormously successful commercially through viewer support, ad revenue, and even merchandising. Many scholars credit shows like these with increasing representation and visibility of diverse players and spurring further diversification.⁹⁸ Carlson points out that the audience of these shows are also not solely the traditional white, male profile of 1980's *D&D* players, and that more and more players and viewers identify as queer, women, or people of color.⁹⁹

Impact of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Tabletop RPGs have proven themselves to be a financially successful and popular hobby that continues to grow and evolve alongside its players and larger society. Significantly, the game's elements of role-play demands a level of imagination, participatory commitments, self-reflection, creative problem solving, and collaboration from players that most leisure activities do not. Additionally, the time commitment of tabletop RPGs often facilitates the creation of tight social networks and the process of gameplay encourages imaginative experimentation with different personality traits, social roles, and viewpoints.¹⁰⁰ The complexity and capacity for formation of these games can yield impacts on players that go beyond simple amusement. True to their earliest roots as educational tools, educators are now utilizing tabletop RPGs in schools.

⁹⁸ Amanda Farough, "How Tabletop RPG Actual Play Shows Are Inspiring a New Generation of Fans — and Products," *VentureBeat*, March 17, 2020, <https://venturebeat.com/business/how-tabletop-rpg-actual-play-shows-are-inspiring-a-new-generation-of-fans-and-products/>.

⁹⁹ Carlson, *Beyond Bikini-mail*, 39.

¹⁰⁰ Mikko Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development—a Survey Report," *International Journal of Role-playing* 3, no. 1 (2012): 50.

They are showing up as everything from officially sanctioned extracurriculars, therapeutic group activities offered by counseling offices, or immersive ways to learn history.¹⁰¹ The educational, formative, and therapeutic benefits of tabletop RPGs are well documented, with Bowman classifying the benefits into the three categories of cognitive, behavioral, and affective gains.¹⁰² Inspired by her categories, the following discussion will be framed through the categories of cognitive, social, and affective impact of tabletop RPGs on players.

Cognitive

An extensive amount of research and writing has been done on the cognitive and learning benefits of tabletop RPGs. They have been integrated into classrooms as a learning tool to present case studies,¹⁰³ teach literature,¹⁰⁴ history,¹⁰⁵ narrative theory,¹⁰⁶ coding,¹⁰⁷ power and

¹⁰¹ *Reacting To The Past* is a successful series piloted by Barnard University that offers classroom-ready RPG modules over significant moments in history. <https://reacting.barnard.edu>

¹⁰² Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Educational Live Action Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review," *In Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, ed. Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014), 120.

¹⁰³ David Simkins, "Playing with Ethics: Experiencing New Ways of Being in RPGs," *In Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, ed. Karen Schrier and David Gibson (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2010), 78.

¹⁰⁴ Mike P Cook, Matthew Gremo, and Ryan Morgan, "Playing Around with Literature: Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Middle Grades ELA," *Voices from the Middle* 25, no. 2 (2017): 63.

¹⁰⁵ William J. White, "The Right to Dream of the Middle Ages: Simulating the Medieval in Tabletop RPGs," *In Digital Gaming Re-Imagines the Middle Ages*, ed. Daniel T. Kline (London: Routledge, 2013), 69.

¹⁰⁶ Jennifer Ann Grouling Cover, "Tabletop Role-Playing Games: Perspectives from Narrative, Game, and Rhetorical Theory," (Masters thesis, North Carolina State University, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Konstantinos Ntokos, "CodePlay: A Tabletop Role-Playing Game System used in Teaching Game Programming Using Content Gamification," *The Computer Games Journal* 9, no. 3 (2020): 46.

privilege,¹⁰⁸ heritage enactment and preservation,¹⁰⁹ and library programming.¹¹⁰ They have been recommend to aid with social skills,¹¹¹ depression,¹¹² chronic pain,¹¹³ and ameliorating mental health during COVID-19.¹¹⁴ Because of the abundance of this research, this dissertation will not go in-depth into specific applications, and instead focus on the broader philosophical implications of their use and potential for civic formation and outcomes. However, frame analysis and meaning making, two of the most important cognitive impacts of tabletop RPGs, do have broader implications for how the games can contribute to democratic civic formation. They are defined at length below and further discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Frame Analysis & Shifting

Much of the positive cognitive impact of playing tabletop RPGs comes from the ability of the games tabletop to facilitate experiences of cognitive immersion through narrative

¹⁰⁸ Antero Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (2017): 232.

¹⁰⁹ Michal Mochocki, *Role-Play as a Heritage Practice: Historical LARP, Tabletop RPG and Reenactment*. (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹¹⁰ Steven Torres-Roman and Cason E. Snow, *Dragons in the Stacks: A Teen Librarian's Guide to Tabletop Role-Playing*, ABC-CLIO, 2014.

¹¹¹ Stéphane Daniau, "The Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games—: From Play Skills to Human Skills," *Simulation & Gaming* 47, no. 4 (2016): 425.

¹¹² Aaron Segal, "Depression RPG: Weaving Teaching and Knowledge into Gameplay," (PhD diss., Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2018).

¹¹³ Ann Marie Roepke, Sara R. Jaffee, Olivia M. Riffle, Jane McGonigal, Rose Broome, and Bez Maxwell, "Randomized Controlled Trial of SuperBetter, a Smartphone-based/internet-based Self-help Tool to Reduce Depressive Symptoms," *Games for Health Journal* 4, no. 3 (2015): 240.

¹¹⁴ Jane McGonigal, "5 Science-Backed Benefits of Playing Tabletop RPGs During (and After) COVID-19," *Pop Mythology*, last modified May 15, 2020, <https://www.popmythology.com/tabletop-rpg-dnd-benefits-science-coronavirus-crisis/>.

involvement. Janet Murray claims that the brain processes “stirring narratives” the same way across mediums, with individuals just as likely to become fully absorbed into the experiences of playing games as they would be by watching a movie or reading a book.¹¹⁵ Sociologist Gary Fine conducted a seminal study of fantasy role-playing game players in 1983 (later published as *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*) and one of his primary findings was that this immersion leads players to experience what he called engrossment. Fine said that engrossment occurred when players willingly bracket their own selves to focus more heavily on their games selves, as manifested by the characters.¹¹⁶ Fine believed that the players simultaneously saw themselves as both as their out of game self and as their in-game self. It was a separate self that sat alongside their primary self while they played the game. Equally significant, this engrossment was not total and players would shift in and out of it according to the social interactions that were occurring at the same time.

This complex cognitive exercise that Fine documented in engrossment is something he identified as frame analysis. Fine also utilized the work of Erving Goffman around roles when writing about these games, but focused more on Goffman’s conception of frames as they relates to holding and moving between roles. According to Goffman, frame analysis studies how an individual shifts back and forth through frames of meaning in order to understand their own perceptions of the finite world. Fine quotes Goffman saying, a frame is “a situational definition constructed in accordance with organizing principles that govern both the events themselves and

¹¹⁵ Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

¹¹⁶ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

the participants' experience of these events.”¹¹⁷ Frames provide contexts, which enable the interpretation of events. As a result, individuals will shift back and forth between frames as a result of the setting they are in and the roles they hold in order to process what is occurring. As referenced earlier in this chapter, different frames shift the meaning of symbols and objects. Individuals who get stuck in a particular frame may not perceive important information about the reality of a situation.¹¹⁸

Within games, Fine saw three distinctive frames that players were utilizing - the frame of games' internally constructed reality or fantasy world; the frame of the games mechanics and internal system and rules; and the frame of the normal reality.¹¹⁹ Dennis Waskul connected these frames to the idea of persona, player, and person respectively.¹²⁰ This corresponds with what Steven Dashiell identified as the interactional component of games that engage the players across three levels - the players as game participants, as imaginary characters, and people engaged in social activity with others.¹²¹ Importantly, Fine observed that not only did tabletop role-players

¹¹⁷ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 182.

¹¹⁸ For example, what looks like a wedding is understood differently if it is happening in a theater during a performance.

¹¹⁹ An example of those multiple frames and switches would be a player, who upon being told by the game master they are encountering a glowing locked door, says out loud, “Hmm, surely this door is enchanted. I’m rolling for investigation. Can someone pass the chips?” The first frame and sentence is within the game reality where the player is role-playing and announcing her character’s observation and thoughts about the door. The second frame and sentence is that of the games internal mechanics when the individual acts as a player of the game and utilizes its mechanics to pursue a goal - determining the nature of the door. The final frame and sentence is the individual, fully aware of their circumstances asking other individuals in the room to pass them the chips. They are present to and understand each frame and can slide back and forth between all of them easily and without confusion.

¹²⁰ Waskul, “The Role-playing Game and the Game of Role-playing,” 23.

¹²¹ Steven Dashiell, “Table Talk”: Defining Metadiscourse of Analog Games,” *Acta Ludologica* 4, no. 2 (2021): 96.

experience different frames for the self while playing, they were also able to switch back and forth between frames with a high level of speed and ease. Players never lost sight of broader reality, but were also able to take seriously the internal reality and systems of each frame. RPG players can move easily between frames, allowing them to immerse in the narrative of the game, enjoy the strategy and challenge the game mechanics may demand, and build social bonds with others at the table simultaneously. While this is commonly accepted in the field of role-play study, there are some diverging opinions. Communications scholar William White believes it is actually frame shifting and not role assumption that is at the core of tabletop RPG role-play. He argues that players are not so much taking on a role, but rather positioning themselves in a diegetic and ludic frame of mind when playing.¹²² Of note, much of White's work focuses on communication patterns in the games.

The cognitive skill of easy frame shifting found in tabletop RPG players is a developed skill that others may find difficult. Laycock believes that difficulty in frame shifting was actually fueled by some of the Christian critics of tabletop games during the Satanic Panic. Opponents accused tabletop RPGs (in particular *D&D*) of introducing and encouraging youth to practice magic, worship other deities, and perform evil, violent actions.¹²³ While players could shift back and forth and make distinctions, Christian critics of the games took a cosmological view of the

¹²² William J. White, "Playing House in a World of Night: Discursive Trajectories of Masculinity in a Tabletop Role-playing Game," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2, (2011): 21.

¹²³ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 20. Laycock also believes that this may have been a manifestation of what Jason Bivens called the "erotics of fear," in which individuals become fascinated with and even take pleasure from fixating on something they reject or condemn. Jack Chick's famous evangelical pamphlets and evangelical haunted houses are examples of this.

game world reality and became stuck in that frame. Players would respond to these critiques by reminding critics that the content was fictional and actions were narrated in the game, not actually performed. Fine, in a response to rising protests of the game, said that, “What is different is that fantasy role players, in contrast to members of crusading groups, it that they define these activities as inherently social, imaginative, and limited, rather than cosmological and self-defining.” Laycock says that this lack of fluid frameshifting in one’s life both resembles Huizinga’s idea of corrupted play, as well as encourages conspiracy theory thinking and a willful rejection of informational literacy.

Meaning Making

Ironically, tabletop RPGs do bear some similarity to cosmological religious traditions in that they can be tools in meaning making. Laycock draws a comparison between active tabletop RPG players and devout Christians, claiming that both are using their respective activity of choice to help bring a sort of sensible order to their world. Laycock says, “They are both constructing new worlds in which tragedy is rendered sensible, and if the forces of chaos cannot be annihilated, we can at least fight them as heroes.”¹²⁴ While some Christians apply the principle values and story of their faith to their own daily lives, some tabletop RPG players are doing so within the constraints of their game. As players role-play their characters, they construct a narrative of why they behave the ways they do. Games like *D&D* regularly talk about and apply concepts like moral alignment and driving needs or desires. These mechanics and character

¹²⁴ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, xiii.

elements force players to justify how the actions they take sync up with self-professed moral positionality.¹²⁵

According to Laycock, it is the co-created narratives of tabletop RPGS that allows players a sort of radical agency in the construction of their game worlds, characters, and course of action. Players are able to experiment with “ludic recombination”- reordering their world and lives within the game. Because the games allows space and time for players to reflect on the game’s reality, they may begin to compare it to their own and eventually consider how that reordering and revaluing could occur in their own life. This encourages a broader mindset as they generate¹²⁶ capacities for increased mental flexibility and cognitive openness is an essential resource when considering how these games might encourage healthier civic behavior in communities.

Social

Beyond cognitive benefits, tabletop RPGs also impact player social lives and behavior. In Fine’s work in *Shared Fantasy*, he highlighted the ways in which the experience of playing the games constructed a supportive social world for players.¹²⁷ Individuals interviewed found the games to be autotelic, with the ultimate purpose of the game being the experience of playing itself and not winning. Most players were focused less on the success of their performance in the

¹²⁵ The alignment chart, a nine squared matrix upon which players plot themselves, may be one of the more recognizable elements of *D&D* outside of game playing circles. It focuses on consequence and action centered approach to moral action similar to the pragmatic moral philosophy of John Dewey. *D&D* moral alignment is also an interesting example because within the system of the game, moral positioning is only verified through actions and their consequences. A player cannot keep claiming to be lawful good if they are secretly a mafia hitman.

¹²⁶ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 26.

¹²⁷ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 39.

game and instead on the enjoyment of the game and the company they were with. The social element of tabletop RPGs is at its center both in mechanics and impact. It is the specific necessity for synchronous and proximate socialization¹²⁸ with others in tabletop RPGs that enables them to become a sort of lab for democratic civic habits, as players are unable to withdraw from the influence and impact of others.¹²⁹

Fine believed that the impact of these close knit groups formed within the game came not just from extensive socialization, but because the groups often created their own idiocultures - or “a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serves as the basis for further interaction.”¹³⁰ Rene Schallegger said this behavior helped turn players groups into “pseudo tribal groups” and claimed that the process of creating a shared narrative led to a sense of intimacy in their social bonds.¹³¹ The shared culture within a group is often sustained and amplified through specialized jargon. It is created both through game mechanics and the cultural reference points (both pop and classical) that inform the game material. Being fluent in this unique “language” allows players to strengthen feelings of community and belonging through their enthusiasm and knowledge of the game. Christopher Lehigh says that within these spaces, an individual's dominant frame of

¹²⁸ Although the huge boom in tabletop RPGs showed that they could be played just as effectively over Zoom, the author argues a Zoom call can create its own sense of pseudo-proximate space if all parties are engaged.

¹²⁹ This concept will be developed in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5.

¹³⁰ Gary Alan Fine and Brooke Harrington, "Tiny Publics: Small Groups and Civil Society," *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 3 (2004): 347-348.

¹³¹ Rene Reinhold Schallegger, *The Postmodern Joy of Role-playing Games: Agency, Ritual and Meaning in the Medium* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 3.

reference for other players may be that of how they interact in the game world rather than who they are in the world outside of the game and RPG culture. As a result, players who find it difficult to navigate mainstream culture may find that they can build relationships more easily without the anxiety of failing other cultural expectations.¹³²

The community created by these games also often extends beyond the adventuring parties. Chris Bateman posits that there is no such thing as “playing a game alone” and highlighting the ways in which players interact directly with others or with a broader community of practice. He argues that tabletop RPGs not only build ties between the specific group playing the game together, but also connect all the individuals who “practice” tabletop RPGs.¹³³ One modern tabletop RPG, *Blades in the Dark*, has a section of the rulebook that tells readers that they only need three things to play - the book, each other, and the internet, where they will find videos and forums full of people who are playing the game and experimenting with it. The playbook directly encourages the reader to utilize this internet community to troubleshoot and innovate. It is an explicit claim that experiences with community could lead to game mastery.

However, the same social bonds created by playing tabletop RPGs could be perceived as a threat to broader social engagement as well as a benefit. Reactive social stigma and potential resulting social exclusion has been a historical aspect of tabletop RPGs culture. Fine’s earlier studies in the late 1970’s showed that while there was no such thing as a typical gamer, there was

¹³² Christopher Lehigh, “Ritual Discourse in Roleplaying Games,” 2005. Accessed January 8, 2022. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/_articles/ritual_discourse_in_RPGs.html.

¹³³ Chris Bateman, "No One Plays Alone," *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 3, no. 2 (2017) 15.

a shared sense of not fitting in elsewhere in their lives.¹³⁴ Bowman's interviewees described most fellow players as being either an "After High School Cool Person" - someone who, while unpopular in high school was then recognized as intelligent, dynamic, and had wide ranging tastes and interests in later life - or "SuperNerds" - wildly socially awkward individuals that were difficult to engage with outside of gameplay.¹³⁵ Both Fine and Bowen documented the hyperawareness and displeasure that many players directed to the presence of socially maladaptive individuals in games and RPG communities, pointing to a potential desire to deflect the experience of social stigma off themselves.

For some, this fear was based on the personal experience of players, especially those who played during the height of the Satanic Panic of the 1980's and early 1990's. Organizations like Bothered Against Dungeons & Dragons (B.A.D.D.)¹³⁶ and individuals from the Christian Right like Jerry Falwell, fixated on *Dungeons & Dragons* specifically as a supposed cause of criminality, suicide, mental illness, and occult indoctrination in teenagers and young adult. These organizations were highly vocal, petitioning libraries and schools to ban any role-playing games, as well as distributing "information guides" on the connection between the occult and *D&D* to police departments.¹³⁷ As recently as 2017, a study of social workers found that those polled

¹³⁴ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 78.

¹³⁵ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games*, 69.

¹³⁶ Patricia Pulling, founder of B.A.D.D., lost her teenage son to suicide in 1982. He had recently been playing role-playing games with friends and Pulling believed it was the games, not his diagnosed depression, that was responsible for his death.

¹³⁷ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 100. Laycock believed that much of the threat that tabletop RPGs posed to Christian churches had less to do with the fantasy content of the game itself, and more to do with the game's to encourage inquisitiveness and create social capital amongst its players. Laycock also argues that because the game

believed there was a significant association between tabletop RPG play and social dysfunction and psychopathology.¹³⁸ However, the researchers of this study believe that the rise of actual play livestreams, the recent crop of celebrities who self-identify as enthusiastic players¹³⁹, and the increased usage has led to dramatically decreased stigma around tabletop RPGs in the broader public.¹⁴⁰

Affective

The ability to enact another persona, experiment with different ways of being, and cultivate empathy for others are other impactful aspects of playing tabletop RPGs. A tabletop RPG character is chiefly created by the player, although some games provide preset characters or encourage players to use tropes from film and literature. While it may sometimes originate from a set of pre-supplied tropes, personality traits, or abilities, the player is ultimately in control of the thoughts, feelings, and reactions of the character. Players are the author of their characters' identities and selfhood.

Game scholars Hakkarainen and Stenros, who use a postmodern lens to analyze the games, focus on heavily on the idea of authorship of character and identity construction. They

showcased how a fictitious world with functional logic could be created, it also opened up the capacity that any religious worldview could also be constructed and not based on exterior truth.

¹³⁸ Of note, the more a practitioner knew about the games, the less likely they were to make this connection. Menachem Ben-Ezra, Eric Lis, Agata Błachnio, Lia Ring, Osnat Lavenda, and Michal Mahat-Shamir, "Social Workers' Perceptions of the Association Between Role Playing Games and Psychopathology," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2018): 215.

¹³⁹ Stephen Colbert, Vin Diesel, and Joe Maginello amongst many others.

¹⁴⁰ Premeet Sidhu and Marcus Carter, "The Critical Role of Media Representations, Reduced Stigma and Increased Access in D&D's Resurgence," (paper presented at *Digital Games Research Association Conference*, virtual conference, 2020).

believe the experience of this new identity via the character is just as impactful as one's "normal" identity and argue that because both are constructed by narratives (the characters from the world of the game and the players from larger society), one is not necessarily of a lesser value or less authentic.¹⁴¹ These scholars further blur the line between where the player ends and the character begins and focus on the power of narrative to both construct a character and, in turn, make the player aware of how they are being constructed by narratives. Game scholar Theresa Jean Tanenbaum draws from the work of postmodern psychologist Jerome Bruner and says that tabletop RPGs have the ability to allow player to "re-story their own lives" through the characters they play.¹⁴²

As mentioned earlier, for many players, this ability to construct and experiment with a new role and worldview becomes liberatory. Carlson says that being able to construct an alter ego within a highly controlled environment gives players the chance to safely engage elements of themselves they do not feel comfortable expressing in public. They can test run new approaches to the conflicts they may face in their own life. Carlson describes this as "projecting shadows of their current dilemma onto the game from where they can be examined from different angles,

¹⁴¹ Montola, "Invisible Rules of Role-Playing," 32.

¹⁴² Theresa Jean Tanenbaum, "Restorying Trans Game Studies," *Transformative Play Initiative*, YouTube video, February 3, 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8P4wvZDn2Lk&t=3664s>. Tanenbaum claims that the a person's experienced reality is as much shaped by the stories they tell themselves to make sense of things as external input. She quotes Bruner's *Life in Narrative*, "The culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very events of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives. And given the cultural shaping to which I referred, we also become variants of the culture's canonical forms." Tanenbaum believes the the enacted stories of tabletop RPGs can are another form of self-storytelling.

which, in turn, allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the situation by approaching the problem in another person's shoes."¹⁴³

Not only does the space the games create allow for identity experimentation and coalescence, it is often safer than other arenas in which this exploration occurs. Bowman points out that the formation of identity is a difficult and stressful experience, as a person wants to experience themselves whole and unified. Differing from a more post-modern approach, Bowman believes that the lines between character and player are less porous and a person's primary identity is never diminished when playing a tabletop RPG (even at the heights of engrossment). As a result, a player can more comfortably experiment with other approaches and roles within the game than they can in real life.¹⁴⁴ The player can test out new forms of expression and approaches in a low risk environment, while keeping a firm hand on their out-of-game dominant identity. Bowman still believes game narratives and experiences are deeply transformational and argues that reflection and debriefs after games help facilitate this process.

The interaction of others in the party is also a key element of this experimentation. Rather than just imagining they could be more assertive at work, a player may use the game to try out being assertive, vocally expressing anger, and not avoiding conflict. How the other characters react to them is not a perfect mirror of what their boss might do if they spoke up, but it would allow the player to experience the reactions of push back or to notice their own internal reactions as they refused to back down.

¹⁴³ Carlson, "Beyond Bikini-Mail," 41-42.

¹⁴⁴ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games*, 152.

Cultivating Empathy

Just as RPGs allow players the space to try out new approaches to life and better understand aspects of their own identities, they also have the capacity to build empathy within players for those with differing identities.¹⁴⁵ Peggy Schaller says this is because players “walk in someone else's shoes for a while, thinking their thoughts, living their lives, and at the same time never losing meaningful connection to real life.”¹⁴⁶ Because of the group nature of these games and the necessity to have a minimum number of people or a game master to make the game run, players may also find that they are exposed to different types of people than they would normally associate with.¹⁴⁷ Bowman also believes that the crises that games typically place players in can cause them to depend on the other members of their party. This interdependence creates the potential to build bonds that may encourage players to see beyond their initial evaluations of one another and potential biases.¹⁴⁸

Mikko Meriläinen conducted a study on 161 individuals who play role-playing games to determine if they self-reported a growth in what Roslyn Arnold calls empathic intelligence - the ability to use different approaches to intelligence and sensitivity to improve one's relationship

¹⁴⁵ Anissa Rivers, Ian E. Wickramasekera, Ronald J. Pekala, and Jennifer A. Rivers, "Empathic Features and Absorption in Fantasy Role-Playing," *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 58, no. 3 (2016): 287.

¹⁴⁶ Schalleger, *The Postmodern Joy of Role-playing Games: Agency, Ritual and Meaning in the Medium*, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Aaron Trammel's Essay "Militarism and Masculinity in Dungeons & Dragons" details the somewhat funny, somewhat poignant ways in which men in the 1970's who wanted to play *Diplomacy*, a wildly successful strategy board game that required seven players, would attempt to find other players. They used personal ads and set up blind gaming dates. Aaron Trammell, "Militarism and Masculinity in Dungeons & Dragons," in *Masculinities in Play - Palgrave Games in Context*, ed. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 136.

¹⁴⁸ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games*, 61.

with others.¹⁴⁹ Arnold believed that empathic intelligence was grown through use of imagination and that experience with narratives helped create thoughtful speculation. Tabletop RPGs naturally expose others to narratives that challenge them to see things from another perspective. Meriläinen's study found that the majority of players reported that the experience of gaming strengthened their imagination and that they had experiences of intense emotional introspection either during a game or after.¹⁵⁰ Over half of the respondents directly credited the experiences of role-playing games to an increase in their empathy skills.¹⁵¹

Intentional empathy and reflective practices are not just found in the process of playing the game, but in the materials that structure them as well. Carlson details how the designers of the latest edition of the *D&D* rulebook intentionally began redesigning artwork for the books to include more inclusive images.¹⁵² The basic rules also include a section that encourages players to think beyond binary notions of sex and gender when constructing characters, while also encouraging them to think about how societal notions might negatively or positively impact them.¹⁵³ The playbook of *Kids on Brooms*, which takes place in a collaboratively created Harry Potter-esque wizarding school, includes text that asks players to think about "Systems of Power Within Your World", and consider the impact of issues like racism, sexism, and ableism, how

¹⁴⁹ Mikko Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development—A Survey Report," *The International Journal of Role-Playing* 3, (2012): 50.

¹⁵⁰ Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development," 58.

¹⁵¹ Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development," 62.

¹⁵² Carlson, "Beyond Bikini-Mail," 42.

¹⁵³ Wizards of the Coast, *Basic Rules for Dungeons and Dragons: 5th Edition*, (Wizards of the Coast, 2014) Retrieved from <https://media.wizards.com/downloads/dnd/DnDBasicRules.pdf>.

they show up and how they might impact the characters.¹⁵⁴ Of note, it appears on page 7, well before any information about individual character creation or play.

Moral and Ethical Formation Through Tabletop RPGs

While tabletop RPGs impact the players personally, they also often raise questions of how to treat others or what values should be prioritized in a society or social group. These moral and ethical dilemmas (some intentionally created by GMs and others simply an incident of gameplay) are also often complicated by the player because of the immersive nature of gameplay. Consequently, tabletop RPGs may serve as a powerful tool for moral and ethical education. The conception of games as agents of moral formation is also widely studied across disciplines and bridges all three categories of cognitive, social, and affective impact. Though much of the published scholarship is on video games, video games ethicist Karen Schrier is clear that all games have the capacity for ethical instruction and transformation. She posits that games generate knowledge¹⁵⁵ and can be used for ethical instruction - and as a result of that capacity, ethical principles should be considered in their design.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Gilmour, Doug Levandowski, and Spenser Starke, *Kids on Brooms*, (San Diego, CA: Renegade Game Studios, 2020), 7. In addition to asking players to think about impact, the book also complicates both the decision to include or not include these structures. “This would be a good time to decide whether your game features “fantasy oppression” such as racism against fae or legal restrictions on magic. These forms of oppression may seem safer to work with than real-life power dynamics, but sometimes they’re even riskier. Precisely because they feel safer, they can encourage individuals to exaggerate prejudiced behavior. They may also lead to misery tourists, players who like pretending they’re marginalized people to enjoy the illusion of challenge and adversity on a temporary, low-stakes basis. Fantasy can be a fun, safe space to explore some of these concepts, but keep the safety measures in mind in case they get exploitative.”

¹⁵⁵ Karen Schrier, *Knowledge Games: How Playing Games Can Solve Problems, Create Insight, and Make Change*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), 28.

¹⁵⁶ Karen Schrier, “Designing Role-Playing Video Games for Ethical Thinking,” *Educational Technology Research and Development* 65, no. 4 (2017): 840.

The structured nature of tabletop RPGS game systems, rules, and procedure runs alongside the complex narratives they generate. This presents an interesting window into how individuals react when ascribed laws or rules become complicated by complexity. A study by Alex Atmore on tabletop games specifically showed that players develop complex relationships with the rules associated with the games and often adjust their view of how valuable rules are depending upon setting and experience levels of players.¹⁵⁷ A player would simultaneously talk about the importance of structure and frameworks, but in the same breath emphasize that if the individuals playing the game were not enjoying themselves, the rules should be revised, if not scrapped.

This cognitive flexibility and creative problem solving has interesting implications for how these immersive experiences may impact players' moral and ethical viewpoints. Bateman says that tabletop RPGs not only require imagination to play, but exponentially expands a player's imaginative capacity, thus allowing them greater creativity when it comes to engaging difficult circumstances in their own life.¹⁵⁸ Ben Dyer specifically calls the practices of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* “soulcraft”, saying that the game “interrogates our moral intuitions and offers us the same questions...as our characters...How is it best to live, and what kind of life is worthy of success?”¹⁵⁹ Player choices can become reflective of their own “out of game” held

¹⁵⁷ Alex Atmore, “Just Rol[l/e] With It: the Sense-Making Practices of a Tabletop Roleplaying Game Community,” (paper presented at *Proceedings of RAILS - Research Applications, Information and Library Studies*, School of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, 6-8 December, 2016). Retrieved from <http://informationr.net/ir/22-4/rails/rails1613.html>

¹⁵⁸ Chris Bateman, "The Rules of Imagination," in *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, ed. Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox (Chicago: Open Court Press 2012), 229.

¹⁵⁹ Ben Dyer, "Dungeonmastery as Soulcraft," in *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks*, ed. Christopher Robichaud and William Irwin (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 109.

moral positions – or allow them to consider what holding another moral framework might feel like.

The development of critical ethical reasoning through role-play via the mechanism of choice was studied by David Simkins and Constance Steinkuehler. They posit that players will consciously view the choices they make as moral when the decisions are significant and effect change; are impacted by social context; and result in a level of mirroring¹⁶⁰ from the game.¹⁶¹ Schrier says that game structure itself provides unique spaces in which players can consider and enact different ethics and moral perspectives as they make decisions. The game space creates a low (external) stakes environment that also allows players to take the time to think about the values inherent in these ethical and moral stances, as well as see their resulting consequences.¹⁶² In addition to the opportunity to “try on” a new way to approach decision making and behavior, gameplay allows players to take more time to formulate their actions - a luxury not often found in real life instances of moral decisions making. That same surplus of time can also promote more imaginative or creative actions, allowing players to deviate from rote responses and encourage the formation of new habits.

¹⁶⁰ Mirroring is the ways in which elements of the game respond to a character's choices (i.e. potential course of action is no longer viable to the player or an NPC expressing intense disgust at a character's actions and refusing to work with them).

¹⁶¹ The importance of having social context impact the game is identified as a particularly essential responsibility of the GM by Simkins and Steinkuehler. GM's needed to “provide players with sufficiently rich in-game social context to render their actions significant beyond the individual alone.” David Simkins and Constance Steinkuehler, "Critical Ethical Reasoning and Role-Play," *Games and Culture* 3, no. 3-4 (2008): 350.

¹⁶² Schrier, *We the Gamers*, 144.

An example of moral decision making, imagination, and mirroring can be provided from the author's own experience playing. The author was part of a party of three *D&D* players who were being led through an older *D&D* module called *The Temple of Elemental Evil*. The module was written in 1985 and is considered a classic dungeon crawl, or an adventure designed to make heroes descend into a dungeon, fight (supposedly) evil creatures, and take treasure. After several sessions of play, all the players in the party indicated a general fatigue and disinterest with a constant stream of violent battles and their repetitive nature. Additionally, all three players and the GM are individuals who indicate an aversion to violence as a solution to problems in the real world.

The party began to intentionally subvert the module by going out of their way to avoid conflict, doing everything from feeding and taming a chained owlbear, to giving a dungeon prisoner seed money to start a business on the outside after freeing them.¹⁶³ It culminated (to the DM's delight) with the party sparking a large-scale labor uprising between the hired guards and the temple priests. The guards walked out, the priest left to find new workers, leaving the players to finish the encounter with exponentially fewer battles and far less murder.¹⁶⁴ Upon returning to the town, the party of adventurers discovered that the former temple guards had settled in the surrounding village.¹⁶⁵ The population boomed and diversified, but also leading to economic

¹⁶³ This was an example of the conflict that Montola said can occur between the endogenous rules of the game and the exogenous goals of the players. When asked later why she selected a module, the game master said that it was recommended to her by a friend and she did not realize the extent to which its primary focus was hack and slash. It illustrates Montola's claim that endogenous goals made explicit in the codified elements of a role-playing game are only as useful as how they translate to the player's interpretation of them in the game world as diegetic goals.

¹⁶⁴ It is interesting to note in considering both the reaction of the party and the consequent actions, all the players and game master identify as female and two of the players identified as queer.

¹⁶⁵ Being in the temple made reality "wibbly-wobbly time-y wimey", and roughly a year had passed.

instability and organized crime. While they were now more economically successful, several town residents reported missing the smaller and safer environment before the population influx. The party also discovered that an ally they had made before going to the temple had been killed as a result of increasing violence in town.

The encounter highlights the ways in which a group of players can push back against behavioral norms or practices through imaginative responses and how mirroring in the game deepens the significance of choices. The party found the constant violence troublesome as well as boring, and looked for new pathways other than what the game module had intended. While the game master was very supportive of this innovation, rather than just allowing it to occur in a vacuum to great fanfare, she had the world respond and react to significant changes. The players were forced to consider how their actions had the capacity for long term unforeseen consequences and grapple with the fact that they avoided killing numerous strangers and mercenaries, but may have unintentionally caused the death of a friend as a result.

The Shadow Side of Tabletop RPGs: Violence, Misogyny, and Racism

While these games have the capacity for moral formation, empathy, and relationships building, the participatory and discursive elements also have the ability to encourage the replication of experiences of misogyny, racism, oppression, and discrimination, especially when not well moderated.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps due to their origin as wargames, most tabletop RPGs have

¹⁶⁶ William J. White, "Playing House in a World of Night: Discursive Trajectories of Masculinity in a Tabletop Role-Playing Game," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2, (2010): 25; Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games," in *Role-Playing Game Studies*, ed. Sebastian Deterding and Jose Zagal (New York: Routledge, 2018), 441.

violence as a main, if not primary mechanic. Players in a party may work together collaboratively, but it is often to kill or overpower someone or something else. The participatory narrative of games also has the ability to allow for justification of heinous attitudes and actions, with players claiming that they were following the emotional immersion of the moment or actively pushing the narrative towards a justification of those actions.¹⁶⁷ The next section will discuss how games have struggled with fostering violence, sexism, and racism.

Violence

In his in depth study of players in the 1980's, Fine wrote that he was often disturbed by the vivid descriptions of seemingly needless violence that the primarily male players he observed would bring to games. The presence of women at the table dampened this, but not permanently.¹⁶⁸ While violence was an omnipresent mechanic for most tabletop RPGs, it is also not without its critique by players and creators. As early as 1999, Greg Costikyan, an accomplished games designer, published *Violence: The Role-Playing Game of Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed*.¹⁶⁹ A deliberately unplayable game, it was compared to Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, and it directly critiques the ultra-violent structure and play style of many games at the

¹⁶⁷ Chad Mahood and Michael Hanus, "Role-playing Video Games and Emotion: How Transportation into the Narrative Mediates the Relationship Between Immoral Actions and Feelings of Guilt," *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 6, no. 1 (2017): 61.

¹⁶⁸ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 98. Out of curiosity about whether or not their actions would extend violence to a non-aggressive foe, Fine was GMing a game and intentionally had the party encounter a group of orphaned children. The children did not attack the party and refused to speak to them. The group spent nearly a half hour debating whether or not to kill the children and ultimately settled on telling them to run away and threatened to kill them if they were ever encountered again.

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.costik.com/Violence%20RPG1.pdf>

time and mocks the player throughout the playbook.¹⁷⁰ However, Costikyan has expressed concern that the game was not understood as satire.¹⁷¹

Beyond historical thematic design, Jacob Ericsson believes that mechanics and poor game design are partially to blame for the dominant focus on violence in gameplay. He believes that the turn to violence is often because violence is a less challenging course of action as opposed to finding a non-violent or creative approach. He highlights that in *D&D*, a non-violent approach could utilize any number of checks or pathways of actions, whereas attacking is always one action.¹⁷² Additionally, there was rarely a negative consequence for a missed hit (just the absence of damage being done), while a poor skill check could lead to a player being in a worse situation than when they began. For Ericsson, a reliance on violence was a result of poor game design, not ethics.

¹⁷⁰ The subsection of the playbook entitled “What is Violence?” says “Violence™ is a lot like Dungeons & Dragons® by that other company. You and your friends play characters in an imaginary world. You wander about a maze, kicking down doors, killing whatever you find on the other side, and taking its possessions. The main difference is this: The world isn’t some third-rate fantasy writer’s drivel about elves and dwarves and magic spells, but the world of today. The doors you kick down aren’t those of a subterranean dungeon—unless you’re in the subway—but those of decent, honest, hard-working people who merely want to live their lives. The things you kill aren’t cardboard ‘monsters’ whom the game defines as okay to kill because, well, they’re monsters—but fellow human beings, with families and friends and hopes and fears and highly developed senses of morality—far better people than you, in fact. And the things you steal aren’t “magic items” and “gold pieces” but stereos, computers, jewelry, and whatever other items of value you can lift. Indeed, you yourself are a monster: a monster in the true sense, not the ‘fantasy’ one. You are a degraded, bloodthirsty savage, the product of the savage streets, a Jeffrey Dahmer, a droog, a character out of Brett Easton Ellis. You delight in pain and blood and mayhem.” Retrieved from <http://www.costik.com/Violence%20RPG1.pdf>

¹⁷¹ Mia Consalvo, Greg Costikyan, Drew Davidson, Nick Fortugno, David Shaenfield, Pete Vigeant, Christopher Weaver, and Karen Schrier, “Quick Takes on Ethics and Games Voices from Industry and Academia,” In *Designing Games for Ethics: Models, Techniques and Frameworks*, ed. Karen Schrier and David Gibson (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2011), 8.

¹⁷² Jacob Eriksson, “Violence or Challenge?: Determining Factors for Conflict Resolution in RPGs,” (Bachelors Thesis, University of Skövde, School of Informatics, 2016), 24.

In contrast to the battle mechanics in *D&D*, a more recent tabletop RPGs called *ApocalypseWorld* created a rule system that attempts to de-center violence.¹⁷³ In most of the games using this rule structure, the mechanics nearly guarantee that if a player chooses to attack, they themselves will also undergo damage - and players have a very low damage threshold. This significantly raises the stakes and risks of opting to use violence. At the same time, this system provides players with a host of other potential actions to take in lieu of continually engaging in battle that will likely kill them quickly. An astute player of a *Powered By The Apocalypse* system game chooses violence sparingly.

As evidenced by the examples provided above, game playbooks (which contain descriptions of game mechanics and source material for game setting, adventure, and character construction) become powerful potential conduits of meaning and value to players. They shape the structure the narrative will take as it forms and the expectations of the players for what behaviors are possible and appropriate to the narrative. Sarah Albom conducted an in-depth study of the *D&D* three primary gamebook texts - *The Player's Handbook*, *The Dungeon Master's Guide*, and the *Monster's Manual*, noting how often the text mentioned violence. While she found that less than a fourth of the *Player's Handbook* used violent language, there was an outsized amount of violent examples used when explaining gameplay mechanics to players. Additionally each of the twelve character classes (the ability template all characters must have) included three paragraphs which describe to readers how the class may be played. Of the 36,

¹⁷³ These games are referred to as *Powered By the Apocalypse*. The system only requires two six sided dice and the game master typically does not roll at all and instead responds to player actions and rolls. Combat is one of many other optional ways of interacting with other characters.

Albom found that 26 were violent.¹⁷⁴ The language of heroism was the predominant frame present and linked to violence; a hero conquers others; a hero is brave when facing and vanquishing the enemy.

Play state and immersion are also pertinent to consider when asking questions of violence.¹⁷⁵ Play occurs within the immersive “magic circle”, but players still bring their own perspectives and experiences into their play. Within a tabletop RPG, players typically begin to identify with their character and often utilize first person pronouns when describing character action (i.e. One would say, “I hit him with a fireball,” rather than “My character casts the spell fireball on Steve.”). As a result of this immersion and identification, the player is still the one “doing” the actions. Some of the tendency towards violence may occur for similar reasons to why people seek out violent media such as horror movies. Both the games and the experience like watching a horror movie allow a person to experience socially negative stimuli in a way that is safe and free of consequences. However, even if this is an aspect of why players may choose violent in-game actions, Albom claims that *D&D* in particular is problematic. The violent actions in the game will often lead to success in the form of defeating an enemy and progressing in the game. As a result, Albom believes the game deliberately juxtaposes violent stimuli with pleasure, subtly training players to “derive effective pleasure from the subjugation of the other and are motivated by sensation-seeking desire without consequence.”

¹⁷⁴ Sarah Albom, “The Killing Roll: The Prevalence of Violence in *Dungeons & Dragons*,” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 11, (2021): 11.

¹⁷⁵ Sarah Albom, “The Killing Roll,” 7.

Sexism & Racism

Some of this aiding and abetting of consequence-free violence may have roots in hegemonic attitudes of masculinity and whiteness that are intertwined with the historical development of the game genre. Scholars Aaron Trammel and William J. White believe that the longtime prevalence of white, male players and creators in the wargame and tabletop role-playing game community left it with a legacy of sexist and racist attitudes that still manifest in game language and culture. Carlson cautions that *D&D* has historically facilitated opportunities to embody traditional masculine ideals and power fantasies to men who were often unable to embody these ideals in mainstream society, allowing them to (ironically) punish others as they themselves were punished.¹⁷⁶

Stang and Trammel also studied the prevalence of what they deemed “feminine monstrosity” in the RPG bestiaries - databases of monster information that are presented as authoritative descriptions. They argue that the bestiary entry (a staple of many tabletop RPGs) becomes another tool of patriarchal control as it presents itself as the “true” information around seemingly monstrous women.¹⁷⁷ Images of women and the language of masculinity across editions of *D&D* shifted over the years to become more inclusive, but it remained predominantly militaristic in nature.¹⁷⁸ While depictions in *D&D* books and manuals are now full of non-

¹⁷⁶ Carlson, “Beyond Bikini-Mail,” 39.

¹⁷⁷ Sarah Stang and Aaron Trammell, “The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons.” *Games and Culture* 15, no. 6 (2020): 735.

¹⁷⁸ One especially egregious offender was “the harlot table”, from the first edition of *D&D* rules. You would roll a die and use the table to determine what sort of bar wench you had run into. Trammell, “Militarism and Masculinity in Dungeons & Dragons,” 138.

sexualized women and people of color, most are still performing violent, militaristic tropes. Trammel challenges fans and game designers to push beyond just questioning maleness to actually questioning masculinity.¹⁷⁹

Other power fantasies may present themselves through an attitude of “us against them” that can be encouraged within the game play of the many tabletop RPGs. This may also encourage more aggressive problem solving. Albom also notes that violence can more easily be justified when a player believes that they have been wronged or threatened, often allowing characters to simplify struggles to simple matters of right and wrong types of characters. Game designer James Mendez Hodes believes some of this “bad group” vs “civilized group” mentality has been encouraged in *D&D* particularly because of its use of racial categories. Races in the game refer not to human ethnogroups, but to broader categories of species such as dwarf, elf, orc, human, etc.¹⁸⁰ Particularly in earlier editions of *D&D*, there was a strong language of biological determinism, with races being linked to certain types of behaviors or moral attitudes. Early on, certain races were framed as evil - orcs manifest savage behavior and tieflings (part demon, part human) have their “evil heritage” obvious in their outward appearance, temperament, and the attitudes they hold towards others.

¹⁷⁹ Trammel, "Militarism and Masculinity in Dungeons & Dragons," 145.

¹⁸⁰ Recently, Wizards of the Coast, the publisher of *D&D*, said it would change the term race to species in its next revision of material saying, “We understand ‘race’ is a problematic term that has had prejudiced links between real world people and the fantasy peoples of D&D worlds.” Owen Good, “D&D Rules Change Replaces ‘Race’ with ‘Species,’” *Polygon*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23488097/dungeons-dragons-race-species-rule-change-announcement-wotc-uneearthed-arcana>.

While ascribing a moral orientation to a species of fantastical creatures may seem like an innocuous bit of fantasy world building, the sources for some of this lore may have a more sinister connection to real life discriminatory attitudes. According to Mendez, some of the traditional moral conceptions of more monstrous races can be traced to Tolkien's influence on early tabletop RPGs.¹⁸¹ Tolkien's letters reveal that he specifically designed orcs using harmful and stereotypical depictions of Asian people, saying they were "sallow skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types." Tolkien's own beliefs were based on the pseudo-scientific understandings of race of the early twentieth century, as well as the racist perceptions of Asians as militaristic and violent based upon Eurocentric historical readings of events like the Mongol empire and the Chinese resistance to colonization.

These racially deterministic underpinnings, divorced from their context, actually manifested in game mechanics. *D&D*'s racial bonuses (statistical increases or penalties linked particular races) were not optional until 2020's rule revision book *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything*. Your character's race directly impacted their capacity. Some races could not advance past certain levels or were presented as less intelligent or more likely to act in anger. The revision to these rules that removed these limitations was done to not only improve gameplay, but also because game designers wanted to explicitly address the ways in which these mechanics

¹⁸¹ James Mendez Hodes, "Orcs, Britons, And The Martial Race Myth, Part I: A Species Built For Racial Terror," *James Mendez Hodes Blog*, January 14, 2019, <https://jamesmendehodes.com/blog/2019/1/13/orcs-britons-and-the-martial-race-myth-part-i-a-species-built-for-racial-terror>.

could be linked to racist ideologies. In an interview with *Dicebreaker*, Jeremy Crawford, the lead designer of the 5th edition of *D&D* rules (the current edition) said,

One of the motivations was: let's decouple your choice of class from your choice of race... Our other motivation [...] was that, by doing this, D&D would stop leaning into a theme the game has had since the '70s of particular species having these innate advantages that really do not speak to the narratives that people want to tell about their own characters, and is also uncomfortably like some of the racist narratives in the real world.¹⁸²

Tabletop RPG designers and players have continued to interrogate and innovate around the ways in which race shows up in these games. As it was in many other areas of society, 2021 was described as a cultural reckoning for tabletop role-playing games around race in the wake of the response to George Floyd's murder and the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement.¹⁸³ BIPOC players and game designers have begun to publicly push for more inclusion in game design, narrative, and play. Several larger games system companies like *Pathfinder* and *D&D* began to look seriously at and remove game elements that were based on harmful stereotypes, as well as address a failure to hire and support diverse employees. The challenge has also been extended to white players. Hodes, in a blog entry entitled, "May I Play A Character From Another Race?", advocates for white players to play characters from other racial and ethnic identities not because it will induce empathy, but because it helps decenter whiteness in tabletop gaming and allows more space for BIPOC players to not feel pressured to play their own identity

¹⁸² Alex Meehan, "D&D 5E Lead Designer Says Improvements to Racial Depictions Will Take 'Several Years' to Fully Implement," *Dicebreaker*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/games/dungeons-and-dragons-5e/news/dnd-improvements-racial-depictions-take-year>.

¹⁸³ Charlie Hall, "Tabletop Gaming in 2021 Will Be Defined By These Last 12 Months Of Chaos," *Polygon*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.polygon.com/2021/1/8/22178462/board-games-rpgs-2021-magic-dungeons-dragons-pandemic-black-lives-matter>.

to assure representation at the table.¹⁸⁴ He is also careful to say that doing so responsibly is something a white player needs to spend time and effort reflecting on.

Innovating for and by Diverse Gaming Communities

As the player base for tabletop games continues to diversify, both patience and interest has diminished for games models that still manifest 1970's mentalities and/or focus solely on violence. The internet has streamlined access to smaller independent games like Avery Adler's *The Quiet Year*, Grant Howitt's *Honey Heist*, or *Tales from the Loop* - games that either minimize or eliminate combat altogether. These games have experienced high levels of commercial and critical success. The broader gaming community of players and designers alike are also pushing for more diversity in game narrative and design. Hodes advocates for everyone to play games made by people of color about people of color. Adler explicitly built a mechanic into her game *Monsterheart* (set in a high school where teenagers are actually monsters) that guarantees characters will experiences, and need to negotiate with, same sex attraction, regardless of whether or not their character identified as queer. Adler created this mechanic because she wanted to tell more queer stories and challenge the erasure of the experience of queer teenagers. The ways in which these games are conduits for more adaptation to changing society and cultural values and a way to critique and question is also an essential element in their capacity to cultivate democratic civic habits that understand democracy from a Deweyan frame –

¹⁸⁴ James Mendez Hodes, "May I Play A Character From Another Race?" *James Mendez Hodes Blog*, February 14, 2019, <https://jamesmendezhodes.com/blog/2019/2/14/may-i-play-a-character-from-another-race>.

one that recognizes that democracy is changing along with the practices and values of the community.¹⁸⁵

Players' attitudes are also changing as a result of popular actual play streams like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* that emphasize storytelling over combat. For many, they may watch these streams before they begin playing any tabletop RPG, thus they come into games with an expectation that violence is not the only mechanic. Emma Paltrow says this has led to combat increasingly being seen as “a foundation for inexperienced DMs to help structure a campaign before settling into a heavier storytelling narrative once they become comfortable.”¹⁸⁶ At the time of this writing in late 2022, Wizards of the Coast, the development and publication company that produces *D&D*, recently published two new adventure modules, *The Wild Beyond the Witchlight* and *Strixhaven: Curriculum of Chaos*. Both were notable in the ways in which they deemphasized violence compared to other *D&D* source material, with *The Wild Beyond the Witchlight* actually being the first adventure module in which players could complete all major objectives without ever having to use violence. Fall of 2022 also saw the publication of *Journeys Through the Radiant Citadel*, the first *D&D* sourcebook to be written exclusively by a BIPOC writing team and included a focus on negotiating competing pulls of different cultures - an emphasis informed by lead author Surena Marie's identity as a first generation Thai-American.

Dungeons & Dragons & Discourse? - The Civic Potential of Tabletop RPGs

¹⁸⁵ This will be discussed in extensive length in chapter 4 and 5.

¹⁸⁶ Emma Paltrow, “Dungeons & Dragons in 2021: Essential Evolution Makes the RPG Bigger and Better Than Ever, But Work Remains,” *Dicebreaker*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/games/dungeons-and-dragons-5e/opinion/dnd-2021-in-review>.

Although they are primarily meant to be games played for the autotelic reward of creating and experiencing a shared narrative, tabletop RPGs contain rich formative potential around democratic civic behavior and identity. While many of these games have not fully stepped out of the shadow of their wargaming progenitors and still rely on violent action as driving elements, game mechanics and game play is still rooted in collaborative storytelling and co-creative world building alongside other players and a game master. The activity, especially when done with others - demands high levels of imagination, participatory commitments, self-reflection, creative problem solving and collaboration from players. These skills support the creation of engaged imaginative discourse, which ultimately serves as the primary driver of the game. As they work toward a common goal, players are also negotiating competing needs of their party members, building, and rebuilding consensus for actions. This sounds remarkably like being an active democratic citizen.

Pro-civic opportunities also exist within the social experience of the game. Playing tabletop RPGs has the capacity to forge strong social bonds between individuals. Sessions go for hours at a time and groups often play campaigns that go on for months or years. The idioculture that Fine said players create is enduring and impactful on members of the group. Decades later, Fine would return to RPGs in his work around the idea of “tiny publics” - the micro communities and idiocultures that became the primary locus for group political and cultural activity.¹⁸⁷ Fine believes that it is these small groups that create both the norms for citizenship and provide the initial staging space for civic action.

¹⁸⁷ Fine and Harrington, “Tiny Publics: Small Groups and Civil Society,” 343.

These potentialities also echo major themes and concepts in the thought of pragmatic philosopher John Dewey. Consensus building through communication, interdependence, and collaboration are all the hallmarks of healthy democratic citizenship according to Dewey. Although ironically using similar language but developed independently, Fine's conception of tiny publics mirrors some aspects of Dewey's conception of a public - a group of citizens bound together through shared consequences advocating for a common goal. To better understand how the experience of playing these games can serve to form or build civic skills, we must further examine Dewey's articulation of both education and democracy and the ways in which they impact each other.

CHAPTER THREE

THE RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN DEWEY

This dissertation examines how the experience of playing tabletop RPGs provides an educative experience for democratic life in the Deweyan tradition. Considered a founder of the American pragmatist tradition, John Dewey lived from 1859 to 1952. He was a philosopher, psychologist, and educational and social reformer. He arrived in Chicago in 1894 when the city was dealing with major labor strikes, a huge immigrant influx, and massive industrialization. For the first half of the twentieth century, Dewey was an extremely influential public intellectual and served as a co-founder of ACLU, NAACP, and The New School.¹⁸⁸ He rooted his philosophical work and approach to education in democratic ideals, advocating for communication and ways of association that could create what he called “The Great Community.”¹⁸⁹ Because Dewey was a wildly prolific writer, much of the dissertation will focus specifically on his works *The Public and Its Problems*, *Education and Experience*, and various speeches and sections of his other works.

It will be necessary to first overview the pragmatist tradition’s conception of truth, as it informs Dewey’s specific understanding of experience’s role in education and how it functions

¹⁸⁸ Robert W. Lake, “For Creative Democracy,” *Urban Geography* 38, no. 4 (2017): 58.

¹⁸⁹ John Dewey and Melvin L. Rogers, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay In Political Inquiry* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2012), 171. Dewey said that democratic ideas “remain barren and empty save as it is created in human relationships.”

as a social process. Having laid that groundwork, the dissertation will move to discuss Dewey's beliefs around how communities form and advocate for themselves. In particular, Dewey's conception of democracy not as a form of governance, but as a manifestation of values enacted in a community through daily life, will inform the ways in which this work argues for how and where individuals may experience civic formation. Finally, it will close by examining Dewey's attitude around fantasy and imagination in education.

The Pragmatic Tradition's Conception of Truth

Before engaging Dewey's understanding around the role of experience as an educative force, it is helpful to review his understanding of truth and its connection to direct experience more generally. Dewey, along with William James and Charles Peirce, was a driving force in American Pragmatism, a philosophical approach that posits that the truth of any idea is inextricably connected to its functional outcome.¹⁹⁰ The pragmatists rejected all forms of knowledge absolutism and insisted that all principles be regarded as working hypotheses that must bear fruit in lived experience. Contextualization is a driving force in pragmatism because its focus on ongoing inquiry does not allow for anything to remain in isolation.¹⁹¹ Writing at the turn of the 19th century, Dewey's response to an unstable world was to fully embrace what he saw as its open and ever-changing nature.¹⁹² Truths existed - but they were not absolute.

¹⁹⁰ Edward Moore, *American Pragmatism: Peirce, James, and Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 32.

¹⁹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, "Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 452.

¹⁹² John Dewey, "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy" in *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1910): 1.

Dewey's tradition of pragmatism was rooted in the claim that all moral and scientific inquiry is the ongoing debate regarding the relative appeal and validity of specific concrete alternatives.¹⁹³ Direct experience played an essential role in the fallibilism that allowed for revision around understanding of truth. The work of Charles Darwin shaped Dewey's belief that a scientific and inquiry based approach to truth was necessary.¹⁹⁴ In *How We Think*, Dewey says that truth is something to be understood through direct engagement (hence the importance of the scientific method to pragmatists) and could be shaped through human activity. Dewey said that, "Truth, in final analysis, is the statement of things 'as they are,' not as they are in the inane and desolate void of isolation from human concern, but as they are in a shared and progressive experience."¹⁹⁵ Knowledge was bigger than truth, as it was gained through a process of inquiry that was attentive to reason, present conditions, and understood to be ongoing.

In his later work *Logic*, Dewey would position truth in relationships to ongoing inquiry, similar to a scientific understanding of settled knowledge in which something's status as true did not preclude it from further investigation or questioning as new information emerged.¹⁹⁶ He saw truth as something that could be a "resource for further inquiry." According to Dewey,

¹⁹³ Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," in *The New Social Theory Reader*, ed. Steven Seidman and Jeffrey C. Alexander (London: Routledge, 2020), 154. Rorty compares a reliance on universals or static methods as being in a state of illumination such that one can arrive at a true belief through "mechanical procedures" instead of Socratic conversation that encourages examination alternatives before making a determination.

¹⁹⁴ Dewey, "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy," 2.

¹⁹⁵ John Dewey, *How We Think* in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976) *MW* 6: 67.

¹⁹⁶ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), *LW* 12:16.

“experience for philosophy is method, not distinctive subject-matter.”¹⁹⁷ In turn, philosophy was meant to be praxis, resulting in positive action for the benefit of society. Inquiry would lead to an appropriate understanding of the good needed in the current setting.

While this responsiveness and move towards a scientific inquiry based frame was inspiring to some, Charles Mills critiqued Dewey’s reliance on what he called biological language. Mills believes that by calling human activity simply an ongoing response and adaptation, Dewey could avoid having to make any sort of value judgements.¹⁹⁸ John Patrick Diggins claims that while Dewey’s insight on traditional philosophy’s inability to establish truth was essential, his recommendation of how to move forward was to “forsake metaphysics, epistemology, and other ultimate questions and to turn to science for guidance.”¹⁹⁹

Experience and Knowledge

Richard Rorty said that Dewey’s conception of pragmatism claimed that all moral and scientific inquiry is the ongoing debate regarding the relative appeal and validity of specific concrete alternatives.²⁰⁰ Dewey actually preferred the phrase “warranted assertion” over

¹⁹⁷ Dewey, *LW I*: 371.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Wright Mills, *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America* (Oxford University Press, 1964), 81.

¹⁹⁹ John Patrick Diggins, "Philosophy Without Foundations, Politics with Illusions," *Reviews in American History* 21, no. 1 (1993): 117.

²⁰⁰ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism,” (Presidential Address, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, New York, December 29, 1979), 724. Rorty compares a reliance on universals or static methods as being in a state of illumination such that one can arrive at a true belief through “mechanical procedures” instead of Socratic conversation that encourages examination alternatives before making a determination.

knowledge because it better acknowledged the contingency in knowledge creation.²⁰¹ Dewey rejected traditional epistemologies for containing what he called the Spectator Theory of Knowledge - the idea that knowledge was learned by passively observing it from a fixed point of reference. He described it as

That which is taught is thought of as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to the changes that will surely occur in the future. It is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception.²⁰²

As an alternative to Spectator Theory, Dewey spoke of inquiry or instrumentalism, a process rooted in experimentation that involved interacting with objects and noting the consequence on it and the learner.²⁰³ This empirical, experience oriented framing was rooted in an embrace of the scientific method that was so important to Dewey, as well as an emphasis on connecting valuation and judgment to consequences.²⁰⁴ Dewey called this “knowing”, framing it as an experience that went beyond rational exercise to include the totality of the knower, involving their physical being and emotions as they adapted to new situations and problems. Dewey was clear that this adaptation was key to the educational process, saying “If human nature is unchangeable, then there is no such thing as education and all our efforts to educate are

²⁰¹ Jim Garrison, "Nietzsche, Dewey, and the Artistic Creation of Truth," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 7, no. VII-1 (2015):10.

²⁰² John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 19.

²⁰³ Georges Dicker, “Knowing and Coming-to-Know in John Dewey’s Theory of Knowledge,” *The Monist* 57, no. 2 (1973): 195.

²⁰⁴ While the scientific method was essential to pragmatists, they avoided rigid empiricism by not taking a reductionist approach to social and ethical issues and not limiting truth to the physical domain.

doomed to failure.”²⁰⁵ Regardless of the subject matter, information was not the end in itself for inquiry. Knowledge also had to include the transformation of the learner through the cultivation of habits.²⁰⁶

Education as a Social Process

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey said that transformation of the learner was essentially a social process and that “the quality [of the education] is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group.”²⁰⁷ Knowledge is a function of association and communication. It depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed, and sanctioned.²⁰⁸ However, Dewey was realistic about the ways in which schools stymied students’ experience in the name of teaching supposedly stable absolutes. He believed that traditional schools used a model of instruction from above and the outside that focused on the imposition of knowledge onto passive students.²⁰⁹ The knowledge conveyed was verified, but ossified (in contrast to pragmatic epistemology). Schools gave students further miseducative learning experiences, primarily through memorization and drilling, that made them hate the subject matter and limited their critical thinking. Dewey referred to rote instruction as fatal to

²⁰⁵ John Dewey, "Does Human Nature Change?: (1938)," In *America's Public Philosopher: Essays on Social Justice, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Eric Thomas Weber (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 190.

²⁰⁶ John Dewey, "The Supreme Intellectual Obligation: (1934)," In *America's Public Philosopher: Essays on Social Justice, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Eric Thomas Weber, 263-69 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 267.

²⁰⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 58.

²⁰⁸ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 183.

²⁰⁹ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 18.

reflection capacity and famously said, “How many students were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them?”²¹⁰ Some believe that Dewey’s critiques go too far in rejecting traditional instructional approaches. Rasha Eldeeb agrees with Dewey’s understanding of the power of student motivation, but believes that he erroneously implies that student enjoyment of learning does not occur *at all* in traditional education settings.²¹¹

Teacher Role In Education

As a result of his view of traditional schooling, Dewey believed an ideal model of instruction involved a teacher who was well prepared with an eye to encouraging individual pupils’ capacity. However, this preparation was not static and rigid, allowing for complex interplays in the classroom community around the subject matter.²¹² Teachers needed to walk the line between good activity management and inspiration that could excite students into deeper learning.²¹³ Dewey did not see intellectual capacity as something that was all encompassing, and pushed instructors to not to make assumptions on student academic ability based on reactions to one subject matter. Dewey said, “The teacher is not entitled to assume stupidity or even dullness merely because of unresponsiveness to school subjects or the lesson presented by textbook or

²¹⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 26.

²¹¹ Rasha Eldeeb, "Review and Critique of the Book *Education and Experience* by John Dewey," *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education* 1, no. 2 (2013): 46.

²¹² Peter Nelsen, "Growth and Resistance: How Deweyan Pragmatism Reconstructs Social Justice Education." *Educational Theory* 66, no. 1-2 (2016): 234.

²¹³ Adrian Skilbeck, "Dewey On Seriousness, Playfulness and the Role of the Teacher," *Education Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2017): 12.

teacher.”²¹⁴ A student may be unresponsive to one lesson, but animated by the next because of their own curiosity and desire to deepen experience with the content. Teacher disposition and habits also impacted student learning, with Dewey cautioning, “Example is more potent than precept and a teacher's best conscious effort may be more than counteracted by the influence of personal traits which he is unaware of or regards as unimportant.”²¹⁵

Teachers were also understood to be a part of the educational community, not as a dictator, but a leader.²¹⁶ However, far from being laissez faire, Dewey believed the teacher served an essential role in helping the community to form through thought and planning. Because education was a social process, the teacher must be considered a member of the selfsame community. However, as the most mature member, teachers needed to guide interactions and help the community form around shared goals. By shifting the frame away from “external boss” to “leader of group activities,” an instructor was able to remain fully in the community without exerting their will onto students or abdicating their shared responsibility and expertise.²¹⁷ Dewey said instructors were meant to fully engage in the learning process alongside students and to “let [their] mind come to close quarters with the pupil’s mind and the subject matter.”²¹⁸ Care theorist Nel Noddings says that while Dewey’s emphasis on the teacher as co-learner and an inquiry approach is important, a care theorist’s approach would claim that the

²¹⁴ John Dewey, *How We Think* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 35.

²¹⁵ Dewey, *How We Think*, 47.

²¹⁶ Dewey, *How We Think*, 59.

²¹⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 58.

²¹⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 109.

relationship between the teacher and student is at the center of any education experience.²¹⁹ For Noddings, as long as the teacher was caring, they would be able to produce excellent educational results with old fashioned and less experiential methods.

Games and Active Pursuits in the Classroom

Dewey believed that children were well aware of the dynamics of social cooperation and control needed in the classroom even at a young age. He used the example of game play, indicating that most children did not have a problem playing with an agreed upon rule set.²²⁰ Dewey insisted that children would typically emulate the rules that they saw adults abiding by in games, with their adherence serving as a form of respect for the continuity of traditions. The enforcement of these rules by one individual was not seen as an imposition so long as the game continued to progress fairly and players could continue to participate. Dewey said, “When violent disputes do arise, it is usually on the alleged ground that the umpire or a person on the other side is being unfair; in other words, that in such cases some individual is trying to impose his individual will on someone else.”²²¹ Children understood that without rules, no games would exist. Social control in the classroom was a result not of domination, but of students joining in a shared social enterprise, with each person participating.

Dewey was both an advocate and critic of the progressive education movement at the time. While he believed that these active ways of learning and engaging were essential for

²¹⁹ Nel Noddings, “Dewey’s Philosophy of Education: a Critique from the Perspective of Care Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, ed. Molly Cochran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 269.

²²⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 59.

²²¹ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 53.

students, all of them had to have a clear educational purpose and that framing and facilitation needed to come from a prepared and intentional instructor. Teachers could not allow full self-direction from children. Dewey took seriously the educational capacity of activities like games and what he called “active occupations” in schools. This involved working with materials like paper, wood, cloth, and metal and engaging in things like gardening, cooking, cutting, measuring, etc. Active occupations engaged the totality of the student - bodily, emotionally and imaginatively - and opened up wider possibilities for intellectual and social growth. While he admitted that in part, this made the school day more enjoyable for students and thus diminished the need for a high level of control in classroom management, he was also careful to push that these activities needed strong educational justification that went beyond just vocational training.²²² Dewey was not advocating for these activities because of the ways in which it would prepare students for jobs, but because of the way the activity and subject matter could engage students. Rather than encouraging occupational education, Dewey believed in education *through* occupations. Adrian Skilbeck said this positioning meant that activities which had a potential economic value in wider society could be pursued for their own sake in the classroom, with a focus on growth and not perfection.²²³

The experience of play was also essential in intellectual formation. Dewey claimed that through play, children experiment with abstract concepts and create a “world of meanings, a store of concepts so fundamental to all intellectual achievement.”²²⁴ Rather than being

²²² Skilbeck, "Dewey On Seriousness, Playfulness and the Role of the Teacher," 12.

²²³ Skilbeck, "Dewey On Seriousness, Playfulness and the Role of the Teacher," 3.

²²⁴ Dewey, *How We Think*, 162.

unconnected with reality, Dewey pointed out that most “free play” connected back to recognizable concepts. A child might imagine a firefighter on the moon in their play, but they were still conceptualizing things like space, fire, job roles, etc. The experimentation with meaning and plasticity was a key element in playfulness - a trait that Dewey believed was an essential attitude of mind.

Because Dewey specifically cited the dynamics of play as being educative for children, he has been cited by many scholars when talking about games as educative or simulation learning in classrooms. However, a survey of this research revealed that most of the references to Dewey are primarily associated with video games, highly surface level, and typically briefly reference his conceptions that experience is educative,²²⁵ learning through inquiry,²²⁶ and the importance of reflection in learning from experience.²²⁷ David Shaffer does engage more deeply with Dewey, claiming that games are capable of being a place where a community of practices

²²⁵ Aiko Sato and Jonathan de Haan, "Applying an Experiential Learning Model to the Teaching of Gateway Strategy Board Games," *International Journal of Instruction* 9, no. 1 (2016): 3-16.; Kristian Kiili, Sara De Freitas, Sylvester Arnab, and Timo Lainema, "The Design Principles for Flow Experience in Educational Games," *Procedia Computer Science* 15 (2012): 78-91.; Mansureh Kebritchi, Atsusi Hirumi, and Haiyan Bai, "The Effects of Modern Mathematics Computer Games on Mathematics Achievement and Class Motivation," *Computers & Education* 55, no. 2 (2010): 427-443.

²²⁶ Mansureh Kebritchi, "Examining the Pedagogical Foundations of Modern Educational Computer Games," *Computers & Education* 51, no. 4 (2008): 1729-1743.; Fiona O’Riordan and Deborah Kirkland, "Games as an Engaging Teaching and Learning Technique: Learning or Playing," *Novel Approaches to Promoting Student Engagement*, 77 (2008).

²²⁷ Hui-Chun Hsiao, "A Brief Review of Digital Games and Learning," *2007 First IEEE International Workshop on Digital Game and Intelligent Toy Enhanced Learning (DIGITEL'07)*, 124-129.; Deborah Ambrosio Mawhirter and Patricia Ford Garofalo, "Expect the Unexpected: Simulation Games as a Teaching Strategy," *Clinical Simulation in Nursing* 12, no. 4 (2016): 132-136.; Daniela Ahrens, "Serious Games—A New Perspective on Work based Learning," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 204, (2015): 277-281.

can convey its collected knowledge through simulation.²²⁸ However, David Waddington believes that video games especially do not instill cooperation and discipline that was key to Deweyan educational model, but he does think that simulation games can generate the Deweyan disposition to approach situations experimentally.²²⁹

Experience and Education for Growth

Dewey's primary goal for a student's education was growth through experience. It needed to be understood not as a "movement toward a fixed goal" or specific set of benchmarks to achieve, but rather an end in itself.²³⁰ The growth experienced through education was meant to spark deeper curiosity and desire for more education. In *Education and Experience*, the criteria for that growth was clarified. Educative experience that led to growth would be marked by what Dewey termed continuity and interaction.²³¹ While all experience was educative, some were miseducative, shutting off future paths for growth and did not allow for continuity of experiences leading to more experience.²³² Dewey said, "Every experience is a moving force. It's value can only be judged by what it moves toward and into."²³³ Experience should yield a growth and

²²⁸ David Williamson Shaffer, "Epistemic Games," *Innovate: Journal of Online Education* 1, no. 6 (2005): 2.

²²⁹ David Waddington, "Dewey and Video Games: From Education through Occupations to Education through Simulations," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 1 (2015): 18.

²³⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 55.

²³¹ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 44.

²³² Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 36. Dewey's uses the example of a burglar to illustrate miseducation without growth. The individual man may eventually learn to become an excellent burglar, but these choices close future paths for him, destroying the possibility for continuity.

²³³ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 38.

development in personal habits, which in turn help an individual pursue and reflect upon further experience, leading to a sort of compounding effect.

Growth in education would also occur when there is what Dewey called interaction - interplay and consideration given to both objective and internal factors of an experience.²³⁴ Sarah Stitzlein highlights that Dewey's conception of growth would also mean a deeper and ongoing curiosity about the world and an openness to changing oneself to respond to a shifting environment.²³⁵ Attention had to be paid to the environment in which learners existed as well as their internal capacities and motivations.²³⁶ Dewey said that there was "no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in the construction of the purposes involved in his studying."²³⁷ Education was the best way to promote ongoing growth of the individual, which could in turn spark further growth on a societal level. As a result, education was meant to form attitudes, not just convey information.²³⁸

²³⁴ Dewey said, "The human mind does not learn in a vacuum; the facts presented for learning, to be grasped, must have some relation to the previous experience of the individual or to his present needs." John Dewey, "Why Have Progressive Schools?: (1933)," In *America's Public Philosopher: Essays on Social Justice, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Eric Thomas Weber (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 138.

²³⁵ Sarah Stitzlein, "Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today," *Education and Culture* 30, no. 2 (2014), 67.

²³⁶ Dewey called for "mutual adaptation" between student and educational experience. It advocated for developmentally appropriate choices. Citing the fact that trigonometry is not taught to elementary children, Dewey maintained that there was no such thing as something having educational value in the abstract. It is the interaction of the position and interest of the learner, the material, and how it is taught that led to educational experiences. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 44.

²³⁷ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 67.

²³⁸ Larry A. Hickman, *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism : Lessons from John Dewey*, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2019).

Dewey was clear that these attitudes would not be a result of social indoctrination, but rather intelligent social action by the student as a result of educative experiences.²³⁹ When describing his idea of utopian schools, Dewey claimed that simple knowledge acquisition was not the primary purpose. Educational liberation would occur when the focus was on determining a student's initial capacities and preferences, and then determining the "conditions of the environment and the kinds of activity in which the positive capacities of each young person could operate most effectually."²⁴⁰ According to Dewey, schools served to sustain the values that social groups prioritized, reinforcing them through the educative experiences that cultivated not just the mind, but the student's way of life and ability to communicate with others. Stitzlein echoes Dewey's claim around schools' capacity to continue democratic life by highlighting their role in habit formation. The inquiry and deliberative practices students experience in schools engages cultural norms and customs, allowing students to both improve democratic habits as they inculcate them.²⁴¹ James Scott Johnson amplifies Dewey's claims around inquiry and claims that the capacity to inquire is synonymous with an individual's capacity to engage with democracy. He says, "Education thus becomes a necessary constituent of growth, community, and democracy, by fostering the habits of inquiry, which (again) fosters the movement of growth

²³⁹ Dewey, "The Challenge of Democracy to Education."

²⁴⁰ John Dewey, "Dewey Outlines Utopian Schools: (1933)," In *America's Public Philosopher: Essays on Social Justice, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Eric Thomas Weber (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 122.

²⁴¹ Stitzlein, "Habits of Democracy," 65.

to community, to democracy, and back again.”²⁴² Students are meant to be educated *through* lived democracy to foster democracy and ultimately continue to shape it.

Critics of Dewey claim his approach to moral formation is too permissive and presumes that any growth is positive. Dewey specifically addressed what he called miseducative experiences (which lead to a narrowing of options and capacity) as not being growth oriented. Dewey’s lack of specificity on what good growth looks like or an end goal for growth has been criticized by a variety of scholars. Robert Talisse says that Dewey does not allow enough room for pluralism and that the conception of growth and human flourishing that one group of Deweyan citizens advanced could easily be rejected by fellow citizens - leading to either a stalemate of democratic progress or an eventually oppressive civic totalitarianism.²⁴³ Similarly, Diggins pointed out that Dewey’s conception of growth did not properly account for when a progressive movement was also wildly exclusive.²⁴⁴ This concern over a lack of direction or framing for growth that could lead to pernicious results connects to concerns around Dewey’s lack of explicit engagement of issues of power. This will be addressed later in the chapter.

Others claim that the problem in Dewey’s claims around growth is not in its lack of specificity, but in the belief that humans are capable of positive growth at all. Francis Samuels says that Dewey’s positive orientation to the wider material world is what leads to an

²⁴² James Scott Johnson, *Inquiry and Education* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), 190.

²⁴³ Robert Talisse, "A Farewell to Deweyan Democracy," *Political Studies* 59, no. 3 (2011), 515.

²⁴⁴ Diggins, "Philosophy Without Foundations, Politics With Illusions," 120. Diggins used the example of the labor movement, whose unions often did not allow the membership of people of color, Jews, or Catholics.

oversimplified understanding of growth.²⁴⁵ As a pragmatist, Dewey's conception of growth was not associated with a specific value frame, but was associated with a framework that also placed tremendous faith in the powers of human reason. Dewey spoke of a "working faith in the possibilities of human nature."²⁴⁶ Samuels, who writes from a Christian and specifically Calvinist perspective, sees this understanding as inherently naive and accuses Dewey of lacking a deeper understanding of the self. Samuel's moral anthropology and hermeneutic of a "fallen" world where humanity is inherently prone to negative and harmful actions mean Dewey's growth seems doomed to failure. Samuels' described Dewey's optimism as making him "uneasy" especially given that the world was full of violence, greed, and anger.²⁴⁷ A Deweyan approach to growth appears naive and insufficient to those who do not conceive of the world as (at minimum) a neutral or good place.

Accusations of naivete often fail to recognize that Dewey does not claim that this rosy view of human potential is an automatic reality. Humans, for Dewey, are not naturally good or evil, but rather influenced by their environment and capable (through human reason and ability) of much. Dewey claimed that this affirming attitude of human potential was not a philosophical abstraction, and had to be actualized in the way that people related to one another. In his famous address, "Creative Democracy - the Task Before Us," he said, "It [belief in the common man] is

²⁴⁵ Francis Samuel, "Human Fulfillment and Education: A Critique of Dewey's Philosophy of Education," *Religion & Education* 42, no. 1 (2015): 108.

²⁴⁶ John Dewey, "Creative Democracy - the Task Before Us," *The Later Works, 1925-1953* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), *LW* 14:227.

²⁴⁷ Samuel, "Human Fulfillment and Education: A Critique of Dewey's Philosophy of Education," 113.

only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life.”²⁴⁸

Education and Democracy

Beyond just social change, Dewey believed that education’s capacity for values transmission was essential to the health of democracy. While not the only way, schools were a primary means in which values are presented to individuals for judgment and potential acceptance and integration.²⁴⁹ As a result, Dewey believed that public schools should commit to a curriculum that taught subjects that developed active citizens who would sustain democracy. However, this did not translate to enforcing a static set of values for Dewey. Instead, it was an ongoing commitment to reflection and responsive education as the world changed. If a school could not respond to new realities with openness and inquiry (in the pragmatist tradition), it was not preserving democracy. Referencing Horace Mann’s famous admonition that “Education, is our only political safety; outside of this ark is the deluge,” Dewey said,

The ark is not an ark of safety in a deluge. It is being carried by the deluge of outside forces, varying, shifting, turning aimlessly with every current in the tides of modern life. Just as democracy in order to live, must move and move forward, so schools in a democracy cannot stand still, cannot be satisfied and complacent with what has been accomplished, but must be willing to undertake whatever reorganization of studies, of methods of teaching, of administration...Failing in this, the schools cannot give democracy the intelligent direction of its forces which it needs to continue in existence.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Dewey, “Creative Democracy - the Task Before Us,” 227.

²⁴⁹ John Dewey, "Democracy and Education in the World of Today: (1938)," in *America's Public Philosopher: Essays on Social Justice, Economics, Education, and the Future of Democracy*, ed. Eric Thomas Weber (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 163.

²⁵⁰ Dewey, “The Challenge of Democracy to Education,” 33. Dewey was referring to Horace Mann’s admonition that “Education is our only political safety; outside of this ark is the deluge.”

Schools were the best hope for the next generation to equip skills to deal with the unforeseen consequences of the current political and social reality and challenges to democracy.²⁵¹ Because Dewey saw democracy as more than a form of government and rather a way of living in the world, classrooms were where citizens could cultivate the essential habits and appreciations for democratic life.²⁵² Education and democracy sustained each other, with knowledge blossoming into social action that enlivened the continuing dynamic democratic community.²⁵³ A Deweyan understanding of democracy sees it as both an end and a means, constructed through daily life and habits as much as governance.²⁵⁴ Dewey believed that this attitude would permeate nearly all of an individual's life, saying, “The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion.”²⁵⁵

Moreover, the democratic spirit was connected to the essential social nature of humans. Democracy was not simply authority distributed across a crowd, or “sovereignty chopped up into mince meat,”²⁵⁶ but the process through which democratic ends are pursued. Because of Dewey’s positive orientation to human reason and capacity, he believed that “human nature when left to itself, when free from external arbitrary restrictions, will tend to the production of

²⁵¹ Dewey, “The Challenge of Democracy to Education,” 34.

²⁵² Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 163.

²⁵³ Dewey, “The Challenge of Democracy to Education,” 33.

²⁵⁴ Stitzlein, “Habits of Democracy,” 70.

²⁵⁵ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 171.

²⁵⁶ John Dewey, *The Early Works, 1882-1898* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), *EW1*:228.

democratic institutions that work successfully.”²⁵⁷ As a result, the flourishing of democratic ideas was a moral proposition for Dewey, as he believed it reflected the best of human nature and was the expression of a human capacity operation at its fullest levels of freedom. He saw democracy as a moral and ethical way of engaging with others out of which came a governmental structure. Dewey compared the importance of the democratic spirit’s connection to the form of government to a home or a church, claiming both can be understood as simply an arrangement of bricks (which is technically true), but that both were far more significant and influenced by the way people engaged with them.²⁵⁸

Democratic means and ends were the full expression of an individual able to communicate freely, associate with others, and pursue their desired way of life. As a result, as time and circumstance impacted society, a democratic political structure was not always reliably the best source of democratic life

No matter how uniform and constant human nature is in the abstract, the conditions within which and upon which it operates have changed so greatly since political democracy was established among us, that we cannot now depend upon our being expressed in political institutions alone. We cannot even be certain that they and their legal accompaniments are actually democratic at the present time, for democracy is expressed in the attitudes of human beings and is measured in the consequences produced in their lives.²⁵⁹

As a democratic society’s citizens grew through education, they were forming habits of mind and practice that were dynamically responding to deliberation and communication with one another.

²⁵⁷ John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 97.

²⁵⁸ John Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy,” *University of Michigan Philosophical Papers*, Second Series, no. 1 (Andrews & Company Publishers, 1888): 238.

²⁵⁹ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 97.

A functioning democratic government then needs to change as its citizens change. For Dewey, political forms were not inherently good or bad, but were instead the results of choices made by humans in response to their changing circumstances and relationships. Stitzlein says that because democracy is meant to respond to the needs of citizens and the current environment, any sort of settling into a particular form would mean that it would then no longer need active participation and engagement to function.²⁶⁰ Henry Farrell said that Dewey's flexible understanding and call for responsive democracy is an essential framework as new forms of media continue to shift the ways in which we engage with social issues.²⁶¹ Given the constantly shifting horizon of social media platforms and their impact on disinformation in the last several election cycles, this responsiveness is essential, especially when open discourse and conversation is understood as a key element to democracy.

Forming Publics

Dewey's broader conception of democracy beyond a form of governance is developed in particular in *The Public and Its Problems*. In it, Dewey posits that democratic action around public problems allowed for mutual edification of community members and growing the health of democracy. Beginning with a claim that humans are inherently social beings, ever in relationship to one another, Dewey claims that people are drawn into associations with one another especially through shared interests, consequences, and desires. While members of

²⁶⁰ Stitzlein, "Habits," 63.

²⁶¹ Henry Farrell, "New Problems, New Publics? Dewey and New Media," *Policy & Internet* 6, no. 2 (2014): 185.

groups, individuals still retain their own agency and focus, Dewey says they begin to think of “consequences of their behavior upon that of others and that of others upon themselves.”²⁶²

He believed that as people began to associate with one another for reasons large and small, (or simply living in proximity together), they would discover common consequences.²⁶³ When these associations of people become aware of the consequence of their own actions on others in society and vice versa, they can become compelled to action and advocacy. In these moments, for Dewey, they become *a public*. From there, publics would advocate for their needs and desires which in turn would (usually) be carried out through a representative government. Dewey said, “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systemically cared for.”²⁶⁴ By communicating with one another, sharing their experiences and concerns, they begin to shift and shape both their own thoughts, but also their habits.²⁶⁵

Publics do not require uniformity of identity, just shared consequences and opportunity for action. Dewey said, “When these consequences are intellectually and emotionally appreciated, a shared interest is generated and the nature of their interconnected behavior is thereby transformed.”²⁶⁶ The experience of common consequence and movement to action

²⁶² Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 75.

²⁶³ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 88.

²⁶⁴ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 69.

²⁶⁵ Sarah Stitzlein and Amy Rector-Aranda, "The Role of 'Small Publics' in Teacher Dissent," *Educational Theory* 66, no. 1-2 (2016): 169.

²⁶⁶ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 77.

around then is also key to the understanding of what distinguished a simple group of people from a public.²⁶⁷ Dewey believed it was through this collective work as publics would nuance viewpoints and further entangle the lives of neighbors, with local particulars becoming a window into larger universals. Dewey pushed proximity and conversation, claiming that if individuals become interlocutors they will form “vital attachments” and come to an understanding both of their neighbor’s shared and differing wants and needs, and how individual actions affect the greater community. Publics did not need to be formal groupings of people (although organizations and social groups often contained publics). They would form and come in and out of existence as they responded to the current social reality and their consequences. Dewey acknowledged the fuzzy distinction between a simple group of people and a public saying

There is no sharp and clear line which draws itself, pointing out beyond peradventure, like the line left by the receding high tide, just where a public comes into existence which has interest so significant that they must be looked after and administered by special agencies, or government officers.²⁶⁸

Melvin Rogers believes that Dewey’s emphasis on connectivity in *The Public and Its Problems* stems in part because of the massive shifts in technology, communication, and economics at the time. Relationality was meant to serve as a counterweight to a belief in expertise claims - claims that often failed to understand how contingent the rapidly changing and developing world made them.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Stitzlein and Rector-Aranda, "The Role of ‘Small Publics’ in Teacher Dissent," 169.

²⁶⁸ Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 107.

²⁶⁹ Melvin Rogers, "Dewey and His Vision of Democracy," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (2010): 72.

The formation and action of publics is the place from which democratic action springs, highlighting that Dewey saw democracy's origin point as a manifestation of the healthy social exchanges, not as a fixed governmental system. Dewey said, "Democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself."²⁷⁰ Dewey wrote *The Public and Its Problems* partially as a response to Walter Lippman's 1922 book *Public Opinion*. Lippmann advocated that government would be more effectively and safely run by those with expertise rather than the often uneducated and uninformed public who were easily manipulated. Conversely, Dewey called for citizens to not abdicate the hard work of democracy and societal change to technocrats, but to rather bring their stories and experiences into the process as well. Dewey claimed that, "The man that wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied."²⁷¹ Facts and vital knowledge of what the public wants and needs is found in the voices of its members, not just in analysis, polling or economic extrapolations. Amy Shuffelton says that Dewey is claiming that the knowledge needed for a flourishing democracy is held socially and is not separate from practical reason.²⁷² It is rooted in inquiry and communication conducted in public by publics.

²⁷⁰ Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 175.

²⁷¹ Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 224.

²⁷² Amy Shuffelton, "The Chicago Teachers Strike and Its Public." *Education and Culture* 30, no. 2 (2014): 24.

Critiques of Dewey's Understanding of Community

Dewey's understanding of community as expressed in publics has been critiqued as being too simplistic and not paying enough attention to the dynamics of power and systemic oppression, especially race. Dewey himself would admit less than ten years after writing *The Public and Its Problems* that technological progress meant that fewer associations would be proximity based and more would be focused on common identity or interest.²⁷³ Care theorist Nell Noddings said that Dewey focused on the individual and communal experience of community, but did not examine the dynamics of relationships, specifically dyadic ones, which Noddings believe shape how a person experiences larger participation in community.²⁷⁴ However, Noddings' focus on dyads loses the complexity of shared consequences and problems that cannot be solved by individuals in which Dewey roots publics. The dyadic relationships that Noddings' says shape the individual are often not things that need (or even should) be regulated via democratic process.

Charles Mills read Dewey as far too optimistic about the experience of being in a community to combat the alienation of individuals as a result of oppressive structural forces. Similarly, Cornel West critiques Dewey for not paying enough attention to both race and class when forming an understanding of community and instead assuming that shared impact would be enough for people to work together for a mutual good.²⁷⁵ While Dewey did not have the specific

²⁷³ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 123.

²⁷⁴ Noddings, "Dewey's Philosophy of Education: a Critique from the Perspective of Care Theory," 286.

²⁷⁵ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: a Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 86.

language of intersectionality at the time of his writings, he points to the need to examine the ways in which differing groups share a consequence, but are impacted differently. This would occur in the dialogue around these consequences from which publics formed and maintained themselves. Scholars of intersectionality like Patricia Hill Collins (whose thoughts on the pragmatic approach is discussed at further length below) point to the shared consequence as an important springboard for collective action across identities. Though West's points about the absence of discussion in Dewey on how class and race might impede the formation of communities that would move to collective action is an important nuance, it misses the ways in which Dewey depends on those shared consequences to serve as a bridge and motivation for action. The extensive work of union organizer Saul Alinsky, who focused on organizing diverse communities around what he called "shared interests" provides tangible proof that while systemic issues hamper community action, they are not insurmountable.²⁷⁶

Moreover, Black pragmatist philosopher Eddie Glaude believes that although Dewey did not talk about race in his work, his orientation towards change is actually an asset when talking about racial identity. Glaude disagrees with the claim that pragmatism (particularly Dewey's) is too optimistic, and introduces a critical reading of Dewey that shows pragmatism is capable of engaging with the tragic elements of human experiences (especially racism), because of its responsiveness to contingency and change.²⁷⁷ Dewey's non-essentialism coupled with the idea of

²⁷⁶ Simona Giorgi, Jean M. Bartunek, and Brayden G. King, "A Saul Alinsky Primer for the 21st century: The Roles of Cultural Competence and Cultural Brokerage in Fostering Mobilization in Support of Change," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 37, (2017): 128.

²⁷⁷ Eddie Glaude Jr., "The Problem of African American Public(s): Dewey and African American Politics in the 21st century," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (2010): 9.

the emergence of publics and their formation through deliberation is, for Glaude, essential to the political health of the Black community in the post-civil rights movement era.²⁷⁸ Black political activity needs to be reconceptualized, not based on a monolithic experiential claim based on the historical reality of the civil rights era, but through the emergence of Black publics. Glaude believes these publics will come together through communication in a way that recognizes how new social and economic realities impact Black communities and individuals differently.²⁷⁹ This will lead to political action that is neither chained to a historical experience of Blackness that is no longer applicable, and also not deny the unique challenges faced by a community whose reality is existent and ongoing.²⁸⁰

Similarly to Glaude, Gregory Bynum says that Dewey has been lambasted for focusing on the emergent in lieu of essential, especially around group identities, and can fail to offer a “strong theoretical basis for definitive movement away from present, oppressive conceptions and practices and toward a better, and distinctly different, future.”²⁸¹ However, Bynum argues that despite this, Dewey’s anti-essentialist positioning toward group identity can allow the oppressed

²⁷⁸ Glaude, "The Problem of African American Public(s)," 26.

²⁷⁹ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 25.

²⁸⁰ Glaude explains the complex ways in which the experience of a racial community can change without denying the reality of their racialized experience by quoting Dewey, “The experience has changed; that is the thing experienced has changed—not that an unreality has given place to a reality, nor that some transcendental (unexperienced) Reality has changed, not that truth has changed, but just and only the concrete reality experienced has changed.” Glaude, "The Problem of African American Public(s)," 6.

²⁸¹ Gregory Bynum, "John Dewey's Anti-essentialism and Social Progress," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 36, no. 3 (2005): 365.

and the oppressors to see each other as complex individuals, possibly sharing common desires and allowing the possibility of social progress with minimal conflict.

Glaude and Bynum's insights continue to point to the potential of Deweyan publics to be a space of intersectional action and dialogue. This is supported by Patricia Hill Collins belief that intersectionality and American pragmatism have much in common in their emphasis on experience, the contextualized nature of knowledge, and the need for imaginative social action. She highlights the importance of the pragmatist understanding of community as a tool for an intersectional analysis of social inequality. Though she references the more general conception of community, all would apply to Dewey's conception of publics. Collins says that community as understood by pragmatists offers a "template for describing actual power relations as people live them and conceptualize them" and offers the mid-level perspective between larger structures and individual experience that current intersectionality theory is missing. She points to the usefulness of pragmatism's conception of community as ongoing and mutable *alongside* its reality as empirically rooted.

However, Collins does express concerns that pragmatism's approach to social action as it emerges from community (and by extension, Dewey's approach) as too reactive to social conditions, with its flexibility also meaning it rarely connects to guiding principles long enough to enact major change. She is also concerned that this means pragmatic principles can be used to serve any variety of ends.²⁸² While both of these critiques raise valid concerns, a further examination of Dewey's conception of democracy is helpful. In *The Public and Its Problems*,

²⁸² Collins, "Social Inequality, Power, and Politics," 450.

among the many descriptions of democracy as shared life, habits, and functioning community, there is a more detailed (and painfully dry) description of democracy. Dewey describes democracy as

From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the group to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. Since every individual member is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups.²⁸³

Dewey holds that functioning democracies will mean that differing groups will be in continual interaction and conversation with one another as they are animated by the ongoing participation and continual growth and “liberation of the potentialities” of members. The growth that opens new pathways for experience that Dewey points to as the ends of education is echoed in this description of groups that enable the deepened engagement of members, while also not limiting their connection to other groups. As individual capacity (both material and otherwise) is ideally awakened by participation in a group, those capacities will support the growth and development of other groups that a person belongs to, necessitating further dialogue and negotiation between those groups. Collins expresses concern that pragmatist’s principles of community may be co-opted by groups that would seek to oppress or harm others. However, Dewey’s conceptualization claims that a group that seeks to isolate its members from all other groups and exit negotiations (even if its group was gaining members and seems to be a majority) is undemocratic. The “baked in” intersectional and dialogical aspects of Deweyan publics (and democracy) are its

²⁸³ Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 174.

greatest safeguard and greatest animator toward serious and sincere engagement with structural oppression.

Dewey and Power

Collin's concerns about the ways that pragmatism may be utilized by groups seeking to oppress others echoes the critiques of Dewey's engagement (or lack thereof) around power. Roudy Hildreth summarizes critiques of Dewey's lack of established goal for political action (taking instead an ends in view approach), as meaning that the goal may change depending upon the prevailing values of the community and social consensus. As established earlier, a pessimistic reading of this responsive position recognizes its potential to be co-opted by oppressive or dominating structures.²⁸⁴ While Hildreth believes this comes primarily from a too narrow reading of Dewey, Richard Bernstein calls it a failure of Dewey to recognize or acknowledge the powerful structures that served to resist or block the reforms he advocated so strongly for. However, Bernstein is also quick to point out that while Dewey's writing did not reflect an engagement with structural realities, and charitably points to Dewey's personal engagement for decades with major reform movements and took action on behalf of women's suffrage, civil rights, free speech, and anti-imperialism.²⁸⁵ It points to the complexity of looking for aspects of more contemporary critiques of structural oppression in older works. Dewey did not speak of racism and sexism using language that would be as recognizable to the contemporary reader as a direct critique, but his life's work indicated both an awareness and

²⁸⁴ Roudy Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 781.

²⁸⁵ Louis Bernstein, "Dewey's Vision of Radical Democracy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, ed. Molly Cochran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 305.

strong commitment to action around those and other justice issues. While it remains important to acknowledge that Dewey did not write about them, the counterpoint of his own work does not allow us to assume he was not considering them at all.

Regardless of Dewey's personal commitments, Nel Noddings commented on Dewey's absence of moral absolutes in the curriculum and saw them as a major impediment to meaningful change. Noddings says that while a care theorist approach agrees with Dewey's focus on building pro-social and integrated habits, it diverges as it asks for a firmer foundation of that education, especially of children. A care perspective believes that a commitment to others means that education begins with agreed upon principles like "receptivity, vulnerability to the suffering of others, acceptance of the obligation to respond as carer to the expressed needs of the cared for...and at least one absolute injunction: never inflict unnecessary pain."²⁸⁶ Transforming power relations through education could not come from a place of neutral inquiry. As a result, Dewey's classroom may provide a positive learning environment, but not one that would yield transformative relationships. Again, Dewey's parameters around growth shows that while inquiry and education do not need to fully be attached to a specific moral code, neither the process nor the end result should be considered morally neutral. Arguably, while the principles of care ethics that Noddings said should guide education are laudable, Dewey would caution that over time, context and changing circumstances may prove some of them to be problematic or harmful. For instance, Noddings does not indicate who decides what is considered unnecessary pain – framing that can drastically shift depending on the subject, their knowledge, and situation.

²⁸⁶ Noddings, "Dewey's Philosophy of Education: a Critique from the Perspective of Care Theory," 284.

While some claim that Dewey failed to acknowledge structural elements of power, Cornel West believes that the deficits in Dewey's view were in his limited perspective of the purpose of reform. Coming out of the Marxist tradition, West wanted to see a more radical commitment to structural change in Dewey's work. While Dewey did see power in education to shift social structures and address systemic problems, West claims that Dewey primarily saw it as a way to ameliorate suffering or encourage social mobility.²⁸⁷ Dewey's writing was absent the large critiques of systems of class that reinforced social hierarchy and not focused enough on transformation of the socioeconomic models that generate and perpetuate inequality to begin with. West argues that Dewey contributed to the professionalization of the job of teaching which in turn helped narrow the impact of education on both students and teachers to the middle class.²⁸⁸

West's argument that the professionalization of teaching has declawed it and diminished its capacity to enact radical change through education is intimately reflected in many of current conversations around standards and accountability. These complex conversation on the ways in which regulation has either hamstrung educators or instead guarantees quality deliverables are occurring at both the level of educational policy circles and in local schools. Although West's point around Dewey's contribution to this debate is valid, Dewey cannot shoulder the blame alone. The discussion of the professionalization of the fields as a force of reifying the structures

²⁸⁷ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy a Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 84.

²⁸⁸ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy a Genealogy of Pragmatism*, 84. Ironically, this critique around professionalism is the opposite of Diane Ravitch's criticism that Dewey's refusal to articulate specific ends for education led to an incoherent core curriculum. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

of classism and racism in modern schooling is well outside of the scope of this dissertation, but one that Dewey is strongly implicated in.

Conversely, while West believes that Dewey's work is not radical enough to promote structural change, Hildreth remains hopeful about Dewey's capacity to engage power. He argues that Dewey understood power through the lens of inquiry and growth. Inquiry for Dewey meant a constant examination of reality and critical reflection. Because Dewey understood knowledge as contingent, one could not automatically trust their judgment and would need to constantly be mindful of potential assumptions and bias and be open for revisions. Additionally, inquiry always leads to action.²⁸⁹ A faithful undertaking of inquiry leads the individual to constantly question their own assumption, and proactively seek perspectives that would challenge their conception of the truth. Absent the important pragmatist framing of truth as corrigible and the implication that this corrigibility necessitates ongoing discovery and reflection, Dewey may seem ignorant to power. Reframed around truth as centered in active, ongoing inquiry, there is a strong mandate at the personal and community level for engagement of issues of power and oppression.

Hildreth claim of the self-regulatory power of inquiry is yet again amplified and nuanced by a clearer understanding of Dewey's definition of growth. Because growth has to be generative and open up possibility, any action that would shut off or stymie growth for one group over another would be suspect, and necessitate more inquiry around it. However inquiry could potentially reach its limits and conflicts could arise which Dewey then believed could only be

²⁸⁹ Roudy Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 792.

addressed through participating in democratic dialogue and action - which in turn would lead to more growth and knowledge and understanding was expanded through dialogue. Dewey called conflict an essential condition of growth and believed that political and social democracy were the best ways to leverage it for flourishing.²⁹⁰

Many of the critiques leveled at Dewey around power are also rooted in aforementioned concern that his moral anthropology is too optimistic. While his writing is stalwartly rooted in a belief that humans must and can change to respond to the shifting reality of the world, Dewey was not completely Pollyanna about his own claims. Dewey admitted that while individuals and organizations might claim a commitment to ongoing democratic dialogue, it may not be reflected in their actions or recognition of authority.

The real trouble is that there is an intrinsic split in our habitual attitudes when we profess to depend upon discussion and persuasion in politics and then systematically depend on other methods and reaching conclusions in matters of morals and religion or on anything where we depend upon a person or group that has the authority.²⁹¹

Notably, Dewey pointed to schools and the home as particularly guilty of this contradiction. Both were places where democratic character was supposed to be best formed, but in general, most disputes were solved by appealing to the authority of a parent, teacher, or textbook rather than discussion and dialogue. While there is no easy and comprehensive riposte to the claims that his beliefs in the capacity of democratic habits to change people and society were unrealistic, Dewey's own admission of where it falls short points to an awareness of his theories' limits. This

²⁹⁰ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), MW 14:207.

²⁹¹ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 100.

commitment to a realistic view of society that refuses to abandon hope in its better angels, along with the simultaneous practice of ongoing inquiry around both personal and communal action may not offer a perfect solution to structural iniquity, but it is far more generative than many of the critiques leveled against it.

Additionally, many of the critics of Dewey who believed his work was not radical enough seem to have missed the most radical aspect and element of his work – his conception of democracy as a changing and liberating force that would yield and could only be produced by democratic means. A democratic approach demands flexibility and the continual recognition of the fallibility and corrigibility of both means and ends. This meant that the current political structures would have to change as democratic habits shifted what was understood as democracy.

In his essay “Radical Democracy,” Dewey says,

The end of democracy is a radical end... It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal, and cultural. A democratic liberalism that does not recognize these things in thought and action is not awake to its own meaning and to what that meaning demands.²⁹²

While the critics argue Dewey did not spend enough time addressing the current structures of injustice, Dewey may well have thought that the systems and structure perpetuating those undemocratic elements of society needed to change in totality. In some ways, Dewey’s work does advocate for the massive structural changes that West wanted him to push for. However, Dewey, unlike West, did not have definitive understanding of what that new system would look

²⁹² John Dewey, “Democracy Is Radical,” in *Essays, Reviews, Trotsky Inquiry, Miscellany, and Liberalism and Social Action* (John Dewey: The Later Works: 1925–1953, Volume 11: 1935–1937), ed. Jo Ann Bydston. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987): 298.

like, as democratic habits and democratic communities, and not a specific ideology would shape it.

Publics and the State

As people came together and formed publics, raising their needs and issues, Dewey said that the state formed to serve the people and their problems, and distinguished this from a simple governmental structure.²⁹³ It was, in effect, an extension of the public that was taking broader action with attention to longer-term consequences. Dewey said, “The characteristic of the public as a state springs from the fact that all modes of associated behavior may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them.”²⁹⁴ As citizens raised new problems and publics shifted and changed over time, so too must the State. If the State was not serving the people, it was simply a structure of government and not truly democratic in nature. It has to be responsive to the democratic community and citizens also have to be active observers and critics of the State in order to help it maintain its dignity and connect to the public.²⁹⁵ Failing this, the State would shift to simply being a governmental structure and one that would be in danger of exerting undue control over the citizens. Dewey described this as the governments often appearing “either a monster to be destroyed or as a Leviathan to be cherished.”²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 89.

²⁹⁴ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 78.

²⁹⁵ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 110.

²⁹⁶ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 74.

Dewey believed that the State, which contained a plurality of association within it, had to be capable and willing to grow and evolve as that plurality shifted. He said

Just as publics and states vary with conditions of time and place, so do the concrete functions which should be carried out by states. There is no antecedent universal proposition which can be laid down because of which the functions of a state should be limited or should be expanded. Their scope is something to be critically and experimentally determined.²⁹⁷

The state needed to be discovered, time and time again, through experimentation and responsive action.²⁹⁸ Fixation on one form of government not only stood as an impediment to orderly social changes, it invited revolution. Dewey believed that the state needed to be continually examined and said, “By its very nature, the state is ever something to be scrutinized, investigated, searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be remade.”²⁹⁹ However, Dewey also acknowledged that for many, conflating the State with the structure of government made it easy to stay focused on the reality of its functions and outcomes in need of change and reform.³⁰⁰

Democratic Communication and Dramatic Rehearsal

Communication was an essential democratic method for Dewey. Publics were born from individuals in communication with one another about how they experienced consequences. Communication extended beyond explicitly governmental debate and proceedings and included the activity of press, any publicly held discourse, and even private conversation.³⁰¹ The back and

²⁹⁷ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 112.

²⁹⁸ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 83.

²⁹⁹ Dewey, *The Publics and Its Problems*, 81.

³⁰⁰ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 109.

³⁰¹ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 99.

forth of civic communication becomes a crucial tool in public problem solving and the creation of publics. By opening up a wider sense of the possible ramifications of both the public problem and its possible solutions, individuals gain a better sense of how consequences affect them.

Roudy Hildreth says that different groups can leverage different voices and go through the intentional process of offering alternative plans and thoughtful consideration of consequences, gaining deeper insight and the potential for better and more widely acceptable ways of proceeding.³⁰² He connects this to Dewey's process of dramatic rehearsal.

Steven Fesmire³⁰³ and William Caspary³⁰⁴ have explicated Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal, but Fesmire admits that Dewey's writings on it are opaque and somewhat disjointed. One of clearest descriptions by Dewey is found in his 1908 edition of *Ethics*.

Deliberation is actually an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of contact. We give way, in our mind, to some impulse; we try, in our mind, some plan. Following its career through various steps we find ourselves in imagination, in the presence of the consequences that would follow.³⁰⁵

Rather than an individual simply imagining how a situation would go in their head or making a no-stakes practice attempt in artificial circumstances, Dewey's conception of *dramatic rehearsal* is a form of deliberation with Fesmire calling it "a vicarious, anticipatory way of acting."³⁰⁶ The

³⁰² Roudy W. Hildreth, "Word and Deed: a Deweyan Integration of Deliberative and Participatory Democracy," *New Political Science* 34, no. 3 (2012), 302.

³⁰³ Steven A. Fesmire, *John Dewey and The Moral Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 24.

³⁰⁴ William R. Caspary, "Ethical Deliberation as Dramatic Rehearsal: John Dewey's Theory." *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (1991): 180.

³⁰⁵ John Dewey, "1908 Ethics," in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991), MW 5:293.

³⁰⁶ Fesmire, *John Dewey and The Moral Imagination*, 37.

process incorporated affective responses, personal relationships, and imagination, exemplifying Dewey's belief as articulated in *The Theory of the Moral Life* that "Deliberation is not then to be identified with calculation, or a quasi-mathematical reckoning of profit and loss."³⁰⁷ Fesmire, Caspary, and Hildreth all claim that dramatic rehearsal extends beyond a reflection process to an essential tool of moral deliberation that leads to action.³⁰⁸

Imagination

Dramatic rehearsal is explicit in its utilization of imagination to both surface new ways of proceeding, consider consequences, and create empathy and understanding for one's interlocutor. Imagination served as a pathway for empathy and was explicitly linked to the educative nature of experience.³⁰⁹ Dewey describes it as

...when the desires and aims, the interests and modes of response of another become an expansion of our own being that we understand him. We learn to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and their results give true instruction, for they are built into our own structure.³¹⁰

However, Dewey's own opinion on the utility and place of imagination in both education and democratic life can seem contradictory across his body of work. In one space he may condemn the contemplation of imaginary or fantastical material as a waste of time, and in another work he may claim that the action of the artist is to stimulate the imagination of others to spur them to

³⁰⁷ John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Irvington, 1960), 134.

³⁰⁸ Steven A. Fesmire, "Dramatic Rehearsal and the Moral Artist: A Deweyan Theory of Moral Understanding," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 31, no. 3 (1995): 568-597; Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy*; Rowdy Hildreth, "Reconstructing Dewey on Power," *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 793.

³⁰⁹ Andrea English, "John Dewey and the Role of the Teacher in a Globalized World: Imagination, Empathy, and 'Third Voice'," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no. 10 (2016), 1048.

³¹⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), 339.

better engagement with their own life. Nakia Pope points out that Dewey's own language is not consistent, leading to further confusion around whether or not he is simply condemning a particular genre (fantasy) or whether he is critiquing any imaginative pursuit whose connection to current lived reality is not explicitly clear.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey called imagination “a warm and intimate taking in of the full scope of the situation.” Imagination invites the individual to conceive of the world as being broader than just the familiar environs and established habits. This would serve to combat the ways in which individuals were limited by both habits and outside structures. Dewey said, “It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress.”³¹¹ Fesmire said that Dewey was concerned that a narrow approach to life would result in a false standardization of meaning.³¹² Dewey described a dynamic in which a learner *tries* something (an active approach) and at the same time *undergoes* something (a passive experience) as the environment and broader world responds.³¹³ An experience serves to introduce the learner to difference, which then sparks questions. The imagination, according to Dewey, then assists in incorporating what individuals have undergone that challenges their previous experiences or habits into a better understanding of the world. According to Andrea English, Dewey's conception of imagination meant it to serve primarily as

³¹¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 349.

³¹² Fesmire, *John Dewey and The Moral Imagination*, 66.

³¹³ Throughout *Democracy and Education*, Dewey references the example of a child putting their hand in fire. In this case, the child tries out touching the fire and undergoes the experience of pain. As a result of both experiences together, the child learns not to touch an open flame.

an engine of integration, not generation.³¹⁴ English believes that Dewey did not consider understanding the full scope of any situation as possible, but the process of ongoing movement towards understanding scope would facilitate growth (the ultimate end of both education and life for Dewey).

Dewey's conception of the role of imagination and fantasy in children can be difficult to parse as he can use the terms interchangeably at times. Pope says that Dewey does make some distinction between a sort of daydreaming, unconnected to any sort of productive process, which he calls fantasy, and creative imagination, in which action of meaning making, knowledge integration, and productivity.³¹⁵ On the one hand, Dewey claimed that it was natural for children to spend time on imaginative play and that it helped develop an understanding of abstract concepts and develop creativity. He called it, "Not a flight into the purely fanciful and ideal, but a method of expanding and filling in what is real." At the same time, especially in his early works, Dewey was extremely concerned with children engaging in fantasy behavior or being encouraged to read things like myth or fairy tales. What Dewey called the imaginary or fantasy, differed from works of imagination because it did not have a strong enough link to reality. Dewey said that imaginary things allowed a mind to "stay aloof" and simply play with material because it "does not offer enough resistance, and so the mind plays with it capriciously."³¹⁶ He

³¹⁴ English, "John Dewey and the Role of the Teacher in a Globalized World: Imagination, Empathy, and 'Third Voice'," 1052.

³¹⁵ Nakia Pope, "Dewey Hates Hobbits: Fantasy and Imagination in the Work of John Dewey," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 13, no. 2 (2016): 182.

³¹⁶ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 272.

calls attempts to spark excitement through fantasy in children something that can “introduce an unhealthy and morbid state of mind.”³¹⁷

David Waddington believes that this was a result of Dewey’s opposition to what he considered to be educational failings in certain contemporary education movements.³¹⁸ Dewey often singles out myths, especially ones focused on nature, as being an educational waste of time and likely to result in children not focusing on real pursuits. Waddington believes that this was a direct critique of the nature study movement popularized by Lucy Wilson. While the movement encouraged students to go out into nature, unlike progressive education, nature was meant to stimulate imagination, not be a subject of experience and learning itself. Wilson would have students make up poems or myths about nature - an action whose sentimentality Dewey found to be distracting at best and insipid at worst. Waddington also thinks that Dewey’s antipathy towards flights of fancy in children was a result of his concerns with what he believed was excessive symbolism in the extremely popular Froebel’s Kindergarten movement.³¹⁹

Waddington claims that despite his critiques, Dewey believed imagination played an essential role in education - but it should always be linked to inquiry. Skilbeck says that confusion on what he believes is Dewey’s “undeniably affirmative attitude” on the importance of play and playfulness comes in part because of the tone and style of Dewey’s writing, not the content.³²⁰ It

³¹⁷ Dewey, “My Pedagogical Creed,” 79.

³¹⁸ David Waddington, “Troublesome Sentiments: The Origins of Dewey’s Antipathy to Children’s Imaginative Activities,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 4 (2010), 356.

³¹⁹ Waddington, “Troublesome Sentiments,” 357. Each of Froebel’s “gifts” - specific objects that were to be given to children at certain ages to encourage development - were meant to evoke symbolic thinking in children.

³²⁰ Skilbeck, 13.

is understandably difficult to believe someone is enthusiastic about play when their writing around it is marked by what Skilbeck calls (and this author agrees) bland prose and somber tones.³²¹

While myths and fantasy are often cited as a way to capture students' attention, Dewey believed that the surrounding world was full of interesting things to learn and engage with and that it was a failure of pedagogy that would make a fanciful world something that a child would be more interested in.

To the child the homely activities going on about him are not utilitarian devices for accomplishing physical ends; they exemplify a wonderful world, the depths of which he has not sounded, a world full of the mystery and promise that attend all the doings of the grown-ups who he admires.³²²

Dewey expresses concern that a playful person will construct an imaginary world that they will prefer over a world of “actual things” and believed that play needed to eventually move toward an attitude of work.³²³ Nakia Pope believes that Dewey worried that a focus on fantasy to grow imagination will result in a lack of focus on inquiry and problem solving.³²⁴ Dewey falsely conflates fantasy the *activity* with fantasy the *genre*, and as a result, underestimates the capacity of fantasy to be educative and productive. It is an inaccurate and reductive assumption that because something is connected to typical fantasy content, it is therefore unproductive. She uses

³²¹ The author is reminded of Cris Mayo's comment that nothing is so unfunny as philosophical writing on humor.

³²² Dewey, *How We Think*, 311.

³²³ Dewey, *How We Think*, 323.

³²⁴ Pope, “Dewey Hates Hobbits,” 193.

the example of the ways in which World of Warcraft³²⁵ players build social networks and solve problems within the games.³²⁶

Dewey also misses an important nuance in the complex motivations that drive people to both play games and participate in educational endeavors. Dewey's call for intention in educational pursuits can often be read as a single-minded intention and often does not capture the ways in which people approach an activity for a variety of different reasons *simultaneously*. Skilbeck says that our motivations are rarely neatly contained as Dewey presents them and argues that just as not every student comes to school with pure intent only to learn, those who play games and imagine often do so for more than diversion.

Conclusion

Dewey believed passionately that democracy was held together by the power of small groups of people in communication about their needs and their impact on the larger world. He called imagination "the chief instrument of the good," recognizing its essential role in promoting the growth that Dewey saw as the aim of education. Imagination also facilitated deliberation and civic communication through dramatic rehearsal. Play experiences like those an individual has in tabletop RPGs seem to tick all the boxes when it comes to providing a potentially educative experience that would promote democratic habits and cultivate an imagination adept at problem

³²⁵ An activity that Waddington specifically cited in his article as one he believed that Dewey would have disapproved of.

³²⁶ Pope, "Dewey Hates Hobbits," 195. Of note, in 2005 a glitch in programming in World of Warcraft actually resulted in a pandemic-like disease to spread throughout the gameworld. It is still being used by epidemiologists to study pandemic conditions and the data was invaluable during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Jhaan Elker, "World of Warcraft Experienced a Pandemic in 2005. That Experience May Help Coronavirus Researchers," *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2020/04/09/world-warcraft-experienced-pandemic-2005-that-experience-may-help-coronavirus-researchers/>.

solving. However, similar to Dewey's critique of experiential educational techniques that were not done purposefully or absent a teacher's careful framing, these play experiences could also simply be just a leisure pursuit. A child learning to sew in a classroom can foster broader skills and lines of flight for further inquiry and curiosity when framed well by an instructor OR it can be simple vocational instruction. Just as Dewey saw fellow educators miss untold opportunities for education growth and enrichment by leaving experience out of the classroom, this dissertation seeks to avoid leaving yet another potentially rich educational tool to go to waste. The next chapter will place Dewey in conversation with tabletop RPGs in an attempt to illuminate the potential places where these experiences can be leveraged for growth and civic formation.

CHAPTER FOUR
TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AS SITES OF DEWEYAN DYNAMICS OF
CIVIC LIFE

The mechanics and social dynamics of tabletop RPGs can mirror Dewey's understanding of the ways in which people are formed for civic life and how they come together for political action. When viewed through a Deweyan lens, some of the latent formative aspects of RPGs become more apparent, allowing us to better understand their capacity for civic education. This chapter will show that engaging in tabletop RPGs can provide players with the opportunity to form groups that mimic the dynamics of Deweyan publics. Within tabletop RPG games, individuals are drawn together through shared consequences, begin to communicate around values, and identify a problem around which they form ongoing and contingent consensus which informs their actions to address the problem – much like what occurs in a public.

The chapter will then examine the ways in which the emergent and imaginative problem solving in tabletop RPGs provides opportunities to players to experience dramatic rehearsal. It will focus on the similarities between Dewey's description of the role of teachers and the traits and practices of a good game master (GM) before closing with an examination of the ways in which communication within tabletop RPG groups generates creative dialogue and deliberation both with others and with oneself. Dewey believed that communication was key to civic health, saying,

I am inclined to believe that the heart and final guarantee of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss back and forth what is read in

uncensored news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another.³²⁷

Having used Dewey to highlight the capacity of RPGs to be a space for both the formation of democratic habits and of democratic methods of education, the chapter will close making an argument for a *ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life*.

Party as Public

The experience of playing tabletop RPGs can potentially facilitate some of the same conditions that Dewey claimed were necessary to form a public - communication, shared consequences, and common action around a problem. Players engage with one another not only to negotiate the much larger world of the game (and the power of the GM) and survive, but also to determine their goals. Montola says that nearly all major elements of role-playing games are determined and decided through a diegetic frame with players fleshing out the world and characters.³²⁸ Even the most traditional role-playing games do not dictate the endogenous goals meant to motivate individual players.³²⁹ This is something that is either agreed upon in advance of, or throughout the experience of play, by players with one another. They negotiate differing - but often overlapping - priorities to try to form ongoing consensus about next steps.

This most often occurs through the recognition of shared consequences. For instance, two characters may have dramatically different moral orientations towards the world, but realize that

³²⁷ John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." In *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), *LW* 224.

³²⁸ Markus Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-playing: the Social Framework of Role-playing Process," *International Journal of Role-playing* 1, no. 1 (2009): 25.

³²⁹ Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-playing," 52.

they have the same concerns. One player character may want to oust a corrupt local official because her entire family's business and legacy were destroyed as a result of the official's greed. Another player character may be a member of another species whose natural home and habitat is in the surrounding region, which is being deforested by the same local official. Neither of these characters may share the same priorities or preferred course of action, but it is through the shared consequences at the hands of the local official that they recognize a common problem and concern.

The challenges players face in tabletop RPGs are also usually bigger than one character can handle. The size of these problems and the need to utilize the help of others in addressing them also echoes aspects of a public. Dewey is clear that the consequences that form publics are of a scale that cannot be addressed fully by the individual or a small group. The level of consequences that pulls together a public requires the attention and action of outside authority to be fully addressed in part either because of the scope or scale. Dewey said, "For the essence of the consequence which calls a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them."³³⁰ Within this context of tabletop RPGs, this is mirrored by the actions of a group negotiating the worlds in which they play. In nearly all games, they exist in a world created, or at least curated, by a GM with nearly omnipotent power. Challenges are most often structured to necessitate the collaboration of players in order to move forward (or even just survive).

³³⁰ John Dewey and Melvin L. Rogers, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay In Political Inquiry* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2012): 78.

Playing tabletop RPGs can not only sharpen a player's awareness of the consequences of their own actions, but it may also lead to a deeper understanding of the structural systems in reality and how they act on individuals.³³¹ Because of the mechanics of many of these games, players are incentivized to be attentive to the ways in which their fellow players experience the impact of the broader world. For instance, the success of a group will be higher when they are aware that one of their members belongs to a class of people that are routinely discriminated against and can think proactively about how to handle situations in which they will encounter this dynamic. Players are more successful when they can pay attention to how others are affected by the world. Amber Davisson and Danielle Gehm write about the ways in which gaming provides lessons on civic life through imagination. They argue when citizens are able to imagine what the broader political community is like and affected by, they are more likely to comport themselves with a self-understanding as a citizen amongst many and not a single individual.³³² In Simkins' work on developing ethical skills through tabletop RPGS, he posits that it is the co-constructed nature of both gameplay and meaning in RPGs that allows for deeper reflection. This centers the ways in which a player in a tabletop RPG is making decisions alongside and affected by others. Simkins specifically linked the communal influence on ethical formation to Dewey's work on participation and association as competency building for democratic life.³³³

³³¹ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing*, 126.

³³² Amber Davisson and Danielle Gehm, "Gaming Citizenship: Video Games as Lessons in Civic Life," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 4, no. 3/4 (2014): 40.

³³³ David Simkins and Constance Steinkuehler, "Critical Ethical Reasoning and Role-Play," *Games and Culture* 3, no. 3-4 (2008): 350.

Dewey believed that participation in communal life and the responses of others to one's participation was the beginning of education. He said in *My Pedagogical Creed*, "Through the responses which others make to his own activities he comes to know what these mean in social terms. The value which they have is reflected back into them."³³⁴ As a result, when these consequences are intellectually and emotionally appreciated, a shared interest is generated and, through Dewey's view, the nature of interconnected behavior is thereby transformed.³³⁵ Still, Dewey distinguishes publics from simple groups of interested citizens because of the ways in which they communicate with one another and identify a "problem." Namely, the problems that publics form around are complex and multivalent; there may be a wide variety of valid ways to solve them, all of which may represent different motivations.

As a result, a public is more than a group of citizens that taking action around something (e.g. volunteers at a park cleanup). Rather, a public forms through the dialogue around shared consequences. That dialogue helps surface and identify the problem. Then the dance of establishing and re-establishing ongoing consensus around action begins. For instance, members of a public will have different approaches to the problem because of the difference of priority and values. The challenge - and the power - of a public comes from the capacity of people to stay in ongoing dialogue around that ever-shifting consensus as a problem is addressed. As result, a public has the capacity to respond to problems with creative energy and emergent methods as

³³⁴ Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," 77.

³³⁵ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 78.

more people are drawn into it. It is not a flash frozen political body that is incapable (or unwilling) to address major problems beyond one course of action.

This same flexibility may also point to the greatest fragility of publics - often once a problem has been addressed or conditions change, they seem to evaporate into the ether. The ephemeral nature of publics was detailed by Amy Shuffelton's article about the 2012 Chicago Public Schools Strike and the Deweyan public that was formed amongst parents, teachers, and community members. She notes that soon after the strike broke, the public that had been mobilized for around the support and concern for local schools dissipated, saying, "Dewey never promises that a democratic public will come into existence, let alone permanent existence, even if conditions are right, only that it can."³³⁶

Player parties in tabletop RPGs evoke Deweyan publics. At the gaming table, players negotiate a multitude of different approaches and motivations from other players, both in game and out. Game designer Emily Care Boss claims that this bringing together of individual players is the core mechanic of tabletop RPGs. In an interview for the podcast *Imaginary Worlds* she said,

For me, the idea that when you sit down at a table and imagine together through role-playing, what you're doing is bringing together multiple minds into consensus about what is true in this world and what has happened in this world. That is what underscores all the roles and all the dice and all the...rules that the system brings forth. It's based on consensus; it's based on a shared idea that everybody can get behind.³³⁷

³³⁶ Amy Shuffelton, "The Chicago Teachers Strike and Its Public," *Education and Culture* 30, no. 2 (2014): 30.

³³⁷ Emily Care Boss, interview with Eric Molinsky, "Rerolling Role-Playing Games," *Imaginary Worlds*, podcast audio, November 10, 2021, <https://www.imaginaryworldspodcast.org/episodes/rerolling-role-playing-games?rq=rerolling>.

As a result, in order to move forward in the game, ongoing consensus must be maintained by players. Sometimes consensus is created nearly effortlessly and in reaction to what is immediately occurring. In contrast, at other times the characters (and players) may take hours to negotiate how to approach a problem. Deliberation may be more intense in these games because it is clearer to players how necessary the others are to their success as well as how all members will be impacted by the consequences of actions taken. Unless a player completely leave the table, their neighbor's choices will likely affect them.

Healthy parties, like publics, are also contingent. While most players may be able to wistfully recall a "perfect" campaign or session when everything was that perfect mix of fun, challenge, and interplay the entire time, they will likely describe the average game as having some moments of dynamic consensus and just as many moments of distracted players, confused GM's, or maddeningly frustrating contrarians. However, the ephemeral nature of "magic" moments actually seems to encourage more participation rather than discourage it.

Another way in which tabletop RPGs echo Deweyan publics can be seen in the relationship between a group of players to their Game Master (GM). In many ways, when it is healthy, there are similarities to how a GM engages with their players and the way Dewey conceptualized the relationship of the State to publics. Importantly, Dewey distinguished the State from the mechanism and structures of government. Dewey called the State "the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members." Thus it existed as an extension of a public and responded to its needs and concerns. When it fails to do this (often because of time or the greed and desire for power of

individual officials according to Dewey), it should no longer be considered the State and rather was just a governance structure.

By viewing governance structure through this lens, Dewey sidesteps the classic debate of whether or not government is a tyrant on our freedoms or a Leviathan deserving of our dedication and love. Dewey emphasizes the dangerousness of this binary saying, “That the state should be to some a deity and to others the devil is more evidence of the defects of the premises from which discussion sets out.”³³⁸ In contrast, the conception of the State laid out by Dewey claims it must be an extension of the public - an active, animated, connected community seeking to address common problems. Therefore the State is not a static structure existing apart from citizens. Because publics are contingent, the State must be continually “rediscovered” - citizens must come together, form publics, and insure their problems are being addressed. When they are not, publics must push for change so the government again reflects their interests and becomes the State.³³⁹

If a group of tabletop RPG players mimics a public, then a good GM begins to look like the State. Gallons of ink have been spilled in commentary over the years on the appropriate role and style of a GM. Are they meant to adjudicate the rules with an iron fist and referee?³⁴⁰ Or are they meant to create a world and guide players through the extraordinary narrative they created, essentially functioning as an interactive novelist? However, in both binaries, what is not

³³⁸ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 77.

³³⁹ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 83.

³⁴⁰ As early tabletop RPG games often called them.

acknowledged is that a GM would not exist without players. Without the consent and participation of the players, a GM serves no function, or worse, is a tyrant. If a GM is forcing players to behave a certain way, can it actually be said that “players” are even playing the game anymore?

Just as Dewey claimed a State must be an extension of and fully responsive to a public, a good GM is an extension of and fully responsive to players. Games designer James Mendez Hodes claims that one of the most important elements tabletop RPGs need to succeed is an understanding that the GM is the social equal of other players. They do not have authority over other players, just different creative responsibility for things per the rules of the game.³⁴¹ Timothy Christopher holds that an ideal style of the GM does not exist, and the perfect GM is the one that responds to the type of game that players want to play, both in what they ask for and how they play. This echoes Dewey’s claim that “there is no form of state which can be said to be the best. Not at least until history has ended, and no one can survey all its varied forms. The formation of the State must be an experimental process.”³⁴² Many playbooks for games, after detailing how the rules are meant to be applied to facilitate the game, will include a note about the importance of not becoming mired down by them if they impede player enjoyment. This is similar to Dewey’s observation that, if not contextualized and attended to, the actions of the State can involve implementing laws and that are more harmful than the problems they were meant to address.³⁴³ Just as Dewey said that through “constant watchfulness and criticism of public

³⁴¹ James Mendez Hodes, interview with Susan Haarman. Audio from recording (March 29th, 2022).

³⁴² Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 83.

³⁴³ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 80.

officials by citizens can the State be maintained in integrity and usefulness,”³⁴⁴ so too must players speak up about the kind of game they want to be playing to their GM and, if need be, leave the table if no dialogue about those wants and needs starts.

Game Master as Deweyan Teacher

While this work has primarily focused on player choice in tabletop RPGs as something that occurs within a bounded reality and yields consequences, it has not yet emphasized the element of co-creation inherent in those same player choices. This is a result of the ways in which a GM takes seriously the actions of their players. While style of play and level of influence can vary from game to game, GMs are as impacted by their players’ decisions as players are by theirs. This delicate balance between participation, mutual impact, and power also mimics much of how Dewey described the role of a teacher in a progressive classroom. Dewey called for teachers to understand themselves as part of the learning community, learning alongside pupils and (within limits) allowing the classroom to be influenced by student interests.³⁴⁵ This is remarkably similar to *D&D*’s definition of the Dungeon Master as “the game organizer and participant in charge of creating the details and challenges of a given adventure, while maintaining a realistic continuity of events.”³⁴⁶ GM’s reflect the principles of a Deweyan teacher through co-creation of the game with players, establishing and fostering the norms of the

³⁴⁴ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 111.

³⁴⁵ Dewey actually said that it was “absurd” to not consider a teacher as part of the community of learners in a classroom. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 58.

³⁴⁶ Wizards of the Coast, *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, (2014).

creative community, and providing scaled and growth oriented challenges. Each will be discussed at length below.

Co-Creation

Because of the mechanics of chance and emergent outcomes of choice, GMs have to be responsive to game action and practice some level of improvisation to run a game. Although many use sourcebooks with guidelines and extensive material around suggested encounters, ultimately the result of gameplay is uncertain - and both GM and players are negotiating and being impacted by that uncertainty. This necessitates a wide range of skills as GMs respond to the ways that game shifts and moves. Tresca says that GMs must serve both the role of world builder, adjudicator, and supportive narrator, requiring skills around both creative authority, collaboration, and the discernment when to know when to use each.³⁴⁷

As a GM, I have employed a principle of co-creation with my players I call “nothing is wasted.” Anything my players say becomes fodder for later sessions. That off-handed comment a player made about being a water ski champion? That is now canon, and I may push the narrative so that they will likely have the opportunity to test that skill later. This approach ensures that players have an understanding that their actions and choices have meaning and influence. My players are creating aspects of the world alongside me and although I may have structured a general narrative in a specific way, refusing to follow emergent outcomes actually threatens the narratives coherence and believability. This respect for emergent material and the input of players echoes Dewey’s understanding of education as a social process rooted in experience.

³⁴⁷ Michael Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 68.

Players are not playing “my game” - we are engaging and creating the world together. For Dewey, an instructor who understood the social dynamics of education would see themselves not as “external boss or dictator,” but rather one who was leading others through an activity they were experiencing together.³⁴⁸ Schalleger actually explicitly compares GMing to pragmatist philosophy, saying that negotiation and interpretation instead of conflict and rigid truth are the principles and habits that drive the role.³⁴⁹

At the same time, much of the enjoyment of games can come from having a GM who is prepared and has a narrative or world into which a player can step. While co-creation certainly leads to a level of wonder, having a rich environment created by the GM to begin with often helps players feel comfortable and build skills around creative thinking and problem solving. Dewey also emphasized the importance of preparation in creating a classroom community that would support learning. He was careful to indicate that sustained and functioning life together does not organize itself spontaneously and without direction. He said in *Experience and Education*,

It requires thought and planning ahead. The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 58.

³⁴⁹ Schalleger, *The Postmodern Joy of Role-playing Games*, 78

³⁵⁰ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 56.

Similarly, GMs are tasked both with setting the tone of a gaming environment through balancing player choice with the rule system that structures the game. Steven Dashiell says that the power that GMs hold begins and ends with both player agency *and* games rules - it is not actually a fully blank slate upon which they may (individually or in collaboration with players) create something from nothing. GM's create the environment not through unequivocal acts of power, but through striking the balance between "the social construct of the rules system and the collective will of the ludic space."³⁵¹

Establishing the Norms of the Creative Community

The educational environment in the classroom that Dewey detailed in his writings was composed not only of the structure and activities chosen by the instructors, but also the students interactions with one another. Dewey also said that the teacher would need to be particularly attentive not just to content, but to the "interactions and inter-communications which are the very life of the group as a community."³⁵² A good teacher helps lay the baseline and monitors the ways in which students interact with one another in order to foster an environment that will be conducive to learning. This aspect of responsibility for tone setting is echoed in the work of GMs through increasingly common processes like safety tools or 'session zero.' Session zero or prep sessions occur before gameplay technically begins and typically includes character introduction, a discussion of what sort of tone or focus players would like the game to take, and a discussion of boundaries around content. Character creation or introduction features players either

³⁵¹ Steven Dashiell, "DM Habitus: The Social Dispositions of Game Mastering in Dungeons & Dragons," *Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies*, no. 3 (2022): 10.

³⁵² Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 58.

collectively creating their characters or introducing and discussing how their already created characters may be intertwined. This helps establish the beginnings of a common narrative or bond between characters,³⁵³ and it can also allow for the surfacing of potentially harmful portrayals of identities.³⁵⁴

The practice of using safety tools in games is also becoming more and more commonplace³⁵⁵ with practices such as the X Card and “Lines and Veils” allowing players to indicate what content they do and do not want in the game.³⁵⁶ Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain wrote *Consent in Gaming*, a resource around how to both play and run a tabletop RPG in a way that prioritizes the consent of all parties involved.³⁵⁷ Rather than simply censoring content, these practices actually allow for better development of trust and player agency. It also encourages values clarification amongst players both as individuals and as a group as they make active decisions around what they will and will not participate in.

³⁵³ And ipso facto the players themselves.

³⁵⁴ As discussed in chapter 2, many current game developers would say that portraying a character with identities held outside one’s own is not unethical, but needs to be handled with care. The sourcebook for *Kids on Brooms* says that a zero session should be used to discuss why a player is making the choice to portray a more marginalized identity and that the entire party and GM should weigh in about how to do this appropriately.

³⁵⁵ Significantly, Roll 20 one of the largest virtual tabletop platforms used to run games recently added the option to add safety tools as embedded elements of their game platform.

³⁵⁶ The TTRPG Safety Toolkit is a free digital publication, written by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk, that lists various safety tools and other advice for encouraging a culture of safety at a gaming table. It can be found [here](#).

³⁵⁷ Sean K. Reynolds and Shanna Germain, *Consent in Gaming*, Monte Cook Games, 2019, <https://www.montecookgames.com/store/product/consent-in-gaming/>. Reynolds and Germain discuss how to have conversations around difficult topics and prioritize practices that encourage the engagement of everyone at the table, including taking responsibility for the consequences of comment or actions that damage or harm the group.

Scaled and Growth Oriented Challenge

This educational community that Dewey says a teacher should create in the classroom will succeed in part because of the ways in which it is responsive to the interests and developmental needs of students. Dewey says that these needs and capacities should inform both what is taught in order to both engage students and help scaffold learning and development. As a result, according to Dewey, planning for the classroom must be “flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power.”³⁵⁸ As mentioned in chapter 3, while Dewey prized imagination and encouraging agency in the learner, he also despised the vein of progressive education which he perceived as devoid of focus and intention and left too much up to the whims of a child. Educational structure had been too rigid in the past, but could not be entirely given up.

A GM is called upon to do a similar balance of co-creation and guidance, personalization and challenge. Most of the time, they are working within a set of rules, using them to both propel the game forward and adjudicate its boundaries. In order to give players both a sense of agency and an understanding that their actions and choices have meaning, a GM has to allow for levels of player influence and co-creation. However, a complete departure from rules or structure in favor of player preference could lead to a collapse of the game itself. Gary Gygax, one of the co-creators of *D&D*, cautioned the importance of scaling player agency and maintain a sense of structure to ultimately serve larger goals of the game, saying,

The danger of a mutable system is that you or your players will go too far in some undesirable direction and end up with a short-lived campaign. Participants will always be

³⁵⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 58.

pushing for a game which allows them to become strong and powerful far too quickly. Each will attempt to take the game out of your hands and mold it to his or her own ends. To satisfy this natural desire is to issue a death warrant to the campaign, for it will either be a one player affair or the players will desert en masse for something more challenging and equitable.

Dashiell says that GMs are able to relax the rules, but never completely dismiss them, as doing so would fully violate the magic circle that they are entrusted to maintain and protect to players.³⁵⁹

For both the Deweyan teacher and the GM, structure and rules used alongside freedom allows for the facilitation of experiences that are educative - leading to further growth. GMs are responsible for finding a razor thin balance between an appropriately leveled challenge that engages players and simultaneously gives them a sense of the game having stakes. Antero Garcia claims that teachers should explicitly incorporate the best principles of GMing into their classroom, claiming that it will aid in making learning adventurous. Antero says these practices could allow schooling to shift from tedious rote learning and instead become, “a foundation on which students explore ideas, take on new identities, and generally get to try out new experiences in the safe confines of a teacher mediated space.”³⁶⁰

Group Creativity & Communication

While the major dynamics of Deweyan publics and states *can* surface amongst tabletop RPG players and GMs, that does not mean it is guaranteed or that every session of a tabletop RPG is marked by intense dialogue and a dedicated focus on the collective task at hand. The

³⁵⁹ Dashiell, “DM Habitus,” 9.

³⁶⁰ Antero Garcia, "Teacher as Dungeon Master," in *The Role-Playing Society: Essays on the Cultural Influence of RPGs*, ed. Andrew Byers and Francesco Crocco (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 175.

same way that not every gathering of like-minded people is a public (i.e. people gather together for any number of “unproductive” reasons), many games may be focused on simple amusement or feature a group of players who are just along for the ride of the story. However, even when a party does not rise to the level of public (either through intention or agreement), the group dynamics and communication may still echo civic engagement and skills.

Group Creativity

The interplay amongst the group is a crucial space for creative problem-solving. Bowman highlights that the problem solving in tabletop RPGs can be as tactical as synchronizing moves to best utilize an attack opportunity or as abstract as negotiating complex social hierarchies by pooling resources and thinking about the character best personally poised to approach another non-player character in the game.³⁶¹ Groups playing tabletop RPGs also demonstrate a high level of what sociologist Keith Sawyer called group creativity. The concept was initially introduced through research on jazz and theater improvisation and focused on how group members both accept and elaborate on the ideas of each other. Groups that manifest this unique type of creativity show elements of improvisation, emergence, and interaction. Sawyer’s understanding of interaction referred to the ways in which individuals worked together toward specified goals with unspecified ends.³⁶² Player parties in tabletop RPGs are constantly improvising, negotiating with emerging circumstances, and working together to address a common goal.

³⁶¹ Bowman, *Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 90.

³⁶² Eric Gordon, Jason Haas, and Becky Michelson, "Civic Creativity: Role-playing Games in Deliberative Process," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3793.

The creativity manifested by players can come not only from the emergent solutions or tactics they create to deal with obstacles, but also from their complex communication and deliberation itself. Gordon, Haas, and Michaelson argue that groups engaging in deliberation should be considered creative groups, as they seek the potential of finding a common goal that will also allow them to achieve their personal agendas.³⁶³ Their work to establish consensus is done through communication with one another.

In a way, most tabletop RPGs are language games. Both players and the GM. narrate the actions of the game. As studied by Gary Fine, players are also communicating across multiple levels of frames as they deliberate with and react to one another both in and out of character. According to Gastil's theories, deliberation is made up of two parallel processes. The first is the analytic process, featuring the content of the exchange as it pertains to the topic at hand. The second is the social process, which includes the norms of conversations and how they are impacted by groups dynamic and setting.³⁶⁴ Players in a tabletop RPG participate in both at once, but because of the levels of frame analysis occurring in tabletop RPGs, they often externalize their awareness of both at the same time.

Though not universal, players often narrate what their character is thinking or have to externally justify their actions to each other and the GM in order to connect actions to the appropriate skill check. For instance, a player who is trying to intimidate someone for information may say aloud at the table, "Well, I know he's running a corrupt business and he

³⁶³ Gordon et. al, "Civic Creativity: Role-playing Games in Deliberative Process," 3793.

³⁶⁴ Gordon et. al, "Civic Creativity: Role-playing Games in Deliberative Process," 3794.

knows my father is a cop. So normally, I would not try anything with someone so big, but I'm going to try to intimidate him for more information." The deliberation that occurs in these sessions provides not only the opportunity to try negotiations and communication with others, but also provides an additional potential element of being able to explain one's approach, promoting a better understanding of what motivates others. As a result, a player's moral context for actions is easier to access, inviting other players to better understand how to interact with them and potentially even develop empathy. Simkins says that the ways in which games externalize moral context and encourage attention to them, provides key opportunities to honing critical ethical practice.³⁶⁵

Deliberation in Games

Participation in communication and deliberation, both formal and informal, helps build civic skills. Dewey called the free communication between people "the heart and final guarantee of democracy," and said that ongoing communication with others was essential in building democratic habits.³⁶⁶ Many deliberative processes associated with governance and democracy are remarkably similar to games (especially deliberation that occurs in more structured formal environments such as town hall meetings) with their own rules, internal goals, and unexpected outcomes. Nevertheless, Gastil believes that many deliberative experiences actually miss a sense of play, saying that they "too often they exclude the qualities of play that games can facilitate, namely the 'for-its-ownsakeness' that defines the experience of a player."³⁶⁷ These unplayful

³⁶⁵ Simkins and Steinkuehler, "Critical Ethical Reasoning and Role-Play," 337.

³⁶⁶ Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 225.

³⁶⁷ Gordon et. al, "Civic Creativity: Role-playing Games in Deliberative Process," 20.

deliberations are only as useful as what they produce, rather than being seen as a valuable and potentially enjoyable process to experience. John Lerner believes that integrating aspects of good games design and construction is potentially curative for low participation rates of many formal deliberative settings like town halls and council meetings. He points to the implementation of gameful exercises in participatory budgeting and city planning in Latin American and the United States as examples.³⁶⁸

In deliberative groups, the stakes around any issue may feel heightened as the group is in continuous effort to attempt to find and maintain a level of agreement or consensus in order to continue to exist. Except in rare situations, most democratic goals require the participation of others in order to advance a goal. School board meetings may feel fraught because if everyone leaves rather than dialogue with one another, no progress occurs and problems are never addressed. While tabletop games may seem to be more stable than political meetings, there is also the same risk that players will leave the table if they no longer consent to play because of a disagreement on the agreed upon rules or outcomes. Game theorist Miguel Sicart highlights this rather colorfully saying that games can be seen collectively as “a balancing act of egos and interest, a purpose and intentions. Play is always on the verge of destruction, of itself and of its players, and that is precisely why it matters.”³⁶⁹ Players of tabletop games have experience in negotiating the ways in which one must work to keep someone at the table so that a game

³⁶⁸ Josh Lerner, *Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2014), 15.

³⁶⁹ Sicart, *Play Matters*, 3.

continues. The experience not only of negotiation with others, but the actual surrendering of direct control for the sake of the group, is one of the hallmarks of RPGs according to Hodes. He says, "Role playing games [are] one of the only places where you have to navigate, 'I'm going to balance my free will against the free will of the other three to five people at the table.'"³⁷⁰

Arguing at the Table: Agonism in Games

But what if a group never strikes that balance? What if players refuse to change their will for others? There are political theorists who argue that some democratic conversations will always remain disagreements and defy the deliberative hopes of reaching a true consensus before action can be taken. Chantal Mouffe in *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, claims that political questions typically involve decisions between conflicting alternatives that do not avail themselves to rational solutions.³⁷¹ Mouffe claims that some political theories are fixated on process, consensus, and order. In contrast, her theory of agonism argues that democracy is rooted in the pluralistic concept of *agon* - the ancient Greek notion of a public struggle or contest between adversaries. Claudia Ruitenberg says that if deliberative democracy is the art of consensus, agonistic democracy is the art of disagreement and adversarial position taking.³⁷²

For Mouffe, political disagreement was inevitable and inescapable.³⁷³ Building off the work of German political philosopher Carl Schmitt, Mouffe claims there was not a future in

³⁷⁰ Hodes, *Interview with Susan Haarman*.

³⁷¹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, (London: Verso, 2013): 13.

³⁷² Claudia Ruitenberg, "Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 28, no. 3 (2009): 272.

³⁷³ Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 749.

which politics would not be focused on the conception of an “us” and a “them.” Importantly, Mouffe draws a distinction between an antagonist (who wishes to obliterate the other) - and an adversary (who hold an oppositional opinion but recognizes the importance and dignity of the other). By taking a more realistic view towards conflict and the difficulty, if not actual impossibility, of coming to true consensus presented by deliberative democracy, agonism pushes one to focus the energy behind political conflicts to be channeled into political and democratic commitments, rather than winning over ones interlocutor. Nor does it demand that they abandon their own beliefs and moral stances. The antagonist can continue to disagree with the major tenets of what you believe. The trick of politics was to either find a way to get them to work with you or find a way around them.

While this position may initially seems in conflict with Dewey’s commitment to ongoing communication and seeking to build publics and consensus, at the core both Mouffe and Dewey share what Colin Koopman calls, “an abiding and unrelenting commitment to pluralism as the terrain of politics.”³⁷⁴ Both Dewey and Mouffe agree that the dialogue and debate between groups is an essential hallmark of democratic life and what moves democratic society forward. Conflict, according to Mouffe, is actually desirable from an agonistic frame because it is an indication of a healthy, energetic democratic spirit.³⁷⁵ For Mouffe, this was because the ongoing debate meant that one had shifted from seeing the other as enemy - someone to dominate - and

³⁷⁴ Colin Koopman, “Democracy both Radical and Liberal: Political Agency in Dewey and in Laclau and Mouffe,” in *Persuasion and Compulsion in Democracy*, ed. Jacquelyn Kegley & Krzyszof Piotr Skowronski (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013): 85.

³⁷⁵ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 57.

instead to adversary – someone one disagreed with, attempted to beat in democratic contests, and (occasionally) worked with. This tension protects against oppression of a minority by a dominant majority and encourages creativity according to Mouffe.³⁷⁶

Initially, this may appear to be in total conflict with Dewey claims that publics (already diverse and intersectional groups) can come together and reach consensus on what action to take to address shared consequences. However, a fuller understanding of Dewey's conceptions of publics highlights some potential harmony between the two approaches. Dewey believed that publics were sites of consensus, but, as highlighted in chapter 3, he also claimed that they were not permanent. Publics often emerged and disappeared quickly, whether because their initial problem was resolved or because the ongoing communication that constituted led to their fracture into other publics. The consensus that Mouffe believes is illusory is something that Dewey always claimed was temporary. The ongoing interaction and communication between publics and between public and the State also meant that democracy was active and responding to changing circumstances and the introduction of new perspectives. For both Mouffe and Dewey, pluralist attitudes and political debate are a sign of a living breathing democracy and the absences of active dialogue and a glut of agreement were the warning signs of tyranny.³⁷⁷

Agonism also provides an essential corrective to unfortunate the hyper-rational dynamic that some deliberative approaches can drift toward. A solely deliberative approach holds that all societal issues can ultimately be resolved through the application of enough rational discussion.

³⁷⁶ Chantal Mouffe, "Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space," *Open* 14 (2008): 7.

³⁷⁷ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 59.

It can dismiss the importance of emotions in political communication and dismiss the argumentation methods that are not completely rational.³⁷⁸ Agonists see emotions as assets, not liabilities to democratic formation and discourse and claim they have a better sense of what is at stake. Again, a shallow reading of Dewey might see this as another point of major conflict, but he includes room for emotion in the deliberation that helped form publics. While Dewey did not think that overly emotional appeals were helpful in political communication, he also never dismissed the importance of emotions as a source of knowledge and advocates for its important role in dramatic rehearsal, which he saw as a form of deliberation.

Although a strong proponent of agonism, political philosopher Bonnie Honig argues that both consensus through deliberation and contestation through agonism are both essential, and politics cannot be reduced to one or the other.³⁷⁹ Tabletop RPGs provide a space for players to practice forming habits of not only deliberative approaches, but healthy agonistic approaches as well. These games are often reflective of the complex negotiations of the real world and players within an adventuring party may find themselves in intense disagreement about ways to proceed, either because of their own personal preference or a value held by their character. In order to remain at the table, agonism becomes a helpful way of understanding how players can maintain a commitment to held values while also finding themselves having to compromise on a course of action.

³⁷⁸ Iris Marion Young discusses this at length in her book *Inclusion and Democracy* and advocates for the importance of using rhetoric and narratives in political communication along with rational deliberation.

³⁷⁹ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993): 15.

Players who lean into an agonistic approach to negotiating conflict about how to proceed at the table will not shy away from communicating what they need and why they hold that stance – both essential skills in democratic dialogue outside the game. Approaching agonism from a ludic framework, the enthusiasm and excitement of arguing with the adversary that Mouffe writes about could be framed as autotelic. The joy and verve of a spirited debate in which both adversaries are well matched and respect one another may become more important than “winning” an argument (at least in the narrow zero sum gain framework).

The Effects of Metadiscourses

Tabletop RPGs are also unique in the ways in which the collaborative interaction and discourse between the players *is* the game.³⁸⁰ These gaming spaces often utilizes what Dashiell refers to as social language or “distinctive styles or varieties of language with which people enact specific socially recognizable identities and actions or activities.”³⁸¹ Dashiell compares the discourse in tabletop RPGs to James Paul Gee’s understanding of discourse as a kind of ‘identity kit’ or set of roles that others recognize.³⁸² This shared language helps the player show that they both belong and have what T. Fuist relates as connectivity.³⁸³ Dashiell writes about the ways what he calls metadiscourse (“the communication between players that is not critical to the game but would not occur if not for the gaming scenario,”) affects the social bonds of players at the

³⁸⁰ Steven Dashiell, ““Table Talk”: Defining Metadiscourse of Analog Games,” *Acta Ludologica* 4, no. 2 (2021): 98.

³⁸¹ Dashiell, “Table Talk”, 99.

³⁸² Dashiell, “Table Talk”, 98.

³⁸³ Dashiell, “Table Talk” 99.

table.³⁸⁴ Metadiscourse involves the deployment of cultural capital that includes things like pop culture references, insider knowledge of the game, or comparisons to previous game play. As a result, metadiscourse often illuminates the primary power structures and hegemonic beliefs that dominate the overarching social structure.³⁸⁵ Dashiell says that while metadiscourse should be equally accessible and deployable by any players, individuals who do not have this social capital will often find themselves shut out. This later often affects communication patterns in-game.³⁸⁶

Because the communication between players is essential to gameplay, as a result, no conversation that occurs during the playing of a game is worthless. Even the most throwaway conversation may be a window into power dynamics and social connections that influence the gameplay. Consequently, when players are less engaged in the discourse (whether formal or not) of the game, they are less able to influence the way the game proceeds. Additionally, as beliefs and understandings in a single player begin to shift, this affects the frames of the rest of the players. Together, they are creating an agreed upon frame that will affect play. Hendricks says, “This emergent intersecting frame then impacts the actions taken by the gamers through the game, even as it is being developed by the gamers.”³⁸⁷

For example, “Jim” may be a player who believes his own knowledge of both fantasy tropes and game rules makes him an authority on what to do when playing a tabletop RPG. This

³⁸⁴ Dashiell, "Table Talk", 100.

³⁸⁵ Dashiell, "Table Talk", 106.

³⁸⁶ Dashiell, "Table Talk", 100.

³⁸⁷ Dashiell, "Table Talk", 99.

approach may lead him to be dismissive of other characters, always be the first to act in situations, or lecture other players on what actions they should be taking. If other players become irritated by this behavior, it may manifest in how they interact with Jim at the table through direct comments or more passive behavior like not including him in jokes or other interactions. It may also play out in how in-game characters interact with Jim's character. They may undercut his characters actions or refuse to help him in needed situations. In either case, Jim is being given important feedback on his own behavior and how it is being received by and affecting the group.

If Jim allows this to affect him, it may make him aware of how a heavy-handed approach to gameplay or attempts to reinforce traditional frames of reference is both not desired by the group. This may even lead to him to adjust his understanding of what a fantasy story is supposed to look like. He may adjust his behavior to others during play and this may also impact his character's actions. This ongoing dual awareness and ongoing adjust of what they are creating is something that Gordon, Haas, and Michaelson say is another hallmark of group creativity. "Just as performers are both internally engaged with others on stage and conscious of the implications of their performance, deliberators are both within and without the act of creation."³⁸⁸

Dramatic Rehearsal & Tabletop RPGs

One of the reasons that participation at the gaming table is so important is because it provides a space to cultivate generative imagination. Game developer and scholar James Mendez Hodes said that tabletop RPGs cultivate an essential space for imagination, saying,

We are capable of much more there than we often let ourselves imagine in the present day. And for a lot of us, it's nigh on impossible to imagine how that's going to happen

³⁸⁸ Gordon et. al, "Civic Creativity: Role-playing Games in Deliberative Process," 3794.

because we gotta spend 40 hours of our week in the status quo. Imagining other things is not something that's safe to do during those 40 hours. So where the hell are you going to do it? If we want to imagine a different model of civic engagement, if we want to imagine ourselves living a different way, being different people, we gotta use art to imagine that. You can do this by reading books and you can do this by having conversations - there are lots of different media in which to do it. But if you want to try it out and see how that looks, it's hard to think of a better opportunity than role playing games.³⁸⁹

The high levels of imagination needed to play the game also cultivates an ability to think through a variety of actions in order to best understand their impacts. This space for imagination is also where some of the strongest connections to Dewey's work exists.

Much of the previous scholarship connecting Dewey's work to games and specifically role playing games, has been surface level, focusing on the basic idea that simulations can serve as a form of learning by doing.³⁹⁰ This misses the ways in which tabletop RPGs in particular provide opportunities for learning and the development and practice of dramatic rehearsal. Rather than an individual simply imagining how a situation would go in their head or making a no-stakes practice attempt in artificial circumstances (aka a simulation), Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal is a form of deliberation. Caspary distinguishes dramatic rehearsal through the helpful frames of a concern with characters, plot, non-utilitarian approaches, and openness to unexpected and emergent outcomes.³⁹¹ These four elements can serve as helpful guideposts to

³⁸⁹ Hodes, *Interview with Susan Haarman*.

³⁹⁰ Samantha Clarke, Sylvester Arnab, Luca Morini, and Lauren Heywood. "Dungeons and Dragons as a Tool for Developing Student Self-reflection Skills," In *International Conference on Games and Learning Alliance*, pp. 101-109. David Waddington, "Dewey and Video Games: From Education Through Occupations to Education through Simulations." *Educational Theory* 65, no. 1 (2015): 1-20. Of note, there is more done connecting video games to Dewey than connecting tabletop role playing games to Dewey.

³⁹¹ William Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 2000), 113.

illustrate the ways in which Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal can play out in tabletop RPGs.

Characters

There is a high level of relationality in dramatic rehearsal. Dewey was clear that an individual would consider the impact of their choice on others in the process and said that attention must be paid to the "manifestation and interaction of personalities" and "the outwork of character."³⁹² The process is meant to include a consideration of all individuals involved and consider how they may react and respond as real people. Maurice Hamington said that dramatic rehearsal's very pragmatic emphasis on particularity, especially in how it manifested in others, is an essential element of the process.³⁹³

In tabletop RPGs, characters are the backbone of the experience. It is an intrinsically social game. Individuals play with a party. The group's relationships to one another may have just as much impact on the game play as any roll of the dice. A player's actions have consequences and many of them are shared socially. The importance is summed up colorfully in the playbook of the game *Urban Shadows*, underneath a section head entitled "Why play?"

But why do this? Why go to all this trouble just to tell a story when you can turn on the television and find thousands of stories. Why do this much work? Because the characters are fucking awesome. Because no matter how awesome the characters might be individually, taking on the city's forces and trying to make it - they're even more awesome mixed up with each other.³⁹⁴

³⁹² John Dewey, "1908 Ethics," MW 5:290.

³⁹³ Maurice Hamington, "Care Ethics, John Dewey's 'Dramatic Rehearsal,' and Moral Education," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (2010): 121.

³⁹⁴ Mark Diaz Truman and Andrew Medeiros, *Urban Shadows: Political Urban Fantasy Powered by the Apocalypse*, (Albuquerque, NM: Magpie Games, 2015), 22.

Experiences like RPGs demand that a player make decisions in collaboration with others while balancing their own motivating principles and desires against what can be achieved in a bounded world. As a result, RPGs not only provide opportunities to practice dramatic rehearsal, they also necessitate that players do this process within a group setting, with the social impact of their decisions both more apparent and often playing out in front of them in real time.

Beyond practical consequences, dramatic rehearsal asks us to look within and know ourselves through the process. There is a particular emphasis on paying attention to emotions that come up, with Dewey claiming they are a primary material for self-knowledge. He said, “This running commentary of likes and dislikes, attractions and disdains, joys and sorrows, reveals to any man who is intelligent enough to note them and to study their occasions his own character.”³⁹⁵ Dramatic rehearsal and tabletop RPGs are both unlike simple simulations or thought experiments in that they ask the participant to fully engage with a potential course of action (i.e. fully inhabit a character), thinking about how their motivations and emotional reactions would influence their decisions.³⁹⁶ By engaging with a full expression of emotions, this may help create empathy with others. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey called for educational activities that would see learners “animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiment of others”³⁹⁷. While many tabletop RPGs have probability mechanics (such as rolling a die) that influence consequences of decisions, the primary driver of these games is the

³⁹⁵ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 140.

³⁹⁶ Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games*, 5.

³⁹⁷ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 361.

personal investment of the player, reflecting Dewey's belief that "Deliberation is not then to be identified with calculation, or a quasi-mathematical reckoning of profit and loss."³⁹⁸

Additionally in-game content and structures becomes fodder for critique and comparison to the out of game world. Laycock uses the example of *D&D*'s alignment system - the complex matrix by which character motivation and moral engagement with the larger world is classified. Although it can change over time, players are meant to decide upon an alignment for their character that helps guide their actions. This is meant to aid players in thinking about what consistent sets of choices a character may make based upon their motives, also helping streamline gameplay and giving GMs more potential avenues to create meaningful challenges. The alignment system goes as far as dictating what equipment someone can use or how certain creatures may respond to you. Laycock argues that because of mechanics like these, RPGs often moreso than other things in a player's life, encourage reflection and analysis of self and the larger world. "Regardless of whether gamers think alignment is an accurate model, it is impossible to think about alignment without reflecting on its corresponding reality in the real world. Anyone who critiques the alignment system is ipso facto an amateur moral philosopher."³⁹⁹

Plot

The language of plot describes the ways in which dramatic rehearsal involves and considers time. Hammington refers to it as "extending temporal horizons" because the process of dramatic rehearsal is concerned with both immediate and long-term impacts beyond just the

³⁹⁸ John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York: Irvington, 1960), 134.

³⁹⁹ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 198.

initial decision. Because of ruminations, dramatic rehearsal is likely to take longer than other ethical deliberations. Hammington points out that, “Moral rules or consequential calculations, although often lacking, are rubrics that can cut short the time necessary to engage in full moral deliberation.”⁴⁰⁰ Dramatic rehearsal is invested in the myriad ways a potential action can unfold. As a result, the process takes time and is more complex, but also yields great potential for growth.

The structure and purpose of tabletop RPGs also lead to a sort of extending of temporal horizons. Most are meant to tell a story *over time* and the process is the point of the game. Tabletop RPGs are autotelic, with the experience of playing, not the outcome, as the primary goal of play. While success in smaller encounters is enjoyable, most players will not say that immediate successes like landing a hit in *D&D* or succeeding a skill check in *Call of Cthulu* is the highlight of the experience. Many of these games are played in campaign format, meaning that an individual might play the same character and with the same group for months (or years), experiencing sweeping narratives. As a result, their actions will yield consequence after consequence whose impact is felt on an individual and social level. Aggressive players often reap the whirlwind of their violent choices and ones that take a reconciliatory tactic may find that small acts of kindness yield large dividends. Because of the ongoing nature of the narratives, progressing the growth of the character or “leveling up” actually substitutes for a final win condition in most games. Growth and change, the great Deweyan watchwords, become the larger goal as characters face their own demons, find purpose, and fail as much as they succeed.

⁴⁰⁰ Hammington, "Care Ethics, John Dewey's 'Dramatic Rehearsal,' and Moral Education," 122.

Dramatic rehearsal does not assume that decision makers have a complete understanding of every possible course of action, alternative, risk, and consequence of the decisions that they are facing. It is through these considerations in the deliberative process that values preferences are surfaced, making actual values formation an integral and emergent part of the decision making. Dewey called it an “ends in view” approach, in which habits are both approaches and potential moral manifestations when a course of action is taken. Similarity in RPGs, outside the game narrative, the process of play with others reinforces habits as well. Hollander highlighted the fact that within the world of *D&D*, compassion and teamwork are not required, let alone explicitly encouraged. Deceit is actually functionally often immediately rewarded and stealing a horse from a peasant takes far less time than earning the gold to buy it. But the playing of the game itself requires empathy, collaboration, and patience in negotiating complex dynamics with other players.

The dynamic, multi-level interactive nature of the games push players to attend to and reflect on both in-game and off-game happenings. In a given moment, a player is both shifting back and forth between the frames that Fine identified (in-game, metagame, and out of game), while also reflecting on what is occurring in each of them and adjusting accordingly. Knowing a player just ended a relationship may cause a GM or other players to be careful of the emotional content they bring forward in a game, or it may simply help them contextualize that player’s mood out of game at the table or sudden and typically out of character choices. Mikko Meriläinen said that these ongoing adjustments help develop a player’s emotional intelligence

and encourage a plasticity when considering how to negotiate shared goals when not every person is of the same goal, mood, or motivation.⁴⁰¹

Non-utilitarian & Emergent Outcomes

Dramatic rehearsal also takes an intentionally non-utilitarian approach, focusing not on assessing the cost benefit trade off in a situation, but engaging in a creative problem solving process the purpose of which John McVea called "the construction of the good."⁴⁰² Broader and more generalized ethical principles have a role in dramatic rehearsal, but they are one deliberative factor amongst others. Additionally both Fesmire and Caspary claim that because of dramatic rehearsal's orientation in the pragmatist tradition, any value claims need to be understood as corrigible. When participating in dramatic rehearsal, one's habitual beliefs are challenged as alternative means of action are imagined in vivid, emotion-laden detail, and strategies are contextualized by the reality of the lives that will be affected. The corrigibility of those same habits and beliefs means that just as an individual is impacted by the process of dramatic rehearsal, so too may their understanding of guiding ethical principles.

Far from courting moral chaos, Dewey clarifies that it is not a choice between throwing away previous rules or sticking obstinately to them. Instead, it is a matter of looking at one's habits and expanding or revising them. Dewey said, "The problem is one of continuous, vital re-adaptation."⁴⁰³ RPGs invite this re-adaptation because of the ways in which they activate the

⁴⁰¹ Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development—a Survey Report," 63.

⁴⁰² John McVea, "Constructing Good Decisions in Ethically Charged Situations: The Role of Dramatic Rehearsal," *Journal of Business Ethics* 70, no. 4 (2007): 380.

⁴⁰³ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 396.

human capacity for imagination and creation of new meaning. Players are able to challenge the normally fixed order of familiar symbols and structures and, through their choices and the created narrative, see what happens when these same symbols are challenged, inverted, or infused with new meaning.⁴⁰⁴ While this is most often seen in the ways that RPGs allow players to experiment with gender or sexuality,⁴⁰⁵ it can also apply to conflict resolution. It may seem strange that games that contain extensive structuring and rules would be a place of moral contingency and experimentation, but the preferences and agency of those playing takes primacy. Hollander says, “The extent to which constraints are actually nuanced or resisted in the course of a narrative is dependent ultimately on the choices made by specific tables. The power of the narrative is always greater than the power of the system.”

Finally, the process of dramatic rehearsal acknowledges emergent outcomes in the deliberation process. McVea, a business ethicist, recommends the process of dramatic rehearsal for complex decisions because it recognizes that alternative ways of proceeding and major risk are often endogenous, and thereby need creative consideration. Dewey and other pragmatists believed that ethical problems are typically solved through moral progress rather than moral illumination, so the emergence of additional ways of proceeding in a given situation becomes an essential aspect of dramatic rehearsal. Caspary says, “Ethical conflicts can be settled by creative

⁴⁰⁴ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 183.

⁴⁰⁵ Antero Garcia, "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 24, no. 3 (2017): 232-246. Players are able both to play characters of different genders & sexualities, they can also elect to play a character that shares their same identities, but responds to situations in radically different ways. Games allow players a safe environment to commit gender treason and observe the reactions of others as well as their own internal response to doing the opposite of what they may feel is appropriate in normal circumstances.

choices that harmonize competing interests instead of simply picking the most pressing or weighty interest forgoing others.”⁴⁰⁶ This mirrors Laycock’s comments that tabletop RPGs encourage a form of radical agency that allows players to find new ways of approaching seemingly settled problems. Laycock says, “Constructing imaginary worlds empowers players to reorder the world in ways they were previously unimaginable and unthinkable.”⁴⁰⁷

Recognizing the potential of tabletop RPGs to familiarize and develop the skills and habits of dramatic rehearsal in individuals opens up broader opportunities for democratic education and moral formation. Especially as the nation grapples with deeper levels of polarization, the dramatic rehearsal cultivated in tabletop RPGs offers another tool for cultivating ethical and empathetic citizens who also have a strong sense of their own capacity. According to Fesmire, not only is dramatic rehearsal an essential tool of moral deliberation, it also leads to action.⁴⁰⁸ These games encourage and demand tremendous agency, even within a bounded world. The formative potential of tabletop role-playing is not merely a matter of imagining virtuous things. Hollander specifically calls the experience of collaborative imagination through playing tabletop RPGs edifying - transformational and educative - and believes that complex in-game encounters and moral dilemmas allow players to clarify and act on political commitments.⁴⁰⁹ Sicart also makes the connection between games and political commitments,

⁴⁰⁶ Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy*, 129.

⁴⁰⁷ Laycock, *Dangerous Games*, 79.

⁴⁰⁸ Fesmire, "Dramatic Rehearsal and the Moral Artist: A Deweyan Theory of Moral Understanding," 572.

⁴⁰⁹ Hollander, "Blessed Are the Legend-Makers," 326.

saying that play takes on a political aspect when what he calls the “plaything” becomes the conduit for “expressive, creative, appropriative, and subversive capacities of play and uses them for political expression.”⁴¹⁰ Civically committed educators should encourage players to extend this action beyond the game by making intentional and explicit connections and taking seriously the impact of play on individuals.

Cultivated experiences of dramatic rehearsal are critical in forming deliberative, participatory citizens. These experiences and the associated skills support the creation of engaged, committed, and imaginative discourse - the same sort of discourse that serves as the primary driver of many tabletop RPGs. As a result, these games become places of potential educative formation around moral and social commitments. As players learn to utilize the raw skills around conflict resolution and negotiating competing needs while moving toward a common goal, the lines between play and preparation for political life blurs.

Implications for Educational Practice and Approach

If these games can be a site to cultivate the practice of dramatic rehearsal and deliberation, what does this mean for civic educators? First and foremost, it is an invitation to recognize that these games hold tremendous power as educational tools and to avoid conflating them with case studies or simple simulations. As mentioned in chapter 2, tabletop RPGs are already being utilized in schools for a variety of positive cognitive benefits. In late September Wizards of the Coast, the company that makes *D&D*, announced an educational resources campaign and launched a website with curriculum, lesson plans and how to videos for

⁴¹⁰ Sicart, *Play Matters*, 7.

implementing games with the intention of improving literacy, critical thinking, basic math, and communication. Educators could also request free *D&D* kits to help start afterschool clubs (the kits were valued at over \$250). The use and popularity of these games saw a huge uptick over the pandemic as people discovered that it was a safe way to spend time with friends. But as of yet, there is little work being done around how to leverage this tool for civic or deliberative outcomes.

Many of these games are being intentionally designed by creators to encourage thoughtfulness, experimentation, and creative problem solving. Some of these game designers do not conceptualize their games as apolitical amusements, instead believing that playing the games should exhibit and invite reflection on a value system. Playbooks also are addressing issues of consent, trigger warnings, conflict negotiations, and self-advocacy. More and more, newer games specifically include anti-fascist statements within their playbooks, holding that creative engagement is antithetical to authoritarian principles.⁴¹¹ Wizards of the Coast recently attempted to make changes to its Open Gaming License, which allowed independent content creators the right to use the game's basic rules framework in developing independent material. One of the reasons cited was because of a desire to prevent the use of the game system in games with hate-

⁴¹¹ The most commonly used statement is the one initially written by Olivia Hill who admitted that in practice it is unenforceable on a broader scale, but said "If someone who is fascist picks it up, there's nothing stopping them any more than there's anything stopping them from ignoring any other rule. But I think it's important that anti-fascist art be explicit in its messaging so as to guarantee it's not unintentionally seen as a safe place for fascists. We see a lot of that in mass media. Stuff like Star Wars, which is very much a story about rebellion overcoming fascism and oppression, fascists eat it up and think it's theirs. They identify with it. They are passionate about it. It's because while the story is obviously that on its surface, it's sufficiently watered-down so as to be a 'universal experience' and doesn't alienate the people it's supposed to be calling to task," Jans, "Creator One-on-One: Olivia Hill."

based and discriminatory aspects.⁴¹² The content and process of these games is understood by many creators and players as inherently political.

Tara Fickle, author of *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*, argues that games are always political and need to be recognized as another conveyor of cultural episteme. Fickle says that we must

understand how games' metaphorical saturation of every realm of 'serious' social relations, from games of warfare to romanced education to electoral politics, has, through the counter-intuitive logic of cliché, allowed us to instead see them as inherently unserious, apolitical, and color blind.⁴¹³

She claims that it is not a matter of encouraging scholars to take games seriously, but to instead recognize just how serious and persuasive they have already become. Ian Bogost believes that much of this serious work occurs through what he calls the rhetorical nature of games. The step-by-step and progressive nature of many tabletop games (both in the narratives and in skill building) have a procedural aspect that Bogost claims plays a rhetorical role. Bogost says, "Procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular."⁴¹⁴ The structure and form of games is able to present a simplified model of the world or issue that then invites the player to reconsider the way they currently see or interact with it.

⁴¹² Many independent game developers would argue that the primary motivation with the OGL revisions was purely profit-based, but it is still interesting that Wizards of the Coast publicly listed this as one of its motivations for revisions. The response of the gaming community to the proposed changes and the backpedaling of Wizards of the Coast as a result of the public outcry is also another interesting point of reflection around democratic action and voice. At the time of this document's writing (January 13, 2023), it is still very much in process.

⁴¹³ Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities*, " 6.

⁴¹⁴ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 3.

Games become important moral and civic educative spaces as they create opportunities in which people interrogate their values and potentially build essential skills for citizenship. Chris Bateman highlights that the process of playing these games demands a level of imagination beyond the ordinary from players saying, “It takes a different kind of person to suspend belief while developing a purposeful narrative sat around a table with other people.”⁴¹⁵ These games build capacity around skills that are also needed for engaged democratic citizenship.

Ludic Pedagogy of Democratic Civic Life

When examined through a Deweyan lens, the capacity of tabletop RPGs to build democratic and civic capacity becomes clear. These games are able to create educative experiences that capture the broader Deweyan understanding of democracy, which sees democratic life as the habits and interactions people have with one another, and not just a list of protections from and duties to the state. If we understand democracy to be dynamic, embodied habits and relationships, then civic instruction that focuses solely on the transmission of some history and facts to citizens begins to feel anemic and potentially undemocratic. Dewey said that after they begin to form, publics may not fully coalesce or become active because they are often caught up in using inherited political mechanisms and approaches that do not fit their civic life as it currently exists.⁴¹⁶ The same challenge exists in civic education, as students are often learning about governmental models and methods that reflect a historical and political reality that may no longer be applicable.

⁴¹⁵ Chris Bateman, *Imaginary Games* (John Hunt Publishing, 2011), 23.

⁴¹⁶ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 80.

For instance, tools like the internet and social media have rapidly expanded and complicated what political speech and public action looks like for the last two decades and many civic education curricula are just now catching up.⁴¹⁷ Additionally, while other more engaged modes of instruction like action civics seek to educate and form students through advocacy and democratic action, they still focus primarily on democracy as enacted through governmental structures, not through the broader life of a community. Neither fully captures an understanding of democracy as more than legal reality and governance. This shift in understanding of civic formation from memorization of governmental procedure and historical facts to responsive action for other citizens and self-reflexivity will require flexibility, imagination, a relational disposition, and discursive skills. Experiences like tabletop RPGs cultivate that habitus and can create spaces for future and current citizens to develop these skills and commitments.

The formative civic potential of tabletop RPGs points to another possible approach - a *ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life*. This is an approach to teaching for the formation of civic outcomes and identity that utilizes games and their essential elements as dynamic and effective teaching tools to inspire democratic habits, thinking, and values. More than just a novel tool to deliver information or a gamified approach to learning benchmarks, a ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life is educative in the Deweyan tradition and also invites deeper reflection on ones' understanding of democratic life and citizenship itself

⁴¹⁷ The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), a research organization focused on civic education, did not produce a substantive report on the use of social media as both an educational and advocacy tool until 2018.

CHAPTER FIVE
PLAYING FOR DEMOCRACY: TOWARDS A LUDIC PEDAGOGY OF DEMOCRATIC
CIVIC LIFE

Dewey advocates for a movement away from the narrow conception of democracy, and consequently, from the individualistic and rigid models we have for civic education. He invites us to instead examine the ways in which thriving communities form citizens through their habits, negotiations, and communication. This way of thinking about civic formation opens up new pathways and potential outcomes. At this same time, Dewey's call for us to form civic habits can be maddeningly vague. Stitzlein points out that while Dewey was a passionate advocate for democracy rooted in engaging in social life, he also gave no clear sense of what that fully entailed or the necessary steps he believed would make a social group rise to an active, engaged, democratic public. Dewey advocated for continuous social planning, but never detailed what he believed that entails or what the planning was intended to move toward.

Taking a Deweyan frame on civics education acknowledges that the essential elements of democratic civic formation needs to include the organically formed habits of flourishing community. While this helps move from a legalistic and individualist view of citizenship,

context changes over time. How will we know a habit still serves a democratic purpose in a community? Dewey believed that because of the speed at which an industrialized world changes, it was “impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now,” and therefore useless to do preparation for any specific societal structuring or conditions.⁴¹⁸ The same openness to the ways in which people and context changes also threatens to leave civic educators with little to no guidance on what to teach. In the face of that potential content vacuum, it could be easy to see how a curriculum could devolve back to the simple facts of democratic process and rights.

Moving From ‘What’ to ‘How’: Games as Tools for Civic Education

Where some clarity around a Deweyan approach to civic education may exist is in Dewey’s emphasis on experience as educative. Experience is necessary to contextualize democracy and civic activity to the communities in which they operate. Additionally, the process can be just as educative as the content conveyed through these experiences. In the same vein of a pragmatic emphasis on method and inquiry over hard truth, Amber Davisson and Danielle Gehm believe it may be more helpful to shift our questions around what makes effective civic education from ‘what’ to ‘how.’ They say, “Reorienting our framework from a question of what to a question of how, usefully redirects our attention from acts to action.

⁴¹⁸ John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” 79. Dewey’s recommendation for dealing with the challenge that education was continually preparing students for a reality that did not yet exist was to focus on cultivating capacity for agency and inquiry in students. For Dewey this meant, “train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently.”

Inquiring into the how of citizenship recognizes citizenship as a process.”⁴¹⁹ Understood from a process standpoint, methods and tools of formation become just a salient to good democratic civic formation as identifying which pieces of knowledge or specific habits should be taught. Davisson and Gehm also believe that a focus on the ‘how’ helps view the instructional methods or tools not as ends in themselves.

Davisson and Gehm write specifically about video games, highlighting how the ways in which games present desired citizenship behavior and reinforce a frame of civic values for players.⁴²⁰ Speaking specifically of technology, they say it can “socialize users to a particular mode of engagement by expanding users’ abilities to imagine the larger citizenry and guiding users through a systematic process of civic participation.”⁴²¹ Technology (in this, case video games) is not a substitute for the fullness of civic participation, but instead provides a way for users to engage democratically in a different modality and tenor than they may have done so before. Games are not seen as a substitute for democratic civic participation, but rather a way to facilitate social encounters that cultivate democratic habits.

As mentioned in chapter 2, games in a variety of forms have been used as educational tools for centuries. The role and form that hands-on experiences of play take in a proto-typical

⁴¹⁹ Amber Davisson and Danielle Gehm, "Gaming Citizenship: Video Games as Lessons in Civic Life," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 4 (2014): 40.

⁴²⁰ For instance they cite the difference between a video game produced by the Army called America’s Army and the numerous games set in post-apocalyptic, failed US settings such as Fallout New Vegas. Each presents an understanding or conception of the United States that a player is oriented to as they play. They connect this back to Ian Bogost’s arguments that games can be rhetorical tools whose mechanics, structures, and stories are persuading players of a certain understanding of the world.

⁴²¹ Davisson and Gehm, “Gaming Citizenship,” 40.

Deweyan classroom is well documented, especially in *Experience and Education*. Play as it occurs within structured games can also become educative and formative. Game scholar Miguel Sicart echoes Dewey's belief that experiences of play allowed for the questioning and remaking of habits. Sicart says that play specifically provides the breathing space for individuals to question their "mindless habits" and allows them to consider moral frameworks without the constraints of their own fixed view of society.

In true play, we experience the world, we construct and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say. Play freezes for moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presents, and portents.⁴²²

Play allows for an experiential deconstruction that is also generative. Because players are enacting new habits and ways of being, they can both question the ways in which previous habits are insufficient in certain circumstances and also road-testing new ones.

Games also allow for in-depth simulation, hands on application of skills, and channeling motivation both in and outside of the classroom. Education scholar James Gee has long advocated for the educative capacity of video games, saying they should be considered another viable learning technology with the capacity to facilitate best practices in teaching and learning.⁴²³ Gee claims that students are able to learn with nearly any learning technology (be it a pencil or a game) when that technology helps them engage in a learning opportunity that is well-constructed, connected to the larger world, and encourages problem solving and reflection.

Video games, according to Gee, require learning from players as they negotiate mechanics, plot,

⁴²² Sicart, *Play Matters*, 5.

⁴²³ James Gee, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Revised and Updated ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 10.

objectives, and challenge. The most successful games are both highly immersive and educative, as players have to master game play to enjoy it.⁴²⁴ He encourages the utilization of games in curriculum and calls for them to be seen not just as an end in themselves, but rather another modality for good instruction and education.

According to Gee, ludic learning, or learning that utilizes games, should seek to educate beyond the content and make the learner a “proactive, collaborative, reflective, critical, creative, and innovative problem solver.”⁴²⁵ Gee claims that games’ capacity to provide high quality educative experiences comes through empowering learners, problem solving, and encouraging understanding. Successful games (much like successful courses) are designed with high levels of intentionality to player experience and copious rounds of feedback. Those successful pedagogical principles are why Gee believes all educators should, at minimum, pay attention to and acknowledge the impact of games, even if they do not incorporate games into their curriculum.⁴²⁶

Building off of Gee’s work, game scholar Kat Schrier’s work *We the Gamers* specifically focuses on how video games can support civic education. Schrier argues

Games are civics and civics are playful. Games are how students are already engaging with the world and with the public. Through games, students are designing, discovering, and deliberating what it means to govern society. Through games students are already citizenizing,⁴²⁷

⁴²⁴ Gee, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, 17. Gee points to the fact that games must succeed in the market through the classic “creativity of capitalism.” Games that succeed in challenging and engaging their players will thrive and ones that do not will fail.

⁴²⁵ Gee, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, 28.

⁴²⁶ Although Gee strongly encourages this as well.

⁴²⁷ Karen Schrier, *We the Gamers : How Games Teach Ethics and Civics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 17.

Schrier analyzed the competencies and standards of seven civic and ethics education organizations and then synthesized her own framework and categories around how video games help enable that vision of a successful civic education.⁴²⁸ She focuses on the games' abilities to impart real world knowledge and action; encourage connection and communication; and promote critical thinking and inquiry.⁴²⁹

Tabletop RPGs and Civic Education: Conveying Content and Consensus Compellingly

While Gee and Schrier's work focuses specifically on video games, tabletop RPGs share all of the same elements they highlight as educative, and often offer it at a greater depth than even some of the best constructed video games.⁴³⁰ Both game formats typically encourage embodied experience,⁴³¹ learning via participation, and copious and immediate feedback. While not true of every tabletop RPG, most of these games also have the capacity to effectively convey factual content about the civic process or essential elements of history as a part of their settings. Schrier holds that good civic instruction should support a student' ability to "identify, remember, and understand the major components of public life and governments, such as policies, protocols,

⁴²⁸ The sources Schrier pulled from around civic education were College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards, the National Assessment Governing Board of the US Department of Education's Civics Assessment Framework, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the "10 Proven Practices for Civics Education" from *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools*, and some major principles of action civics and Youth Participatory Action Research.

⁴²⁹ Schrier, *We the Gamers*, 98.

⁴³⁰ The chapter will not go into great detail on every area, but both Gee and Schrier highlight customization of one's avatar as a place to foster deeper learning. Gee claims that personalizing an avatar allows a learner to connect with the experience and make more personal investment in their learning. Tabletop RPGs do not suffer from the same limits of programming as a video game and are able to amplify this advantage.

⁴³¹ Albeit virtually or imaginatively.

principles, institution, locations, rules, frameworks, and roles.”⁴³² Tabletop RPGs can do this through both content and setting of the game as well as mechanics (especially consensus building), with the immersive aspect of playing amplifying a player’s learning.

Content

Caucus is a game set within an Iowa presidential caucus and introduces players to the caucus process. *Rules & Roberts* (initially created as a joke amongst game designers) utilizes Robert’s Rules of Order as its only game mechanic and according to creators, was intentionally created to “introduce these procedures in a compelling and humorous way.”⁴³³ Schrier, like Gee, argues that these games provide another tool to convey civic information in a way that is both experiential, appropriately challenging, and fun.⁴³⁴ The ways in which these games can engage and educate goes beyond novelty and can also address the ways in which current engagement with governmental procedure can be at best, droll,⁴³⁵ and at worst, inaccessible. John Lerner argues the element of fun that these games bring greatly aids in exposing and motivating people towards political participation as the actual proceedings of government are often highly opaque, difficult to access, and “time-intensive, tedious, and boring.”⁴³⁶ Interacting with the less

⁴³² Schrier, *We the Gamers*, 43.

⁴³³ Molleindustria, *Rules & Roberts* (2020), 3. Retrieved from <https://www.molleindustria.org/blog/rules-roberts-release-notes/>

⁴³⁴ Schrier, *We the Gamers*, 55.

⁴³⁵ Who among us has not laughed at some of the absurd meetings made at town halls and open forums – only to then despair that this is democracy in action?

⁴³⁶ Lerner, *Making Democracy Fun*, 23. Lerner argues that the inclusion of ludic elements into local government proceedings will lead to better and more equitable participation. His work primarily focuses on the work being done around this in South America, but he also includes participatory budgeting and youth development games that have occurred in New York City.

appealing and cogent aspects of governance in a game setting may better dispose a student to later feel comfortable and capable of participating at a city hall meeting.

Interestingly, for every game explicitly around civics, democracy, or governance, a cursory search found just as many, if not more, about protest, resisting totalitarianism, or subversive activism.⁴³⁷ They ranged from a games set within the Weimar Republic where the player had to try to keep the republic alive, to a game called *McConnell's Nomic*. The game (patterned after philosopher Peter Suber's famous Nomic game) had mechanics that highlighted the ways in which the titular politician claimed to be safe guarding supposed eternal democratic values, while using anti-democratic or authoritarian means.

While these previously mentioned games can deliver civic content in a more didactic way, tabletop RPGS can, agnostic of content, also use problem solving opportunities and mechanics to familiarize players with content of and challenges to democratic life. Games like *Eclipse Phase*, set in a future colonized outer space, require players to be familiar with the difference between theocracy, republican government, and oligarchies and understand how each is motivated and functions in society. *Urban Shadows*, a supernatural game set in a large urban environment, highlights the ways in which different populations vie for limited resources, and includes a game mechanic that pushes players to interact and negotiate with characters outside of their "faction" in order to progress. Other games illustrated the dangers of democratic process absent checks and balances and divorced from conceptions of dignity and rights. For instance,

⁴³⁷ This search was conducted on DrivethruRPG.org and itch.io - two of the main websites to purchase or download tabletop RPG materials. These sites include everything from official PDFs of more mainstream games to free or donation suggestion games posted by creators simply eager to share their work.

Mutant: Elysium allows players to use simple voting mechanics to vote for the imprisonment of other players or the criminalization of their identities or behaviors. Characters are asked to struggle with a democratic system that constantly seems to reinforce non-democratic ends – echoing Dewey’s own cautions of conflating the method of governance with the principle.

Consensus

Group deliberation around a significant outcome is also a common aspect and mechanic of most tabletop RPGs. Players are exposed to ongoing consensus-making and faced with its consequences as a primary aspect of play. Not only do they have regular experience in deliberation, but research found evidence that tabletop RPGs actually encourage more creativity in deliberation through encouraging more empathetic identification with others by placing them in groups with shared goals and by reducing the tendency to keep information hidden.⁴³⁸ While players are enjoying the game’s narrative or mechanics, it can incentivize them to share information and test their understanding with others. Foss and Griffin say that beyond just learning to better “communicate, collaborate, plan, strategize, and socialize,” games give players an opportunity to challenge their own modes of thinking.⁴³⁹

In civic education curricula, much of the focus on deliberative approaches to democracies is on the arrival at a consensus. It can often portray the group’s ultimate decision as a final step.⁴⁴⁰ It misses that deliberation in democracy does not realistically end after a decision has

⁴³⁸ Eric Gordon, Jason Haas, and Becky Michelson, "Civic Creativity: Role-playing Games in Deliberative Process," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3800.

⁴³⁹ Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin, “A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995): 7.

⁴⁴⁰ Gordon, Haas, and Michelson, "Civic Creativity: Role-playing Games in Deliberative Process," 3790.

been made. While a decision has been made, it often leads to more and more issues of deliberation. A city ordinance may pass, but then conversation moves on to how to apply the ordinance, what percentage of the budget it may impact, and after a time, if it is ultimately effective. No single deliberative decision is the last word. In tabletop RPGs, the nature of the deliberative process' contingency is more apparent. Decisions are made, the world reacts (sometimes immediately), and the game play continues - necessitating more consensus building.

Although they are not always making direct connections to citizenship and civic engagement, tabletop RPG experiences are still formative. While games create fictitious narratives that players experience and enact, the fiction (and process by which it was made) is no less impactful or instructive. Gary Fine claimed that games were able to illuminate the real in life through simplifying and exaggerating aspects of human experience.⁴⁴¹ This often (but not exclusively) occurs through the utilization of tropes and echoing previous familiar narratives. Henry Jenkins says this serves to “tap the emotional residue of previous narrative experiences.”⁴⁴²

Good utilization of these games as pedagogical tools would incorporate reflection and other best practices from other forms of experiential learning in order to facilitate the connection of these experiences both to civic formation and the world as it is. Sparking metacognition in the players around their learning and the ways in which gameplay is affecting them is already happening in less formally educational ways through the common practice of debrief sessions. It

⁴⁴¹ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 7.

⁴⁴² Davisson and Gehm, “Gaming Citizenship,” 42.

is a widely regarded best practice for GMs to ask players after the conclusion of a gaming session how they felt about their experiences, what they enjoyed, what they did not like and what they are taking away from it.⁴⁴³ At most basic implementation, this encourages players to reflect upon their experience of the game and the feelings and responses it elicited as a player as well as a character. Joe Lasley believes that debrief sessions can extend what he claims is the “holding environment,” of the game that allows for personal experimentation and reflection. The extension of this environment into a space in which players are then invited to engage in an intention frame shift to reflection on themselves and their experience allows more learning to be leveraged.⁴⁴⁴ Building off the need to make this debrief space intentional, Stéphane Daniau recommends that the debrief session be no longer than a half an hour and include specific questions around what skills players feel they utilized or where they were challenged.⁴⁴⁵ This will support the intentional development of skills in players as well as prime them to further understand the games as formative.

In order to further leverage the opportunity for learning and support deeper skill development and integration GMs and educators using tabletop RPGs should draw heavily from the heavily from theory and best practice of experiential and community-based learning around reflection. Experiential learning theory already recognizes that simulation and immersive experiences are rife with educative potential and have developed a rich body of evidence base

⁴⁴³ Black Armada Games, “Tools to Use After Play,” Blog Entry, <https://blackarmada.com/tools-to-use-after-play/>.

⁴⁴⁴ Joe Lasley, “An Examination of Gaming Environments in Dungeons and Dragons Groups,” PhD diss., (University of San Diego, 2020), 74. An

⁴⁴⁵ Stéphane Daniau, “The Transformative Potential of Role-playing Games—: From Play Skills to Human Skills,” *Simulation & Gaming* 47, no. 4 (2016): 430.

research around the methods and models that help learners integrate and further mine their experiences for learning. Because of the rich potential of this subject, the author recognizes it as a line of further flight and study meriting more time and space than this dissertation would allow. At the same time, it is important not to make the assumption that the absence of formal debrief and guided reflections from a game precludes players from engaging metacognition and reflection on their own experiences. Especially as actual plays have become more popular, there is extensive media showing self-reports of players talking about the ways in which they consider the deeper implications of their character choices, what this means for their own lives, and the way they want to take this forward into the world.⁴⁴⁶

Beyond Content: The Demands of a Changing Democracy

Extensive work has been done around the intersection of education and games and Schrier's work makes a compelling argument for the ways in which video games in particular, can enhance civics education and meet established standards. However, these current models still primarily focus on content delivery and the behavior and habits of an individual student.⁴⁴⁷ It understands democracy as a structure of governance, not a broader way of life. Although both Gee and Schrier value the habits that can be created by games, those habits are in service to engaging the government in place - rather than becoming building blocks of a democracy the

⁴⁴⁶ Keerthi Sridharan, "Tabletop Designers Are Making Players Cry, And Working To Keep Them Safe," *Polygon*. September 12, 2022. Accessed September 22, 2022. <https://www.polygon.com/23331167/tabletop-games-make-you-cry-keep-you-safe>.

⁴⁴⁷ Schrier's work does focus on the impact of players on each other and the cultivation of empathy, as well as honing in on the ways video games can develop a student's critical thinking skills and ethical imagination. However, her starting point is still the individual, not the individual in community.

public needs and wants.⁴⁴⁸ Read through a Deweyan lens, it will not help prepare students for a future that is impossible to know.

The changing nature of democracy is at the heart of Dewey's claims that we cannot know with certainty what future for which to prepare a student. Rather than a static concept, Dewey was clear that democracy arose through what he called a "convergence of consequences and adjustments" as people lived together in society and negotiated competing needs and concerns. So much had changed about human life since the creation of the political mechanics of democracy, Dewey believed that they could not be depended upon as a referent point for democratic attitudes and ideals. Democracy came from the ways in which people lived together and, as Dewey said, "Democracy is expressed in the attitudes of human beings and is measured in the consequences produced in their lives."⁴⁴⁹ It is centered on the human capacity to learn from experience itself which further experiences one needs to create and generate to flourish. Other form of moral and social faith rests upon the idea that experience must be subjected to and validated by some form of external control; to some authority alleged to exist outside the processes of experience.

People are choosing their way into life together, cognizant that mistakes will be made, but believing that choices will hopefully be made to correct those mistakes and that they will continue to move toward a better and expanded version of healthy democratic society. Each

⁴⁴⁸ In fairness, Schrier especially writes extensively of the ways in which video games encourage critical thinking, empathy, and imagination especially around ethics. She sees civic education as something that should form dynamic citizens who respond actively to change their world and government.

⁴⁴⁹ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 97.

choice made by the polity to each unique situation over time can move towards a common outcome of democratic life together.⁴⁵⁰ It is a step-by-step and self-corrective process, absent “foreknowledge of ultimate results” and constantly responding to try to correct harm it may have done before.⁴⁵¹ For Dewey, these steps toward a democratic life “represent a choice, another complex of contending forces, of that particular possibility which appears to promise the most good with the least intended evil.”⁴⁵² Dewey claimed much of democracy was a belief that the experience of democratic life - the process of doing democracy - was more important than final results or the governmental structure that may be created as a result.⁴⁵³ The outcomes and products of democratic life were only valuable when they could continue to support ongoing progress and the health of the process.⁴⁵⁴ For Dewey, to educate for democracy is to educate for process and ongoing, contingent growth.

According to Stitzlein, this perspective illuminates a major flaw in current civic education - the idea that it is as simple as forming a student into the calcified mold of a supposedly perfect citizen. According to Stitzlein, “While there are likely some traits of good citizens that will withstand the test of time, we cannot know just what shape citizenship will take

⁴⁵⁰ Dewey believed that people were likely to do what they could to make choices for the common good, based upon the limited understanding of a situation or context that they had. Again, Dewey’s moral anthropology was extremely positive and believed that people were likely to work together rather than against one another if they understood their shared consequences and life.

⁴⁵¹ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 122.

⁴⁵² Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 122.

⁴⁵³ John Dewey, “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us,” in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, volume 14, 224-230 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 228.

⁴⁵⁴ Dewey, *Creative Democracy*, 229.

as democracy changes to meet the needs of its environment and constituents.”⁴⁵⁵ In contrast to the idea that citizenship is a status one receives or earns and comes attached to a set of responsibilities, Robert Asen said that citizenship is better considered a mode of engaging one's community. Echoing Davisson and Gehm, Asen claims that by focusing less on *what* constitutes citizenship and instead on *how* citizenship proceeds, there is a recognition that civic modes change with time and are impacted by those who utilize it.⁴⁵⁶

Citizenships and Change

As a democracy shifts and grows with the current context, the educational commitment to fellow citizens seems poised to fail. It will be necessary to imagine a framing of citizenship that allows for change while still maintaining community.⁴⁵⁷ William Connolly's conception of politics of becoming provides a way of approaching citizenship that opens up lines of flight for new growth without departing too far from democratic aims and community.⁴⁵⁸ The politics of becoming refers to what Connolly calls a “paradoxical process by which a new cultural identity is drawn into being and yet is irreducible to the energies and motives that spurred its initiators to action.”⁴⁵⁹ Within the politics of becoming, a new identity's emergence signals a moment of

⁴⁵⁵ Stitzlein, “Habits,” 69.

⁴⁵⁶ Robert Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 2 (2004): 194.

⁴⁵⁷ Not unlike the ways in which the players of a tabletop RPG negotiate the ever evolving experience of playing together.

⁴⁵⁸ William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 27.

⁴⁵⁹ William Connolly, “Suffering, Justice, and the Politics of Becoming,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 20, (1996): 251. Connolly often uses the example of the LGBTQ rights movement as politics of becoming. Individuals who organized and acted around suspending laws criminalizing homosexuality or refusing to be detained by police at a bar gave birth to a political movement and identity much more complex than simply the gender of one's sexual partner. Additionally, as the queer identity emerged as a social and political identity and not a medical diagnosis, the rest of the community was rescripted as straight. Another example can be found in the resettlement of refugees.

deep reflection for the rest of the community.⁴⁶⁰ Dewey said that a public, once formed, often had to break or push against existing political or governmental structures as it advocated for change, as they were surfacing a new need or concern that had hitherto not been considered.⁴⁶¹

Especially given the highly polarized nature of current society, the failures of current civic education call for a broader understanding of democracy. In order to face these inevitable changes, civic education cannot be patterned on a predetermined sense of democracy, and instead must be open to change. To do so, Stitzlein says that educators should focus on using educational means that are aligned with the desired end - something that would help students “engage in collective problem-solving, inclusive communication, and shared governance as we rear them for the role of citizen.”⁴⁶²

Towards a Ludic Pedagogy of Democratic Civic Life

In the face of these challenges, tabletop RPGs (with their capacity for cultivating imagination, affective deliberation across conflict, and a valuing of collaborative action) are a means that align with the ends of a citizenship rooted in the Deweyan understanding of

Communities suddenly have to examine themselves, potentially articulating values that had never bothered to consider before and negotiate how they may (rightly or wrongly) impact public life together. Until a muslim refugee family moves into town, the town may never have considered the possibility that any students in their school could not say the pledge of allegiance because of their religious beliefs. With this encounter and emergence, the school will have to grapple with whether or not making this a compulsive activity actually violates the democratic principles it is meant to uphold.

⁴⁶⁰ The politics of becoming sees this moment of encounter as a sign of the deficiency of previous ethical frameworks and a moment of disturbance for the broader community that may lead to changes within their own identity. Connolly gave the example of how the emergence of LGBTQ community rescripted those who had never thought about orientation as straight.

⁴⁶¹ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 81. This process was a typically difficult one because the existing forms of democratic life and governance were usually also the primary mechanisms of change available.

⁴⁶² Stitzlein, “Habits,” 62.

democracy. They can serve as a primary (though not exclusive) tool of *a ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life*. Ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life is an approach to teaching for the formation of civic outcomes and identity that utilizes games and their essential elements as dynamic and effective teaching tools to inspire democratic habits, thinking, and values. As students learn skills necessary for democracy, they are also (as Dewey would say) “doing democracy.” More than just a novel tool to deliver information or a gamified approach to learning benchmarks, a ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life is process oriented and educative in the Deweyan tradition, inviting deeper reflection on ones’ understanding of democratic life. It calls for an autotelic approach to citizenship that prioritizes committed collaboration with others, imaginative and emergent approaches to problem solving, and the ability to critically negotiate systems of power. Each of these aspects will be discussed at length below.

Committed and Collaborative Citizens

A Deweyan understanding of democracy is rooted in the relationality of citizens to each other. Dewey said democracy stemmed from the belief that “even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation...is itself a priceless addition to life.”⁴⁶³ To be a citizen is to be constituted by one's relationship to someone and something else. Stitzlein claims that our identity as citizens is formed through the interactions with others and that the average person’s self-understanding of civic identity is often far more about how their civic habits play out in social arenas with others, than it is about rights and privileges granted by the state.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” 228.

⁴⁶⁴ Stitzlein, “Habits,” 66.

Tabletop RPGs provide concrete and vivid examples of this experience. For a player at the table, there can be no game without others. Beyond the analog format, what really distinguishes tabletop RPGs from video games is that RPGs (with rare exception) *always* involve playing with others in a world they help co-create.⁴⁶⁵ A GM has to have players in order for a game to run. Players must work together by necessity to negotiate conflict and challenges to achieve their goals.⁴⁶⁶ At the same time, the time spent playing together and the bonds built are essential to the enjoyment and reward of game play. From the moment a game begins, players learn that their fellow players (citizens) are necessary for their own flourishing, even as they may also occasionally find them frustrating or irritating. Game designer Ruby Lavin says that the narrative dynamics of establishing a party in most tabletop RPGs are built around determining why a group is choosing to be together and they are most often based on the idea that a group of strangers actively chooses to invest in one another. Lavin said, “It’s the natural conclusion of thinking for 10 seconds about party composition... It’s always the hard part about *D&D* — figure out why you’re hanging out. If you think about it for 10 seconds, it’s going to be a found family.”⁴⁶⁷ Tabletop RPGs excel beyond other game formats at illustrating the shared

⁴⁶⁵ Many video games have cooperative features or can be played as a group and for some people their primary reason for playing video games is to play with others. However, the default engagement for most video games is the individual with a controller in front of a screen. If they are playing with others, it is through the platform of the game’s pre-constructed and determined world. This stands in contrast to that of tabletop RPGs - a group of people gathered together around a table for a common and co-created purpose. While Kat Schrier’s incredible work in *We The Gamers* provides a cogent and clear articulation of the way video games (and to an extent games generally) can develop civic skills in students, this difference in orientation is another reason that the author believes that tabletop RPGS offer something unique.

⁴⁶⁶ One of the major tasks of a GM in games like *D&D* with more traditional battle mechanics is to construct an appropriately scaffolded challenge that forces players to depend on one another for survival. Otherwise combat is too easy and there is no sense of stakes or challenge.

consequences that are a reality of life in community and building block of Deweyan publics. Players cannot easily escape the bad (or good behavior) of their fellow party members and a GM is able to provide quick and clear feedback to signal the impact of their choices on others and the broader world.

This evokes a sense of what Stitzlein referred to as “citizenship as shared fate.”⁴⁶⁸ She believes that articulating citizens as bound together will encourage individuals to pay attention to their impact on others without requiring a unified ideology. As established earlier in this work, tabletop RPG players are typically in a constant state of finding a workable way forward given a diversity of character motivations and desires. While this sometimes calls for the formative and deliberative discussions mentioned in Chapter 1, (which push players to articulate their own needs, understand the perspective of others, and determine whether compromise is possible), sometimes the party is in simple agreement - but their reasons and ideologies may be very different. Because games like *D&D* ask players to think about character alignment, even if players do just want to kill monsters and steal gold, their reasons and worldview may be wildly different.⁴⁶⁹ Held together by that shared fate, tabletop RPG players get used to being in a workable and, at times, agonistic relationships with others. They are pushed to model a democratic habit of communication across difference and if pushed, as Dewey would say, “to

⁴⁶⁷ Lindsey Eanet, “Queer Tabletop Games are Having a Moment.” *Polygon*. September 13, 2022. Accessed September 22, 2022. <https://www.polygon.com/23342844/queer-tabletop-games-thirsty-sword-lesbians>. In the interview Lavin goes on to say that this she believes this is why tabletop RPGs in particular appeal to the queer community, as they resonate strongly with the importance of establishing a found family as a place of support.

⁴⁶⁸ Stitzlein, “Habits,” 70.

⁴⁶⁹ This is something an astute and educative-minded GM could utilize to spark dialogue.

treat those who disagree—even profoundly—with us, as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends.”⁴⁷⁰

Co-Creating Community

Just as democracy in the Deweyan tradition emerges from the ways that people find to live together, tabletop RPGs are co-created by players at the table. While the level of creation may vary from game to game, every player can and must contribute to move the game forward. Ludic pedagogy for democratic civic life uses the co-creation that occurs in games to reinforce the importance of personal agency along with learning. Gee claimed that games’ capacity to make players co-designers of their experience empowers them and keeps them connected to the material being presented.⁴⁷¹ Regardless of whether the game itself is being used to deliver civic content, players can be asked to reflect on what it was like to influence the nature of a narrative or create part of a town. They may then be invited to consider how they may do something similar (albeit in different ways) in their own community.

Some tabletop RPGs actually have explicit mechanics that zoom out and invite players to create, shape, and negotiate tensions in communities. *The Quiet Year* by Avery Adler is a game in which players collectively play an entire community, not just individuals within it. Within the game, a community is struggling to survive in the face of an impending threat. During each round players draw a playing card and are faced with a choice of one of two scenarios. They choose one, narrate how it is now part of the community's reality, and then either begin a project or hold a discussion. These mechanics reinforce the idea that communities continually negotiate

⁴⁷⁰ Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” 227.

⁴⁷¹ James Gee, “What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy,” 23.

hard choices and competing demands while also trying to move forward. Resources become more and more scarce and the mechanics of the game often have players unable to finish a project they started or watch another player “ruin” a plot they wished to advance.

Adler specifically designed the game to force players to reflect on living in a community that is not perfect. In a recent interview she said

The Quiet Year kind of asks you to sit with like, how do you relate to the community when we've made, you know, 40 weeks' worth of potentially subpar choices. And here we are, right? Like how do you live with a community when only 75% of your needs are getting met?..I think that that's another way of kind of modeling that, that tension of, if we just throw people away the first time they make a mistake, if we try and make a perfect community, we're not going to go anywhere.⁴⁷²

One of the most powerful dynamics of *The Quiet Year* is the discussions. A player can only say one thing during the course of a discussion and then, after everyone speaks, it ends - typically with no resolution being reached. *The Quiet Year's* playbook says, “A discussion never results in a decision being made. Everyone weighs in, and then it's over. This is how conversations work in communities: they are untidy and inconclusive affairs.”⁴⁷³

The community and relationships created at a gaming table also form bonds that players can leverage to create a more robust civic life outside the game. Just the sheer volume of time spent playing games together has the capacity to foster relationships that may result in civic

⁴⁷² Avery Adler, interview with Eric Molinsky, “Rerolling Role-Playing Games,” *Imaginary Worlds*, podcast audio, November 10, 2021, <https://www.imaginaryworldspodcast.org/episodes/rerolling-role-playing-games?rq=rerolling>.

⁴⁷³ Avery Adler, *The Quiet Year*. Another interesting mechanic in the game is that players can also take contempt tokens to signal to other players when a group feels it has been slighted. There is no mechanical repercussion for these tokens, but they serve as a tangible reminder that a group does not feel engaged in a community or has been isolated. Adler encourages players to consider how multiple contempt tokens might impact one group's way of engaging with others in the community, but also says that it does not have to be considered or impact mechanics of the game.

commitments to each other. However, because games are often played amongst players that already know one another, it could be argued that the games lead to more echo chambers and siloing. Josh Lerner, in his work on bringing games into the political process, said that many civic games designed to spark political engagement failed because they occurred in isolation. A one-off participatory budget game may do little more than spice up a town hall if it does not help foster connection amongst those that played and point to future action.

Though not always accessed by every group of players, tabletop RPGs have the advantage of being situated in a larger community of practice, which amplifies their capacity for formation and impact. These communities, as defined by Lave and Wenger, are groups who hold a shared interest and excitement for something they do and whose regular interactions help them learn how to perform that activity more successfully. They involve individuals at a variety of skill levels, exchange information, problem solve, and usually have their own culture. Tabletop RPGs have a culture and a community of practices and some games explicitly reference it. As mentioned earlier in this work, *Blades in The Dark* actually tells the GM they will need three things for the game - players, the playbook, and the internet community that is posting and discussing the game. There is the assumption that gameplay will be improved by engaging in dialogue and exchanging ideas and information with others who are playing and running games. The role of actual play streams (in which games are filmed as they are played) has also served to build up culture and community around tabletop RPGs, with many new players coming to play the game because they are fans of successful shows like *Dimension 20* and *Critical Role*. With this influx of new players, comes new perspectives.

Imaginative and Emergent Approaches to Problem Solving

While other forms of civic education may encourage imagination and creativity in problem solving, ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life depends on it as a key driver of formation and learning. Dewey said that the only way to move beyond a mechanical approach to teaching was by leveraging a student's imagination as the way to access what lay beyond easy physical observation. He called it "as much a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement."⁴⁷⁴ The imagination was key to creation of aims that would later, through action and effort, become the ends towards which a person would strive.

Tabletop RPGs require players to work with limited (and often changing) amounts of information in order to see a way forward to achieve their goals. Players may have an end in mind and then find their well-constructed plan is foiled through the revelation of new information or through bad luck in execution. For instance, they may plan the train heist perfectly, only to find that a safe is rigged to explode if it is cracked. As a result, similar to the pragmatist tradition of knowledge discovery through inquiry, they are challenged to come up with new means of responding to situations when more information is gained. This requires the generation of emergent means and methods, even if the ends remain the same. Gary Fine claimed that tabletop RPGs cultivated agency in players precisely because of the imaginative work they did, saying, "Because fantasy worlds allow gamers to imagine things that were once unimaginable and so they also present choices that were once inconceivable."⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁴ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 277.

⁴⁷⁵ Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 53.

Additionally, because most tabletop RPGs involve a mechanic of chance to determine success for actions, there is no such thing as a universally foolproof action. A player's sneak stats can be amazing and they can still roll a 1 (an automatic failure for many game systems). The narration of that failure may involve the GM introducing an environmental reason for the unexpected failure or describe the ways in which the character just makes a mistake. In either case, players are reminded that human effort is always contextualized and fallible. The supposedly universal truth of "rogues are good at being sneaky" may be no match for the noise-making toy littered floor of a child's bedroom or a character who sneezes at the wrong time. Absent a guarantee of success, players are more likely to learn to be flexible. Given the dynamic nature of democratic realities, this flexibility is an essential habit to cultivate in a citizen. As evidenced by recent political activity, personal rights thought to be well established can be overturned in a single court ruling.⁴⁷⁶ A community traditionally thought to behave one way politically may shift because of outside circumstances. This is in contrast to current civic education methods that focus on content delivery. What good is knowing about a right if you do not know how to take action if it changes?

Imagination is also cultivated in tabletop RPGs through an emphasis on diversity of means and approaches. Many of these games also provide different character types for players, which are essentially narrative tropes assigned to a stat block of abilities. More than just an identity for players to imagine themselves in and narrate around, they represent different methods of approach. Some character types might privilege solving a problem through

⁴⁷⁶ This chapter was written shortly after the Supreme Court's ruling on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and criminalized abortion in many states.

negotiation and persuasion, while others focus on intelligence and application of knowledge.⁴⁷⁷

While not every challenge will be tailored to a specific approach, players are able to test out methodologies for problem solving through these imaginary situations. This emphasis on considering a diversity of approaches is especially helpful in formation for civic life when many citizens do not have the same legal standing or status. For instance, current models of civic education in schools typically focus on voting and engaging in the electoral political process - something undocumented students and citizens cannot fully access.

Imaging New Worlds Beyond The Table

The challenges and settings presented in games can also encourage imaginative problem solving in their lives outside of the table. GMs are able to construct settings and situations that evoke any number of larger societal issues or challenges, providing players an opportunity to examine them in controlled environments that emphasize their agency. Just because many of these games are set in fictional or fantastic settings does not mean that players are not making connections to the larger world. Hollander says, “Game participants narrate themselves not into an idyllic fantasy land absent of problems, but into narratives that present problems which can be overcome and that cultivate the creativity and will necessary to do so.”⁴⁷⁸ Game designer Jay Dragon says that especially for individuals who experience structural oppression on a regular

⁴⁷⁷ The difference in the mechanics asks, “Who is a better problem solver - a bard or a wizard?” Of course, this is a trick question with a false dichotomy. Both of the characters are insufferable and self-centered. You should be a druid or a monk. <https://lunastationquarterly.com/what-your-dnd-characters-class-says-about-you/>

⁴⁷⁸ Hollander, *Blessed are the Legend Makers*, 327.

basis, the narratives of tabletop RPGs often allow people the breathing space to examine the systems that are acting against them in a safe and accessible way.

The appeal of play lies partially in our ability to take these things which are present in our lives and transmute them and examine them and hold them in our hands, and in doing so, taking power away from them, and giving us this space, as marginalized people, to toy with them.⁴⁷⁹

For Schrier, the most compelling games are the ones that trigger resonance in players, helping them connect the reality of the world to the action of the game and spark reflection on their deeply held values. She says, “Like a good citizen, a good game interrogates. It uncovers, it reveals.”⁴⁸⁰ Joseph Laycock believes that tabletop RPGs in particular actually encourage and foster skill building around deconstruction. Because of these immersive nature and multiple ways that they interact with game worlds, players learn to deconstruct major social realities as they create (and then manipulate) facsimiles in game worlds. Laycock points out that within games (and arguably life), “Governments, religions, and entire cultures are created by disassembling and reassembling social institutions- and this project often reveals the arbitrariness of these systems.”⁴⁸¹

As players and GMs construct a world together, they may realize how socially constructed many aspects of their own world are. Laycock believes that this can be marshaled to

⁴⁷⁹ Jay Drago, Interview by Keerthi Sridharan, “Tabletop Designers are Making Players Cry, and Working to Keep Them Safe,” *Polygon*, September 12, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23331167/tabletop-games-make-you-cry-keep-you-safe>.

⁴⁸⁰ Schrier, *We The Gamers*, 229.

⁴⁸¹ Laycock, *Imaginary Worlds*, 234.

inspire feelings of radical agency in players and sees imaginative activities as key to resisting hegemony.

It is in the interest of any hegemonic institution, religious or otherwise to discourage imagination. Hegemony can be resisted only if we can imagine new possibilities. In this sense, fantasy role playing games, along with novels, films, and other imaginary worlds, provides mental agency... While fantasy is not an inherent threat to tradition, as long as humans possess imagination, tradition will never be secure.⁴⁸²

Because it is so dangerous to the status quo, Laycock argues that this is why historically, imagination has been viewed as problematic when it is in the hands of the marginalized and disenfranchised like youth and women.

Especially given that most of civic education is occurring for individuals who do not yet have full civil rights, a ludic pedagogy for democratic civic life's emphasis on cultivating imagination becomes another way to equip them with tools to push for a form of democracy that includes their voice. DeCesare's highlights that this is another liability of our current civic education system - it is only future oriented. Those who are learning about civic life and citizenship can usually not implement the totality of what they are learning as they are learning it. The individuals in these formal civic classes (either students or aspiring resident aliens or refugees) are being told that when they receive or age into their full status, that is when they should become active. Kathleen Knight Abowitz and Dan Mamlok, writing about the student activism of the Stoneman Douglas student survivors, propose an agonist-informed citizenship education which would push for a model of "lived citizenship" instead of a formal, idealized archetype. Central to this would be political emotion - the expression of affective experiences

⁴⁸² Laycock, *Imaginary Worlds*, 215.

through political channels - and lived experience. This model better recognizes the capacity of political experience and action already present in students rather than encouraging them to wait for a civic maturation or telling them their creative political action can only fit in a narrow frame.⁴⁸³

Critically Negotiating Systems of Power

The skills around deconstruction, imagination, and observation that tabletop RPG players build also equip them to critically negotiate systems of power found in most democratic institutions and governance. A ludic pedagogy of democratic life recognizes, encourages, and leverages this capacity in players. Games are predicated on a system of rules that enable or constrain a player. To play the games, one must have at least a tertiary understanding of the rules that undergird it. As a result, a player is constantly engaging in some level of systems thinking and analysis simply by playing the game. Fickle argues that the experience of rules and constraint in games is part of their appeal. “Games are escapes not because they are more free, but because they are differently constrained. The rules provide a substitute for existing relations of power and systems of valorization, swapping out one set of rules for another.”⁴⁸⁴

Rule(ing) the Table

Tabletop RPGs are notoriously rules intensive, with some requiring the purchase of guidebooks and material in order to properly negotiate the game. Mastery of these rules can lead to exceptional achievement and agency. Dashiell says that knowledge of the rules serves as a form of social capital amongst tabletop RPG circles, allowing more experienced and

⁴⁸³ Kathleen Knight Abowitz, and Dan Mamlok. "#NeverAgainMSD Student Activism: Lessons for Agonist Political Education in an Age of Democratic Crisis." *Educational Theory* 70, no. 6 (2020): 740.

⁴⁸⁴ Fickle, *Race Card*, 10.

knowledgeable players to reinforce that they “belong” in the game spaces and support particular types of praxis over others.⁴⁸⁵ That same mastery can be used to exert power or influence over others at a table. The term “rules lawyer” is a colloquialism in tabletop RPG culture that refers to a player who possesses and frequently references an extensive knowledge of game mechanics. While not universally negative, rules lawyers are often known for using this knowledge to further their own agenda or arguing with a GM and interrupting play.⁴⁸⁶ Bryn Neuenschwander argues that even after players memorize the procedure and codified rules of a game, much is still left to the subtext and mores of a specific table.⁴⁸⁷ Other players, through table talk and interaction, will reward or discourage actions, thereby further enforcing rules of play. The tone and tenor of these interactions often influences a new player’s understanding of how much power they can exert over the game and narrative.⁴⁸⁸ At the same time Steven Dashiell argues that the prevalence of the rules and originating text of playbooks (even if they are minimal) still

⁴⁸⁵ Steven Dashiell, “Rules Lawyering as Linguistic and Symbolic Capital,” *Analog Game Studies* 4, no. 5 (2017), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/11/rules-lawyering-as-symbolic-and-linguistic-capital/>.

⁴⁸⁶ Research indicates that the question of whether or not rules lawyering is universally helpful or harmful is vigorously debated. Jessica Hammer, Whitney Beltrán, Jonathan Walton, and Moyra Turkington, “Power and Control in Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed by José Pablo Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (New York: Routledge, 2018), 459.; Dashiell, “DM Habitus,” 9. While typically portrayed as self-serving and negative, there are examples of rules lawyers improving play. In *The Seven*, a campaign of actual play cast *Dimension 20*, the GM Brennan Lee Mulligan refers to one of the players, Aabria Iyengar, as “Public Defender Rules Lawyer Pro Bono.” Iyengar is an exceptionally skilled player and GM herself and is sharing a table with newer players. Several times during the campaign, she reminds players of their abilities and options. While she does occasionally advocate for herself, the majority of times that she intercedes and is identified as a rules lawyer, it is to assist another player in succeeding at their goals.

⁴⁸⁷ Bryn Neuenschwander, “Playing by the Rules: Instruction and Acculturation in Role-Playing Games.” *E-Learning and Digital Media* 5, no. 2 (2008): 192.

⁴⁸⁸ Montola, “The Invisible Rules of Role-playing,” 29.

ultimately limits both player and GM power, serving as a counter balance to the perception that the game is a fully blank slate.⁴⁸⁹

The experience of playing tabletop RPGs encourages players to analyze the systems of power and structures that they are located within, recognize their impact, and potentially utilize them to their advantage or act against them. In addition to recognizing the constructed nature of systems of power, this awareness of how structures enforce or undercut agency is helpful in encouraging citizens to consider how they negotiate the structural elements of political systems. Gordon and Haas explicitly compare rules in games to rules in governance.⁴⁹⁰ They say that rules provide an essential mechanism in helping players begin a game at a place of equal standing and then compare that need for structural elements that ensure fairness to good deliberative practice. They also believed that introducing ludic elements to civic proceedings will help clarify to participants the ways in which governmental proceedings should facilitate, not block their agency and participation in civic life.⁴⁹¹

Frame Analysis and Shifting in Civic Life

In particular, the skills of frame analysis and frame shifting that tabletop RPG players gain through game play (and mentioned in chapter 2) can also be utilized for civic aims. Robyn Hope says that frame analysis allows players to cultivate the ability to pivot from thinking creatively in one moment and strategically the next, as well as learning to view a situation

⁴⁸⁹ Dashiell, "DM Habitus," 4.

⁴⁹⁰ Gordon and Haas, "Civic Creativity," 3971.

⁴⁹¹ Most of their work is around participatory budgeting.

through various levels of understanding and insight.⁴⁹² As discussed in chapter 2, Fine saw three distinctive frames that players were utilizing while playing tabletop RPGs - the frame of games' internally constructed reality or fantasy world; the frame of the games mechanics and internal system and rules; and the frame of the normal reality.⁴⁹³ Frame shifting can create opportunities for a sort of strategic contemplation that allows players to evaluate both their gameworld through the lens of the real world and the real world through the lens of the game. Carlson believes this could lead to the thoughtful imagining of new ways of being in the world and critique of current norms.

From a civic standpoint, a citizen may utilize frame analysis when trying to foster change in their own communities through democratic governmental channels. For example, a citizen can utilize frame analysis in order to advocate and take action on behalf of a cause like zoning for affordable housing in their neighborhood. A citizen may deeply believe in the aspirational American democratic ideals such as the ability of any individual to improve their status through hard work. Much like the fiction of game narrative, this does not reflect the reality of life in the United States, but it may still be a motivating and compelling narrative for a citizen - even as they know it is oversimplified. This large narrative can remain a reference point for rhetoric and

⁴⁹² Robyn Hope, "Critical Role and Audience Impact on Tabletop Roleplay," in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, ed. Shelly Jones (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2021), 58.

⁴⁹³ An example of those multiple frames and switches would be a player, who upon being told by the game master they are encountering a glowing locked door, says out loud, "Hmm, surely this door is enchanted. I'm rolling for investigation. Can someone pass the chips?" The first frame and sentence is within the game reality where the player is role-playing and announcing her character's observation and thoughts about the door. The second frame and sentence is that of the game's internal mechanics when the individual acts as a player of the game and utilizes its mechanics to pursue a goal - determining the nature of the door. The final frame and sentence is the individual, fully aware of their circumstances asking other individuals in the room to pass them the chips. They are present to and understand each frame and can slide back and forth between all of them easily and without confusion.

justification for the work they seek to do. They may utilize the narrative of advancement to indicate that this housing will help hardworking individuals pull themselves out of economic crisis.

At the same time, a citizen may also be very aware that to advance their cause, they have to negotiate complex systems and structures that enable zoning. As they make impassioned arguments around opportunity, they also have to gather a minimum amount of favorable signatures from a specific zip code, file a petition by a certain date, and include potential bids. Beyond political goodwill, there is a bureaucratic element of civic life in most democracies that needs to be negotiated.

Finally, beyond the ideals and bureaucratic mechanics, a citizen may also be aware of the lived reality of their community, in which both these ideals and structures are located. The citizen's neighborhood may be a diverse urban neighborhood that has been recently impacted by intense gentrification, making affordable housing an important necessity, but something that is resisted by many neighborhood residents. Negotiating the attitudes of residents of the neighborhood will play a key element in the success of political action. All of these frames provide context that can inform political efforts. The ability to shift back and forth between them will not only allow a citizen to be more effective, but it may also encourage creative problem solving when efforts through one frame become stymied.

Understanding Power

The three basic frames described by Fine can also provide a basis for understanding power systems as they occur within role-playing games. Montola says that the power within

RPGs can be understood through exogenous, endogenous, and diegetic lenses.⁴⁹⁴ He describes exogenous power as a player's ability to influence the game from outside of it and notes this power is not defined by game rules. Endogenous power is the power that the game's rules give to a player to utilize within the game. Finally, diegetic power the character's power within the narrative and restricted by the game world. Montola claims that exogenous power and goals supersede all endogenous and diegetic rules and goals because the game depends upon the voluntariness participation to create the "magic circle," where the endogenous and diegetic structures exist and have power.⁴⁹⁵

Players of tabletop RPGs experience these intersecting frames and can come to understand how power systems impact and depend upon one another. A ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life can utilize this familiarity to unpack the often distant and abstract nature of political power and agency in governance for citizens. The limited range of a character's conception of agency within a narrative can be compared to the experience of constrained and disempowered citizenship. In the same way that a player's character may believe that they are incapable of an action only to find they possess more agency (often through a player's utilization of endogenous power), many citizens feel constrained and disempowered because of how democratic citizenship is presented to them and their observations of political systems. Diegetic power as it is experienced by characters in a tabletop RPG can provide a helpful illustration of the ways in which consent of the governed is sometimes lost and forgotten by citizens.

⁴⁹⁴ Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-playing," 30. Montola writes about both tabletop role-playing games and LARPS in the article.

⁴⁹⁵ Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-playing," 29.

In contrast, when a citizen begins to take advantage of the rights, privileges, and options for agency found within law codes and governmental structures, they are exerting endogenous power. Just as a rules lawyer can pull off some extraordinary feats within a game with a supposedly weaker character, a citizen can utilize a knowledge of law to protect themselves against state power in impressive ways.⁴⁹⁶ The experience that individuals have in games can become a helpful educative lens through which to understand their capacity for civic engagement through existing structures and systems. It can also illustrate the importance of shifting and reforming legislation to make it more accessible and responsive to the needs of a community. In a game, rules need to be cogent and accessible to players in order for the game to run smoothly. Otherwise a dynamic may arise in which a GM is constantly explaining or correcting a player, who in turn may grow more frustrated and disengaged from the game.

Exogenous Power and Leaving the Table

This experience of endogenous power in tabletop RPGs provides a helpful lens into the importance of understanding the mechanics of one's local government, but the experience of exogenous power in games moves closer to a Deweyan image of democratic life. Exogenous power, which the player exerts on the game from outside the rule structure (and potentially the game itself), can shift and change the nature of the game itself. It can exert pressure to actually fully revise the rules of the game rather than just tweak their implementation. A player wielding exogenous power knows that the game needs them to function and recognizes that they are

⁴⁹⁶ Knowledge around search and seizure laws and detention by law enforcement are two examples. Asking for proof of a warrant and the utilization of the question "Am I being detained?" at a traffic stop often immediately stops police action at checkpoints.

consenting to participation. The game is an elaborate social construction that they have chosen to participate in and can exert influence and power over them, but it is ultimately constructed and can be changed radically by players if so desired. A player can threaten to leave a table when a game no longer becomes something they wish to engage in, just as a citizen can “leave the table” of public consent in their government when they believe it no longer acts in their best interest. In both cases, these actions interrupt the game and must be taken seriously.

In a ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life, the power of the players to “leave the table” is an important dynamic to pay attention to and can be utilized to open up conversation around civic protest, dissent, and how democracies need to grow. Leaving a game is a viable way for individual players to express that a GM may be forcing them to play in a way that they do not feel comfortable with or do not find enjoyable. It can also occur at any point during a game, and the ability to exercise it helps ensure that the game being played is one that continually respects player limits and boundaries. This inherent player power provides a helpful corollary to the cause and function of citizen protest, but it also raises questions about efficacy.

When a player walks away from the table or the citizen walks away from the democratic process, are they not essentially quitting? Does protest and strategic civic disengagement simply mean that people have withdrawn from democracy, thereby making it weaker? Within ludic theory, Huizinga mentioned what he called “spoil sports” in his work - individuals who shatter the magical circle by refusing to continue to participate in the game.

The spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself

with others. He robs the play of its illusion... Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community.⁴⁹⁷

In some dialogues around democratic participation, protestors do function as spoilsports. Their actions intentionally shatter “the magic circle” of democratic narrative and prove that some of the promises of democratic ideals (meritocracy, opportunity, equal voice) are not lived realities. They highlight the fragility of democracy and the ways in which it fails its citizens.

While this captures the disruptive nature of protest and civil disobedience, it still frames activists and non-conformists as refusing to engage in the larger communal “game” of democracy. It fails to recognize that most protestors do not actually want “the game” (i.e. democratic civic life) to end - they are simply refusing to keep playing by unfair rules. As such, they are not spoil-sports, as much as they are attempting to exert exogenic power so that all may play. If a game is too rigid and its core rules and structures too narrow, dissent can destroy it as it is unable to persist through change. A democracy that is defined strictly by the legal codes and governance structures may not be able to withstand larger demands of change, thereby potentially forcing its dissenting citizens to disengage from democratic life. In contrast, a Deweyan understanding of democracy sees protests and demands for change as indication of forming publics and potential new habits that will influence democratic life together. In this vision of democracy, there are no spoilsports - only players who want us to pause and examine how the game is played.

Ludic Citizenship: Autotelic Democratic Life Together

⁴⁹⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.

Just as players may advocate for shifts and changes in the way a tabletop RPG is played to better include others or match their preferred style of play together, citizens, through forming publics and developing new democratic habits, may push to change the current democratic forms. While they are moving away from the previously iterated form, the shift is hopefully toward a more democratic way of life together. While this prioritization of change over fixity may be unmooring for some citizens, it is important to acknowledge that a democratically named government does not guarantee democratic life. The long, shameful reality of American history of legal slavery, voter suppression, and civil rights struggles are a reminder that democratic governance does not guarantee equality and inclusion. As of this writing of this work, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the Supreme Court, challenging the bodily autonomy of child bearing citizens nationwide although just over 61% of Americans believe abortion should be legal and accessible. Democratic life is not guaranteed, even when it is legally codified.

Dewey believed that democracy emerged from humanity's ability to continually learn from experience and move toward growth. That growth came from within the life of the community. Dewey said, "Every other form of moral and social faith rests upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control; to some 'authority' alleged to exist outside the processes of experience." He believed that democratic life could be created through the process of growing together even without a fixed referent. The same generative capacity of change may also create anxiety, as a Deweyan democracy in the future may look significantly different from what it is now. Tabletop RPGs again provide a helpful lens around reactions to change in institutions in favor of facilitating democratic habits and

connections. Game developer James Mendez Hodes, when asked about whether or not *D&D* could ever move beyond some of its roots in violence said,

I think that *D&D* will always, to some extent, be, like, the stuff about killing monsters and taking their stuff... The parts of *D&D* that are such excellent breeding grounds for colonialism. If *D&D* removes those elements, it will become something that seems completely different, that might not be recognizable. And I would be into that. I would love that. I want to play that game. But I think that if and when that happens, we'll have to deal with a lot of people being like, well, this isn't even *D&D* anymore.⁴⁹⁸

Hodes went on to say that while this “new game” may not be *D&D* as it was known, surely the amount of new people who would be drawn into playing, who would see themselves in the game, would be more exciting and well worth the change. He believes that game designers and players must ask themselves what is more important - the legacy of a game that is already changing or the ability to draw more people to the table.

For Dewey, it is the communal process, the play of democratic life together, which is most important. He cautioned on becoming stuck on particular forms and said, “All ends and values that are cut off from the ongoing process become arrests, fixations. They strive to fixate on what has been gained instead of using it to open the road and point the way to new and better experiences.”⁴⁹⁹ Much like the experience of play within a tabletop RPG, the process of democracy is its own reward and objective. Democratic civic life is autotelic.

The point of democratic civic life is not the winning of elections or even the advancement of one's personal civil rights (though both are important). It is the continual cultivation of democratic life together. Dewey said, “Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself

⁴⁹⁸ James Mendez Hodes, interview with Susan Haarman, Audio from recording, March 29th, 2022.

⁴⁹⁹ Dewey, *Creative Democracy*, 275.

comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.”⁵⁰⁰ A ludic pedagogy of democratic civic life uses the essential element of games, especially tabletop RPGs, to help educate and form individuals in democratic ways. It recognizes that civic formation cannot be limited to a few social studies classes during formal schooling in the same way that democratic action cannot be limited to paying taxes and voting. It is rooted in Dewey’s belief in the educative power of experience in community and his admonition that “faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education.” It leverages the experiences that games provide to help further cultivate citizens who bring a critical eye to systems of power, imagination to the problems they seek to solve, and a firm belief in the necessity of working alongside their fellow citizens. It reminds us that for democracy to thrive, we cannot play alone.

⁵⁰⁰ Dewey, *Creative Democracy*, 226.

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VITA

Dr. Susan Haarman never had enough friends as a child to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. Before beginning her PhD, Susan spent over fifteen years in higher education as minister and community-based educator. She earned a Masters in Divinity from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley and spent the majority of her 20's as a queer woman doing lay ministry at Catholic colleges before shifting to community-based teaching and learning activities. She has a Masters in Community Counseling from Loyola University Chicago. At the same time, she started the Cultural and Education Policy Studies PhD program. She is good at school, but deeply foolish.

Her published scholarly writing have covered a range of topics including community-based learning, faculty learning communities, Jesuit education, epistemic justice, white dominant culture in service immersions, and tabletop RPGs. The common thread of pragmatic philosophy and the power of communities for transformation runs through all of her work. She enjoys serving as a bridge for her two primary fields, encouraging philosophy of education to look to community voice and pop culture for wisdom, and pushing community-based educators to consider the importance and implications of philosophical framings they use. She continues to work in the Center for Engaged Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship at Loyola University Chicago. In her spare time, she is an improviser performing with Comedy Sportz Chicago. She has been GMing a *Monster of the Week* campaign since the summer of 2020 and takes inspiration from the history of Chicago, whose truth is always more fantastical than fiction.