DUNGEONS & DRAGONS & DEWEY: THE POTENTIAL FOR DRAMATIC REHEARSAL AND CIVIC OUTCOMES IN TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Susan Haarman
Loyola University Chicago

Just over a year ago, over 257,000 people watched in real time as a group of six companions negotiated the difficult decision of what to do after a tragic loss.[1] The group engaged in 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 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*.[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 games move forward in a way that is effective and enjoyable. The viewers of the Critical Role live stream were not only watching individuals play a game, they were also witnessing an unintentional enacting of some of John Dewey's philosophical principles around educative deliberative process and its impact on the civic and moral habits of individuals. Players were practicing Deweyan dramatic rehearsal.

The efficacy of tabletop RPGs as an educational and therapeutic asset in schools has been extensively studied, with many middle and high schools employing these games as extracurricular activities because of their positive impact around identity formation, empathy, and social skills.[3] More recent iterations of tabletop RPGs are also being intentionally designed to encourage thoughtfulness, experimentation, and creative problem solving.[4] The designers of game playbooks detail cooperation, compromise, intentional direct action,

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[1] Over 1.7 million people have since viewed the episode.

[2] https://critrole.com/faq/. 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.

[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); Brent Ruben, "Simulations, Games, and Experience-Based Learning: The Quest for a New Paradigm for Teaching and Learning," *Simulation & Gaming* 30 (1999).

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

consensus building, and imagination as explicit goals and outcomes of playing tabletop role-playing games.[5] While not explicitly intended as such, the dynamics of games like *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* give players a chance to experience deliberation around something they are personally invested in within a low risk environment.

Because role-playing games or (RPGs) is a broader category referring to a variety of different games, I will take a moment to define the term. A role-playing game is a game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting.[6] RPGs are delivered across a variety of platforms such as video games (games like Final Fantasy, or Skyrim), or Live Action Role Play games (otherwise known as LARPS) where individuals physically portray their character within a fictional setting represented by real world environments. This paper is focusing specifically and intentionally on another genre: tabletop RPGs.

The adjective of "tabletop" comes from the fact that these games intend for a group of people to gather together around a "table" and play together collaboratively and synchronously while sharing that space.[7] Aaron Hollander defines tabletop RPGs primarily as group storytelling, with each player responsible for the actions of a character of their own design.[8] Everyone responds to and with narrated action to the effects of their decisions through a flexible system of rules and probability mechanisms. Players take responsibility for acting out these roles 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. While they take any number of permutations, the game with the largest cultural footprint is *D&D*. However, *D&D* is only one game setting amongst a multitude — not all have a fantasy setting or focus on combat. 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. Hollander says that tabletop RPGs are rooted in a focus on autotelic narrative experience. They produce unrehearsed and unrepeatable narratives through collaborative improvisational oral storytelling 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.[9]

While there are exceptions, most tabletop RPGS feature players playing in a group and dealing with shared circumstances and (potentially) moving

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[5] Playbooks is the term often used for guidebooks that detail game rules and settings; Brent Jans, "Creator One-on-One: Olivia Hill," *The Rat Hole*, https://therathole.ca/renaissance-gamer-01-21-20/ Retrieved 2020-02-23.

[6] Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 3.

[7] Or a zoom call.

[8] Aaron Hollander, "Blessed Are the Legend-Makers: Experimentation as Edification in Dungeons & Dragons," *Political Theology* (2021): 316.

[9] Hollander, "Blessed Are the Legend Makers," 322.

toward a shared goal. The presence of consensus, as indicated by the example I shared at the beginning of this paper, is usually highly contingent and continually re-established through ongoing dialogue. Players are forced to react to changing circumstances, a responsive world, and both the individual and social consequences of actions they take.[10] The choices they make, whether they yield success or failures, can continue to impact the player long after. Also, these consequences and repercussions are typically shared by the larger party and ripple to impact the relationships a character has to other players (often both on and off the table). Finally, tabletop RPGs typically have some form of game master (also known as dungeon master in *D&D*): an individual who is both organizer and participant. They are in charge of creating the details and challenges of a given adventure, while maintaining a realistic continuity of events. The game master has the power to control any element other than the player character's choices.

DEWEY'S DRAMATIC REHEARSAL

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.[11] I believe 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 (ala a simulation), Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal is a form of deliberation. Steven Fesmire calls it "a vicarious, anticipatory way of acting" that is formative as well as goal oriented.[12] It is a process that is imaginative, values driven, and dynamic — attempting to balance the necessary tension between emotion and rationality in decision making and moral action.

Philosophers Fesmire and William Caspary have explicated Dewey's conception of dramatic rehearsal as an aspect of deliberation, but Fesmire admits

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[10] Daniel Carlson, "Beyond Bikini-Mail: Having Women at the Table," *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* , no. 3 (2020). Retrieved from http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v7-issue-3/dd-beyond-bikini-mail-having-women-at-the-table/.

[11] 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* (Date): 101-109. Cham Springer & David I. 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.

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

that Dewey's writings on it are opaque and somewhat disjointed.[13] One of the 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.[14]

More than just a logical consideration of options, the process incorporated affective responses, personal relationships, and imagination. Fesmire, Caspary, and Hilldreth all claim that dramatic rehearsal extends beyond a reflection process to an essential tool of moral deliberation that leads to action.[15] Caspary distinguishes dramatic rehearsal through the helpful frames of a concern with characters, plot, non-utilitarian approaches, and openness to unexpected and emergent outcomes.[16] These four elements can serve as helpful guide posts to 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."[17] 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.[18]

In tabletop RPGs, characters are the backbone of the experience. It is an intrinsically social game. You play with a party. Your relationships to one another may have just as much impact on the game play as any roll of the dice.

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[13] Fesmire, *John Dewey and The Moral Imagination*; William R. Caspary, "Ethical Deliberation as Dramatic Rehearsal: John Dewey's Theory," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (1991): 176.

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

[15] 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): 780-807.

[16] William Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 113.

[17] John Dewey, "1908 Ethics," MW 5:290.

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

Your 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.[19]

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."[20] 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.[21] 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 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."[22]

When players role-play their character, Bowman believes they are experimenting with notions of selfhood and becoming more cognizant of the ways in which they take on various roles in everyday life outside of the game.[23] Bowman is building off the work of sociologist Erving Goffman's *The*

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

[20] John Dewey, "The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 14, 1899-1924: Human Nature and Conduct 1922." eds Jo Ann Boydston, (2008)140

[21] Bowman, *Functions of Role-playing Games,* 5.

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

[23] Bowman, *Functions of Role-playing Games,* 47.

Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, which 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 take on a different role or traits, and, as a result, become more aware of the ways in which they unconsciously do so in normal life. Players cultivate a differing theory of mind and may intentionally try 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.

Within RPGs, players have the opportunity to see how their own emotions are impacted by engaging in situations and perspectives that are different than their own. This can encourage an increase in the capacity for empathy within players.[24] 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."[25] 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 — or the ability to use different approaches to intelligence and sensitivity to improve one's relationship with others.[26] 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.[27] Over half of the respondents directly credited the experiences of role-playing games to an increase in their empathy skills.[28]

Intentional empathy and reflective practices are not just found in the content of the game, but in the material that structure them as well. Within *D&D,* the basic rules also include a section that encourages players to think beyond binary notions of sex and gender when constructing characters, while also

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[24] 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): 286-294.

[25] Peggy Schaller, "Can (role-) playing the French revolution en Français also teach the eighteenth century?." *Digital Defoe: Studies in Defoe & His Contemporaries* 4, no. 1 (2012): 41.

[26] 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; Meriläinen's study identified role-playing games more generally to include video games and LARP.

[27] Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing," 58.

[28] Meriläinen, 62.

encouraging them to think about how societal notions might negatively or positively impact them.[29] The playbook of *Kids on Brooms*, which takes place in a collaboratively created Harry Potteresque 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 they show up and how they might impact the characters.[30] Of note, it appears on page seven, well before any information about individual character creation or play.

<p align="center">*Plot*</p>

The language of plot describes the ways in which dramatic rehearsal involves and considers time. Hamington refers to it as "extending temporal horizons" because the process is concerned with both immediate and long-term impacts beyond just the initial decision. Also, because of ruminations, dramatic rehearsal is likely to take longer than other ethical deliberations. Hamington 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."[31] 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.

Tabletop RPGs are autotelic, with the experience of playing, not the outcome, as the goal of play. While success in smaller encounters is enjoyable, most players will not say that 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, the impacts of which are 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

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[29] Wizards of the Coast, *Basic Rules for Dungeons and Dragons: 5th Edition*, 2014. Retrieved from https://media.wizards.com/downloads/dnd/DnDBasicRules.pdf .

[30] Jonathan Gilmour, et al, *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."

[31] Maurice Hamington, "Care Ethics, John Dewey's 'Dramatic Rehearsal,' and Moral Education," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2010): 122.

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.

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 value preferences are surfaced, making value 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. Similarly, 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 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 others.

Non-utilitarian

Dramatic rehearsal also takes an intentionally non-utilitarian approach, focusing not on assessing the cost benefit trade-off of a situation, but engaging in a creative problem-solving process the purpose of which John McVea called "the construction of the good."[32] 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."[33]

The development of critical ethical reasoning through role-playing games via the mechanism of choice was studied by David Simkins and Constance Steinkuehler, who posit that players will consciously view the choices they are making as having moral impact when the decisions are significant and effect change; are impacted by social context; and result in a level of mirroring

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

[33] John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct; an Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1922), 396.

from the game.[34] It may seem strange that games which 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." A study by Alex Atmore 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.[35] A player would simultaneously talk about the importance of structure and frameworks and in the same breath emphasize that if the individuals playing the game were not enjoying themselves, the rules should be revised.

Emergent outcomes

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 choices that harmonize competing interests instead of simply picking the most pressing or weighty interest forgoing others."[36]

The paper has primarily focused on player choice in tabletop RPGs as something that occurs within a bounded reality and yields consequences. I have not yet emphasized the element of co-creation inherent in those same choices. While style of play and level of influence can vary from game to game, game masters (GMs) are as impacted by their players' decisions as players are by theirs. 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

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

[35] Alex Atmore, "Just Rol[l/e] With It: the Sense-Making Practices of a Tabletop Roleplaying Game Community," *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.

[36] Caspary, *Dewey on Democracy*, 129.

gameplay is uncertain — and both GM and players are negotiating and being impacted by that uncertainty. Tresca says that a game master has to be able to 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.[37] Some tabletop RPGs refer to the game master as the "Storyteller," emphasizing a focus on narrative continuity and not rule imposition.[38]

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 canon now, 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.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE AND APPROACH

If these games are a site to cultivate the practice of dramatic rehearsal and deliberation, what does this mean for us as 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. The educational and therapeutic benefits of tabletop RPGs are well documented, with Bowman classifying the benefits into the three categories of cognitive, behavioral, and affective gains.[39] Tabletop RPGs have been integrated into classrooms as a learning tool to present case studies,[40] teach literature,[41]

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[37] Michael Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-playing Games* (City, State: McFarland, 2014), 68.

[38] Justin Achilli, *Vampire: The Masquerade Revised Edition* (White Wolf Game Studio, 1998), 40.

[39] Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Educational Live Action Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review," in *Wyrd Con Companion Book,* ed. Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014), 112-131.

[40] David Simkins, "Playing with Ethics: Experiencing New Ways of Being in RPGs," in *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, IGI Global, (2010), 69-84.

[41] 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): 62—69.

history,[42] narrative theory,[43] coding,[44] power and privilege,[45] heritage enactment and preservation,[46] and library programming.[47] They have been recommended to aid with social skills,[48] depression,[49] chronic pain,[50] and ameliorating mental health during COVID-19.[51] They 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. The designers of these playbooks 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.[52] Game designers

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[42] 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* (Routledge, 2013), 69-84.

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

[44] Konstantinos Ntokos, "CodePlay: A Tabletop Role-Playing Game System used in Teaching Game Programming Using Content Gamification," *The Computer Games Journal* (2020): 1-16.

[45] 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.

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

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

[48] Stéphane Daniau, "The Transformative Potential of Role-Playing Games—: From Play Skills to Human Skills," *Simulation & Gaming* 47, no. 4 (2016): 423-444.

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

[50] 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): 235-246.

[51] Jane McGonigal, "5 Science-Backed Benefits of Playing Tabletop RPGs During (and After) COVID-19," (May 15th 2020). Retrieved from https://www.popmythology.com/tabletop-rpg-dnd-benefits-science-coronavirus-crisis/.

[52] The most commonly used statement is the one initially written by Olivia Hill, who admitted that, in practice, this was 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," Brent Jans, "Creator One-on-One: Olivia Hill," *The Rat Hole*, https://therathole.ca/renaissance-gamer-01-21-20/ Retrieved 2020-02-23.

have already recognized the potential of these games as important moral and civic educative spaces as they create opportunities in which people interrogate their values and potentially build essential skills for citizenship. As educators, we need to engage them with the same level of seriousness, or we risk leaving a powerful educative tool unused.

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 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.[53] 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.[54] 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.

IMPORTANCE OF INTENTIONAL USE

As with any educational tool, these games have capacity for great good when approached intentionally and also great capacity for harm if not used well. 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.[55] Empathy can also remain at surface levels without good reflection on the part of the player or at the behest of the game master. Players may incorrectly assume that just because they play someone of a certain identity, they now have a better understanding of that standpoint.[56] Perhaps due to their origin as wargames, many tabletop RPGs have 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 actions, with players claiming that they were

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[53] Fesmire, "Dramatic Rehearsal and the Moral Artist, 568-597.

[54] Hollander, "Blessed Are the Legend-Makers," 326.

[55] 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): 18-31; Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games," in *Role-Playing Game Studies* (Routledge, 2018), 440-447.

[56] Adam Jerrett, Peter Howell, and Neil Dansey, "Developing an Empathy Spectrum for Games," *Games and Culture* 16, no. 6 (September 2021): 635—59.

following the emotional immersion of the moment or actively pushing the narrative towards a justification of the violence.[57] Game designer James Mendez Hodes links some of this "bad group" versus "civilized group" mentality to racial categories in *D&D.* Races in the game refer not to human ethnogroups, but to broader categories of species such as dwarf, elf, orc, human, etc. Especially 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. This language and the mechanics connected to it have been revised over the years.

  Mechanics and poor design may be partially to blame for the focus on violence according to Jacob Ericsson. 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.[58] 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 as much a result of poor game design as it was of ethics.

  In contrast, there is a growing number of games, both independent and mainstream, that decenter violence. Many use a rule system that originated in a game called *ApocalypseWorld.*[59] In most of these games, 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. 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 chooses violence sparingly. Other games, such as Avery Adler's *The Quiet Year*, actually move the emphasis from an individual making decisions for themselves to players planning a community together and needing to make difficult decisions, where no outcome is clearly positive or negative. In an interview for the podcast *Imaginary Worlds,* Avery described the game as asking what happens when you realize that the community you live in has approached problems poorly.

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[57] 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.

[58] Jacob Eriksson, "Violence or Challenge?: Determining Factors for Conflict Resolution in RPGs," Masters Thesis University of Skövde, School of Informatics (2016).

[59] 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.

> The Quiet Year kind of asks you to sit with…how do you relate
> to community when we've made, you know, 40 weeks' worth
> of potentially subpar choices… Like how do you live with
> community when only 75% of your needs are getting met?
> And that's something that comes up in a few other games as
> well. That question of like, when things aren't perfect, how do
> you keep trying to push forward together?[60]

This gameplay is asking players to do some of the same essential imaginative rehearsal needed to balance the difficult requirements of democratic life when assets are finite and community needs are diverse.

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 uprising in response to George Floyd's murder and the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement.[61] BIPOC players and game designers have begun to push for more inclusion in game design, narrative, and play. The challenge also extended to white players. Hodes, in a blog entry entitled, "May I Play A Character From Another Race?", encourages white players to play characters from other racial and ethnic identities if they understand it must be done with care, intentionality, and with a commitment to educate oneself about the culture they are approaching. Hodes also advocates for players to take these risks because it helps decenter whiteness in tabletop gaming and allows more space for BIPOC players to not feel pressured to play their own identity to assure representation at the table.[62]

The very valid concerns around how tabletop RPGs can actually encourage anti-democratic habits in players present an even stronger argument for civic educators to engage tabletop RPGs as educational tools. From GMing intentionally to creative game designs, civic educators can contribute to and utilize the skyrocketing popularity of tabletop RPGs for essential civic outcomes. Cultivated experiences of dramatic rehearsal are critical in forming deliberative, participatory citizens. These skills support the creation of engaged, committed, and imaginative discourse — the same sort of discourse which 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

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[60] Avery Adler, "Rerolling Role-Playing Games," *Imaginary Worlds Podcast,* episode 185. Retrieved from https://www.imaginaryworldspodcast.org/episodes/rerolling-role-playing-games.

[61] Charlie Hall, "Tabletop Gaming in 2021 Will Be Defined By These Last 12 Months Of Chaos," (8 January 2021). Retrieved from https://www.polygon.com/2021/1/8/22178462/board-games-rpgs-2021-magic-dungeons-dragons-pandemic-black-lives-matter.

[62] James Mendez Hodes, "May I Play A Character From Another Race?" (14 February 2019). Retrieved from https://jamesmendezhodes.com/blog/2019/2/14/may-i-play-a-character-from-another-race.

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 blur.

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. Even though many games have not stepped fully 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. As they work toward a common goal, players are also negotiating competing needs of their party members and building and rebuilding consensus for actions. This sounds remarkably like being an active democratic citizen.