

Roll For Democracy: Tabletop Role-playing Games as Essential Civic Formation in the Deweyan Tradition

Susan Haarman

Extended Abstract

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 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*. 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.

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 paper will show that engaging in tabletop RPGs can provide players with the opportunity to form

¹ Over 1.7 million people have since viewed the episode on Twitch and YouTube.

groups that mimic the dynamics of Deweyan publics. Individuals are drawn together through shared consequences, begin to communicate around values, identify a problem around which they form ongoing and contingent consensus which informs their actions to address the problem. This will lead to an examination of 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 before closing with an examination of the ways in which communication within tabletop RPG groups both 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 (Dewey, 1939, p.2).

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.

If these games are 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. 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. More recent iterations of tabletop RPGs are also being intentionally designed to encourage thoughtfulness, experimentation, and creative problem solving. The designers of game playbooks detail cooperation, compromise, intentional direct action, consensus building, and imagination as explicit goals and outcomes of playing tabletop role-playing games. 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 literally include anti-facist statements within their playbooks, holding that creative engagement is antithetical to authoritarian principles (Jans, 2020). The content and process of these games is understood by many creators and players as inherently political. They 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” (2011, p. 23). These games build capacity around skills that are also needed for engaged democratic citizenship. 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.

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