

Democracy & Education

A Problem of Play for Democratic Education? Abstraction, Realism, and Exploration in Learning Games

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Abstract

In this review article, I argue that games are complementary, not self-supporting, learning tools for democratic education because they can: (a) offer *simplified, but often not simple, outlines* (later called “models”) of complex social systems that generate further inquiry; (b) provide *practice spaces* for exploring systems that do not have the often serious consequences of taking direct and immediate social, civic, and legal action; and (c) use rules to allow players to explore this aforementioned outline or model by *making decisions and seeing an outcome*. To make these arguments, I perform a close reading of three examples of participatory and playful media that could be germane to, but are not designed for, educational settings: the early-20th-century board game *The Landlord’s Game*, YouTube videos advising about law enforcement encounters, and the dystopian indie game *Papers, Please*.

This article is in response to

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IN THE PAPER “The Challenges of Gaming for Democratic Education,” Stoddard, Banks, Nemacheck, and Wenska (2016) presented a critique of four games from the iCivics collection of games. Drawing upon a small group of undergraduate and graduate students who played the games, the authors argued that iCivics games: (a) lack realism and real-world complexity; (b) do not “actively ask players to apply what they have learned in the game to situations outside of the game” (p. 10); and (c) have a “closed” problems or tasks (p. 4) with explicit rules that favor certain player decisions over others.

The article and its critique contributes significantly to our thinking about the relationship games have to democratic education. It rightly drew attention to the need for robust curricula and pedagogy to support teachers, pointed out the need for more

linkages between games and participatory democratic learning, and raised significant questions about ideologies that are embedded in games. However, in its focus on the difference between the

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pedagogical ideals of democratic education and the features of the iCivics games, the article overlooked characteristics of games that are potentially generative for learning on the whole and democratic education specifically.

In this review article, I argue that games are complementary, not self-supporting, learning tools for democratic education because they can: (a) offer *simplified, but often not simple, outlines* (later called “models”) of complex social systems that could engender further inquiry; (b) provide *practice spaces* for exploring systems that do not have the often serious consequences of taking direct and immediate social, civic, and legal action; and (c) use rules to allow players to explore this aforementioned model by *making decisions and seeing an outcome*. To make these arguments, I perform a close reading of three examples of participatory and playful media that could be germane to, but are not designed for, educational settings. In doing so, I examine the design features of each relative to democratic education. First, I look at a late-19th-century board game called *The Landlord’s Game*, which uses a simplified model of property ownership to raise issues about housing justice. Then I examine both potential promises and perils of direct real-world engagement in the recent “Am I Being Detained?” genre of YouTube videos. Finally, I look at how a “closed,” hierarchical, and rule-based game system can frame inquiry into immigration policy in the fictive, dystopian game titled *Papers, Please*.

These arguments are rooted in a mounting concern: how people understand and engage with the role of social and state institutions in a democratic society (e.g., how institutions function to constrain, advance, or preserve legal structures of rights, personhood, and protections). In contemporary discourse, revanchist movements in developed nations are assailing existing social, legal, and political institutions as rejecting a corrupt and anti-Western “globalist” system. Given the history of totalitarian movements seeking to undermine the legitimacy of social, political, and legal institutions, these attacks are troubling. At the same time, prominent historical scholarship is making the case that the degradation of state and social institutions can lead to catastrophic results for pluralism and democracy (e.g., Judt, 2010; Snyder, 2015).

Games can play a small part in supporting democratic education that focuses on critical engagement with institutions. Games, as Gee (2007) argued, often use simplified, though still quite sophisticated, models to provide more abstract and less complicated portrayals of the world. These models, like a model airplane, are outlines or sketches of the real thing, which emphasize some properties over others. As game designer Soren Johnson (2012) has pointed out, even though these simplified models are frequently uneven mappings of real systems, they can nonetheless give rise to productive meaning-making. They can help players understand, interpret, and critically engage with the general concepts embedded in the game system, even as games that have too simple a model render meaningful play difficult.

By elucidating and assembling simpler outlines from complicated concepts, some games may help players engage in the exercise of thinking critically about a topic by freeing players from

the burden of sifting through complexities. These game-based models can be:

... depictions of a real thing (like planes, cars, or buildings) or a system (like atomic structure, weather patterns, traffic flow, ecosystems, social system, and so forth) that are simpler than the real thing, stressing some properties of the thing and not others. They are used for imaginative thought, learning and action, when the real thing is too large, too complex, too expensive, or too dangerous to deal with directly. (Gee, 2007, pp. 27–28)

One has to look no farther to find things that are “too large, too complex, or too dangerous to deal with directly” than the social institutions and state administrative apparatus that are at the core of democratic societies. The legal institutions and state administrative organizations, whether overbearing or emancipatory, are often puzzlingly to navigate with potentially perilous consequences. In this area, games like *The Landlord’s Game* could perhaps help support the development of robust understandings and critical democratic engagement.

The Landlord’s Game: Communicating Simple Ideas about Complex Real-World Systems

The board game *The Landlord’s Game* sought to help early-20th-century players develop critical understandings about the complex real-world system of urban housing rents, which the designer thought unfairly advantaged landlords over tenants. It is widely believed that the game was subsequently taken without the original designer’s permission and adapted by Parker Brothers into the well-known title *Monopoly*, though the game’s social perspectives were greatly diluted. Designed by an activist named Lizzie J. Magie, the game was envisioned to be a “practical demonstration of the present system of land-grabbing with all its usual outcomes and consequences” (Miller, 1902, p. 56). The game, in short, sought to help players understand—based on the designer’s perspective—how a *system* of “land monopolism” emerged from the extant institutions of property laws and courts and subsequently disadvantaged tenants (see Figure 1). It undertook this aim by presenting players with a model of the world in which they could make decisions that had lessened real-world consequences.

The Landlord’s Game had a few characteristics salient to this discussion: (a) It created a space where players could experience, with diminished consequences, an abridged and simplified model of urban housing systems’ hardships; (b) it used a rule-based scheme to help players make meaning by making decisions in a system; and (c) it appealed to its audience using humor (e.g., players “Go to Jail” for landing on “Lord Blueblood’s estate”) and real-world references (an expensive board square named “Fifth Avenue,” for instance). Like the popular computer game *The Oregon Trail*, *The Landlord’s Game* aimed to impart something about a systemic phenomenon to players without guaranteeing total correctness of its simplified representation.

It is important to note that no game-based model can completely and precisely represent the world as it is, with all its complexities and nuances. Games such as *The Landlord’s Game* allow a player to act with an abridged and humorous model of the

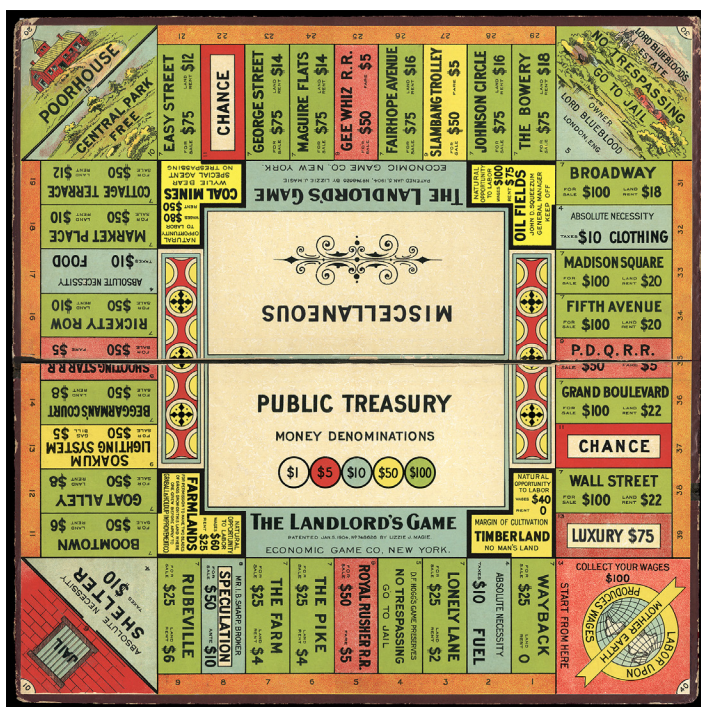


Figure 1. The 1904 version of *The Landlord's Game*, courtesy Thomas E. Forsyth.

world, one that has lessened real-world effects. While other games can be used to transmit facts and train in skills, games like *The Landlord's Game* present ideas about real-world systems that initiate discussions and establish the bases for further inquiry. If a present-day learner was handed 19th-century housing contracts, it might be difficult for them to understand from those documents how that housing system created hardships. With *The Landlord's Game*, they experience a version of the hardships, as construed by the game designer. This playful experience can support and ground further inquiry.

The Landlord's Game, like some iCivics games, features unrealistic scenarios but could also be part of an engaging educational experience. Stoddard et al. criticized the “very unrealistic and even silly examples” (p. 6) in the iCivics games, but do not consider the view that appeals to realism in media may be harmful for young learners. Game-based realism is often grounded in little more than style while offering an incomplete reflection of reality. It may be that assertions that media can represent unfiltered reality, or perhaps even that implications about “real-time data” being ideology-free, are more misleading than iCivics’ tongue-in-cheek references to bomb-sniffing cats.

Outside the closed digital ecologies of school classrooms where self-driven participation on online networks is restricted, youth navigate a complex nexus of circulating representations, perspectives, and experiences in their everyday lives. This online digital media may often pose scenarios that purport to describe legal and civic institutions realistically, and may also encourage active participation in the civic sphere. The category of “Am I Being Detained?” online videos indicates that the boundaries between empowering, educational online videos and misleading, stylized political promotion can be difficult to discern.

“Am I Being Detained?” Realism, Media, and Participatory Politics

Online advice videos on YouTube and other social media sites counsel American viewers, often youth concerned with alleged police abuse or violations of civil liberties, how to engage with police officers during a traffic stop. With titles like *How to Refuse a Checkpoint! Detained “BECAUSE” the Constitution?* and *Police Specific Questions to ASK They Don't Want You to Know*, the videos advise persons to ask if they are being detained when stopped at sobriety checkpoints, when police pull them over for traffic violations, or when questioned at the “interior” border patrol checkpoints that are well inside the U.S. border. These advice videos often feature a proof-of-concept demonstration that shows, with unflinching success, the video host employing their techniques during law enforcement (LE) or border control stops.

For decades, policing reform activists and organizations have sought to encourage assertive and lawful defense of personal civil liberties during LE stops, often encouraging people to simply ask LE officers if they are being detained as part of an investigation. Yet the funding, infrastructure, and reach of these activist campaigns were often limited. However, on social media and social networks, self-produced videos have increased rapidly in recent years, especially beginning in the late 2012 and early 2013 period, and have met a receptive audience of viewers. The videos recommend strategies for LE engagement like: (a) deterring officers from unnecessarily gaining consent to search a person, vehicle, or belongings and (b) preventing and/or documenting possible overstepping of civil liberties. At the same time, these videos are often not produced by policing reform organizations with deep experience of legal activism.

The two most viewed “Am I Being Detained?” videos—the phrase that drove the bloom of online interest in late 2012—on YouTube have over a million views each as of June 2016, with three times as many liked votes as disliked. As of June 2016, these videos, whose titles are mentioned above, have at least 600,000 more views than the next-most-viewed video post ([Gavin Seim], 2013; [skin88p], 2013). The focus is often a self-recorded driver using the right combination of words to challenge an LE officer, which results in the LE officer letting the driver go, sometimes in expeditious fashion. The protagonists appear to be white or white-passing men who affect calm before and during the LE encounter and then afterward offer a clever quip or even a lecture about citizens’ rights to the LE agent (see [adamkokesh], 2014).

The hosts of the videos often encourage viewers to stand up for their rights, a common exhortation among videos in the genre. But the accounts hosting the two top-viewed videos also offer videos supporting the “Sovereign Citizens” movement, which the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) classifies as a hate group and describes as holding “truly bizarre, complex antigovernment beliefs” (SPLC, 2016). Members of the movement, which was linked to the 2016 armed takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife message, number as many as 300,000 and are seen to be growing in quantity.

Some less-viewed videos with lower production values diverge from the smooth script presented in the popular productions

described above. In these videos, the stakes of assertive interaction are high, even dangerous, for the participants. In one video originally released on a police department Facebook page, a young African American woman, revealed in accompanying text to be 17 years old, initially asks in a polite yet firm manner why she is being detained for investigation. After she repeatedly presses the white LE officer to provide a reason for the traffic stop, he opens her door, asks her to get out of the car, and detains her, explaining that he smells marijuana, which is then reportedly found in her vehicle (South Euclid Police Department, 2015). In another video, two young Latino American activists purposefully drive up to an “internal border” checkpoint, discussing how they will ask if they’re being detained. The driver repeatedly inquires through a cracked window as to why he is being detained, but the border agents ignore him, request that he roll the car’s window down, and subsequently break it, detaining both occupants (*North County Times*, 2011).

These popular, advocacy-driven videos circulate through a convoluted networked constellation of social media that serve as an informal learning space for legal rights and law enforcement relations. For those concerned with education, democracy, and media, the videos touch on complicated issues related to the role of realism, accuracy, and networked participatory action: Do seemingly realistic video scenarios inspire youth to political action or potentially give youth the wrong idea about how the world works? Does encouragement to engage in direct action place young people at unnecessary risk or connect them to civic action in meaningful ways? Does social media help make ideology opaque or hidden, or does it make it more visible?

The “Am I Being Detained?” social video genre only gives us ambiguous answers to these questions. In many instances, it presents a powerful venue for sharing basic information about rights and responsibilities in law enforcement encounters. Young people, who seem to be frequent consumers and producers of these videos, may become empowered to investigate, better understand, and better employ their rights and responsibilities when they meet law enforcement. The videos may lead to more deliberative dialogue about what to do in a law enforcement encounter, and significant discussion certainly accompanies these videos online.

At the same time, the stylized realism of the slickly produced advocacy videos may mislead youth into thinking that encounters with law enforcement are casual or low-stakes affairs. In the videos drivers, sometimes affect cool nonchalance toward authority figures, and at others assume a stance of thinly-veiled scorn, without consequence. While such posturing may be appealing and empowering to youth, imitation could lead to unnecessary confrontation with law enforcement.

The calls for resistance in the videos, without mention of the potential consequences (arrest, bail, attorney’s fees, etc.), may at times serve young or vulnerable marginalized people poorly by leaving them with a mistaken impression about the stakes of such encounters. Popular videos do not explore what the viewer should do when a law enforcement officer rightly or wrongly answers, “Yes, you are being detained.” And, perhaps crucially, the videos never seem to help the viewer understand the basic legal principles

that underlay the performance. A simple grasp of said principles, or even awareness of where to find more resources, would be of critical importance in the case that a law enforcement officer does answer yes to the question posed. Perhaps a reliable practice space to try out “direct civic action” and think about its consequences would help learners think experientially about their own stances toward law enforcement.

Papers, Please: Fictive Games Models of Immigration and Hardship

An argument emerges that games generally use different modes of representation than the YouTube genre described above, for better or worse. Games are often spaces that feature lessened consequences for failure, which is very different from the typical high-stakes classroom or even high-stakes democratic participation. A commonly described feature of many games, prominently described by the French sociologist Caillois (1961), is that they often feature a separable space from real-world activity with lessened consequences for failure and often display a light-hearted attitude—the latter a departure from stylized realism in other media. While games should not be conceived of as disconnected from everyday life (see DeVane, 2014), their tapered consequences, sometimes called “failure for cheap” or “failure for free,” can support learners’ exploration of and tinkering with concepts and systems.

Even a game set in fictive, unreal circumstances may prompt reflection, inquiry, and discussion. One such game, the award-winning independent, or indie, titled *Papers, Please*, is subtitled a “Dystopian Document Thriller.” Created by a single indie developer, the game puts players in the role of an impoverished immigration inspector at a border checkpoint in a fictitious dystopian country, a portrayal that resonates with the worst depictions of life in the Eastern Bloc. The immigration inspector’s daily responsibility is examining entrants’ documents for errors or deceptions, and the character is paid daily according to the number of migrants “correctly” admitted, turned away, or detained at his checkpoint. Every day the inspector faces more difficult directives from the faceless, opaque regime of Arstozka (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Faceless immigration enforcement in *Papers, Please*.

After the main character of *Papers, Please* is done with his daily shift (six minutes in real time), he returns home to an

impoverished and illness-stricken family, including a wife, son, uncle, and aunt. If the character has not correctly admitted, screened, or detained enough people past his checkpoint, he is faced with the heartbreaking prospect of not being able to feed his family, buy their medicine, or heat their apartment (see Figure 3). Lack of food and heat leaves the family hungry, cold, and prone to illness. If the character falls into debt, he is fired from his position and sent to debtor's prison, and his family is assigned to a rural labor camp.

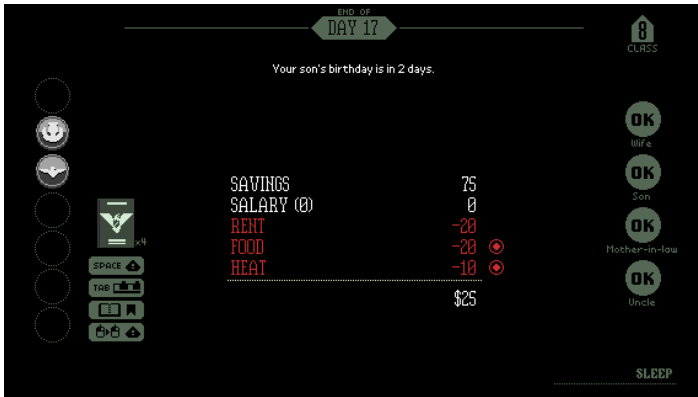


Figure 3. Troubles of the main character's family in *Papers, Please*.

Under scrutiny from the inspector, the potential entrants face even more dismal circumstances. Asylum seekers flee murderous regimes with slightly incorrect paperwork, parents with lost travel permits may be separated from their children, and migrant women beg that alleged sex traffickers tracking them be denied admission despite their proper documentation. Border guards offer kickbacks if the player wrongfully detains immigrants and confiscates their property. If the player's insolvent character makes kind decisions—or mistakes—that differ from the government's ever-changing rules, then his own family may lack food, heat, or medicine and potentially face illness or death.

The game touches upon contemporary issues in its bleak portrayal of a fictive immigration policy. Terrorist attacks at the checkpoint find their way into the game's newspapers and serve as a justification for restrictive migration policies. Body scanners used to search for weapons and contraband intrude upon the privacy of applicants (see Figure 4), and transgender migrants

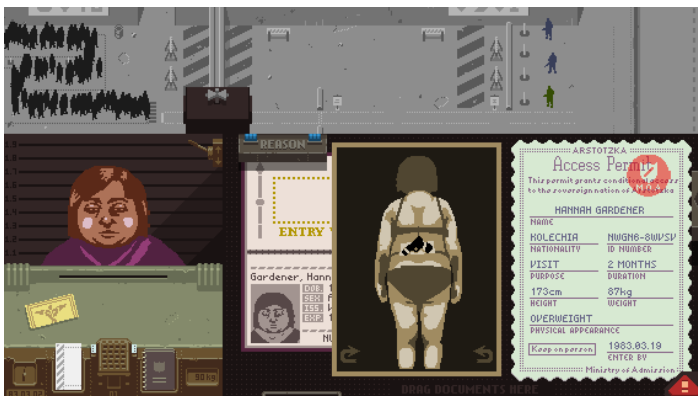


Figure 4. Migrants' bodies are the subject of scrutiny.

risk potential arrest because of discriminatory government policies. Families are separated by seemingly arbitrary rules that change daily and applicants make anguished pleas for lenience. And, of course, the immigration checkpoint is plagued by budget cuts.

The game, like many games, features a “closed” rule system. It offers more positive or negative feedback based upon a player's actions and the game's rules—what one might call “winning” or “losing”—that often runs counter to didactic moral or conceptual themes. Just as Stoddard et al. (2016) critically asserted that the “seemingly arbitrary reward system for ‘winning’ in these games does not seem to be tied to the specific concepts or issues” (p. 7), the autocratic government of *Papers, Please* rewards the player with money for undocumented refugees and murderers alike. But the “concepts or issues” raised by the game are powerful and provocative even though they are not tightly linked to a monetary reward system, and perhaps they may be more profoundly felt because making money in such a way feels very wrong. While Stoddard et al.'s criticism of “obvious right and wrong decisions” (p. 8) is salient, *Papers, Please* presents us with an example of a “closed” decision-reward system that can spark very “open” dialogue about issues.

Games, like works of fiction, can reveal truths about the real world. *Papers, Please* presents an invented model of immigration enforcement in an imagined world, even as it has been described as “a game that leaves a scar, forcing you to confront your own capacity for evil” (Whitehead, 2013, para. 2). However, such a fictive experience can prompt reflection on the real-world topic of immigration enforcement. After all, the game's designer has said that its model of immigration experiences was inspired by his own experiences traversing immigration and customs authorities while living outside his home country. One might understand the game's model in several ways, among them: (a) an allegory for the dangers of draconian and militarized immigration systems in Western nations; (b) a statement about the way that reactive and political policy choices can cause sorrow in the complicated conditions of ordinary people's lives; and/or (c) a plea for empathy for persons in difficult circumstances.

Games, Curriculum, and Inquiry

Integrated in a sophisticated curriculum, *Papers, Please*, could serve to frame inquiry into immigration policy, law enforcement, extremist violence, refugee migration, gender discrimination, or human trafficking, just as a teacher might use *1984* or *Things Fall Apart* to support discussion of social issues or historical events. In the case of *Papers, Please*, as with other fictional media, a robust and well-developed curriculum to ground cooperative interpretation would be critically important for learners' meaning-making. While it is difficult to play the game without sensing that it suggests something troubling is afoot, curricular scaffolds that encourage critical questioning, reflection, and comparison to real-world conditions would be of utmost importance in any teaching with the game (see Squire, Giovanetto, Devane, & Durga, 2005). And game players often bring their own knowledge, experiences, networks, and capacities to the endeavor of reflecting upon and

interpreting a game's meanings (see DeVane & Squire, 2008; DeVane, 2014).

Games, like many films, novels, or textbooks, offer “unrealistic” or incomplete views into the world. Wholly realistic or completist views into our sociohistorical world are, after all, very difficult to produce in any media. Games, like other forms of media, give us a view of the world through a looking glass. The degree to which a looking glass—a particular media artifact like a game—helps us reflect upon and engage the world should serve as the measure by which we assess its value.

Democratic Education and Complex Institutions: A Role for Game-Based Models?

Robust, well-functioning institutions, whether private or public, that both respond to and resist the movements of public sphere are vital for a healthy democratic society. Democratic education must aim to develop a communal capacity to understand, engage with, and potentially transform social institutions like the courts, the media, and law enforcement. The development of communal trust in institutions—through education, transformation, or conservation—is a mutual responsibility of those both within and without said institutions. Functional institutions are important, to borrow Arendt's (1958) words, because they can serve to furnish the spaces in which democratic practices and social freedoms unfold.

Timothy Snyder, a historian of 20th-century Eastern and Central Europe, has argued that one of the primary aims of totalitarian movements is to destroy or delegitimize well-functioning social and state institutions that might serve to oppose the totalitarian regime (2015). In his meticulous histories of Nazi and Soviet atrocities committed in Eastern and Central Europe in the 1930s and 1940s (2012, 2015), he made a compelling case that a deliberative campaign to destabilize of public trust in state and social institutions intensified the horrors that followed. This history reveals that democracy is dependent upon a degree of trust in rule of law and core institutions and that “preserving state institutions is necessary to preserve human lives” (Evstatieva, 2015, para. 18).

In defeated post-1939 Poland, for example, legal institutions that had offered a modicum of protection for ethnic, religious, or political minorities—Jewish people, chief among them—were obliterated with terrifying speed, leaving minority groups defenseless and the whole society on the brink of anarchy, presaging the horrifying genocide to come. The Final Solution was preceded by the destruction of Eastern European state institutions. Disturbing echoes of this approach can be found in present-day parts of Syria and the Ukraine, where the legal system has been extensively compromised and independent media institutions have been targeted for elimination. In other circumstances, totalitarian regimes have undermined institutions by slowly creating public distrust in the institutions or by creating parallel institutions that can supplant a resistant institution (see Snyder, 2015).

Democratic educators now confront as a new global reality of nationalist populism, neo-revanchism, and the potential ruin of important state/social institutions. The further development

of democracy pedagogy not only fosters learner's engagement with Dewey's “organized public,” which has ties “numerous, tough and intangible” (Dewey, & Rogers, 2012, p. 142), but also develops thorough and critical understandings of core state and social institutions. These understandings must be deeply participatory and social, but they must help people grapple with the nuances and complexities of institutions. And often citizens must avoid the temptation to rejecting flawed institutions in sweeping terms. After all, these institutions may serve as one possible guarantor for future democratic change, alongside the organized public.

Games may, as playful tools for thinking, have a modest part to play in this very large task. As Stoddard et al. (2016) suggested, the role of teachers, educators, and curricula will be vital in determining the efficacy of games for democratic education. Games are not “teaching machines,” to use a term first popularized by the famous behaviorist B. F. Skinner, but rather are tools for understanding. It is essential that capable teachers guide inquiry, dialogue, and reflection about a game's cultural models and ideologies, which are always present.

Alongside deliberative dialogue and participatory democratic education, games can help learners begin to playfully grapple with multifaceted, dynamic ideas about society, democracy, and institutions. Games, as a medium, probably would not serve well as citizenship training environments or gamification layers for real-time data simulations. As the corporate sector has found in the past decade in their attempts to “gamify” work and training, games make for very poor camouflage of behavioral or drill-and-skill teaching methods. When the feelings of pleasure, frivolity, and finely structured challenge are drained out of them, games feel worse than textbooks and worksheets.

Instead of seeing features of games—like simplified models of the real-world, fanciful narratives, and rule-based activity systems—as impediments for democratic education, perhaps we should look at them as opportunities for dialogue, critique, and creation. The aforementioned features are all common characteristics of games, and to discard them is to abandon much of what makes a game. But these features do present the opportunity to teach around or against a game, instead of using a game to transmit ideas. Stoddard et al. (2016) rightly pointed out the flawed lack of curriculum blueprints in the iCivics suite, and this failing may seriously hamper busy teachers or fail to provide a foundational support for creative curriculum design.

Stoddard and colleagues (2016) do very well to hit upon this very salient theme: Perhaps the present challenge for gaming and democratic education is in crafting critical pedagogies and curricula that engage learners through inquiry, dialogue, and design (see Gaydos & Squire, 2012). A game can be one focal point among others in a rich, collaborative learning environment for democratic education. Just as media educators built critical curricula around problematic films and delved into media production to teach students and teachers how to make their own media, a new game-based approach could shape pedagogy around designing or adapting games to illustrate powerful ideas.

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