# Civic Creativity: Role-Playing Games in Deliberative Process

ERIC GORDON
Emerson College, USA

JASON HAAS
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

BECKY MICHELSON
Emerson College, USA

This article analyzes the use of a role-playing game in a civic planning process. We focus on the qualities of interactions generated through gameplay, specifically the affordances of voluntary play within a "magic circle" of the game, that directly impact participants' ability to generate new ideas about the community. We present the results of a quasi-experimental study where a role-playing game (RPG) called @Stake is incorporated into participatory budgeting meetings in New York City and compared with meetings that incorporated a trivia game. We provide evidence that the role-playing game, which encourages empathy, is more effective than a game that tests knowledge for generating what we call civic creativity, or an individual's ability to come up with new ideas. Rapid ideation and social learning nurtured by the game point to a kind of group creativity that fosters social connection and understanding of consequence outside of the game. We conclude with thoughts on future research.

*Keywords: deliberation, role-playing games, democracy, civic participation*

There is considerable research on how games can enhance science learning (Li & Tsai, 2013) and health outcomes (Primack et al., 2012). The learning research has demonstrated the capacity of certain game mechanics to generate collaboration, ideation, and transference of complex ideas into practice (Clark, Tanner-Smith, Killingsworth, & Bellamy, 2014). And there is emerging research on games within the urban planning space that extends science learning principles of putting complex ideas into practice (Poplin, 2011), or immersive simulations (Gordon, Schirra, & Hollander, 2011), or "gamifying" systems to motivate participation in process (Thiel, Reisinger, Röderer, & Fröhlich, 2016). But in this study, we look at a different aspect of games in civic life. We seek to understand how a game, through its unique systemic qualities, creates opportunities for social empathy and creative ideation that is central to civic

Eric Gordon: eric@elab.emerson.edu
Jason Haas: jhaas@mit.edu
Becky Michelson: becky@elab.emerson.edu

life. We do this through a quasi-experimental study of a game we designed called @Stake. The game was initially designed in 2013 to facilitate large-group conversations. Although it is currently a digital mobile game,[1] this study examines the use of the earlier card game within a participatory budgeting process in New York City. The game demonstrates the ability to enhance ideation among a group of diverse stakeholders through peer learning and interaction.

## Deliberation and Games

We begin by providing a brief review of the literature on deliberation and its connection to games. Deliberation is defined as a political process through which a group of people carefully examines a problem and arrives at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Gastil & Black, 2008). It is seen as the "gold standard" of democratic process in that it can promote an informed citizenry, through deep engagement with issues, by way of sharing information and weighing alternatives (Fishkin, 1992; Gastil, 2000). There are several tested methods of public deliberation, including open or study circles (Gastil & Levine, 2005), world cafes (Lorenzetti, Azulai, & Walsh, 2016), and collaborative ideation exercises (Schuler, 2010), that have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing trust and connectivity (Cohen, 2003; De Cindio, De Marco, & Ripamonti, 2007; Gastil & Black, 2008; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; van Gelder, 2012). Deliberation can also serve a legitimating function once policy is implemented because the ability to demonstrate the consideration of alternative views and rationales helps to justify a decision among those opposing it (Manin, 1987). However, effective deliberation is difficult to achieve without significant scaffolding.

Deliberation research has focused primarily on identifying the characteristics that constitute deliberative discussions, noting metrics such as argument quality (Min, 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2006), opinion diversity (Albrecht, 2006; Min, 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2007), representativeness (Albrecht, 2006), reflexivity (Dahlberg, 2001), knowledge gains (Min, 2007), and civility (Benson, 1996; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Papacharissi, 2004). Gastil breaks these up into two parallel processes: the analytic process, or the substance of the exchange as it pertains to the issue, and the social process, or norms of conversation as they are reflected in the group interaction and group dynamic (Gastil, 2008). The analytic process begins with the creation of a solid information base intended to ensure that participants understand the nature of the problem at hand. Participants prioritize key values and then identify a broad range of solutions and weigh their pros, cons, and trade-offs (Gastil & Black, 2008). When deliberation takes place within a decision-making body, the final component is the group's decision. An effective deliberative discussion, Gastil (2008) argues, should yield the best decision possible under the given circumstances. The social process is composed of all the norms of communication underlying the conversation, including turn taking and perspective taking. Often, the social process is structured through formal rules and restrictions on the deliberative environment (i.e., sit in a circle, talk about this issue, report back). In short, many deliberative processes are a kind of game, complete with rules and goals, and even unexpected outcomes. But too often they exclude the qualities of play that games can facilitate, namely the "for-its-own-sakeness" that defines the experience of a player.

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[1] The card game can be downloaded from https://elab.emerson.edu/projects/atstake and the digital game can be found at http://atstakegame.org

Game scholars Salen and Zimmerman (2003) define a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (p. 80). The rule-centric structure of most games provides opportunities for players to be immersed in analytic decision-making. But rules within games are different than rules in other systems because games have rules and goals and take place for their own sake, set aside from everyday life, in what is often called a "magic circle" (Huizinga, 1950). As a result, game players tend to be more cognizant of the social processes in which they interact. Importantly, the quality of playing in this social process, with a certain amount of freedom to explore, is where fun emerges. Fun has been defined as the experience of trying to learn and master something new (Koster, 2004); it comes from uncertainty (Kocurek, 2014), not just in the interpretable outcome but in how the player(s) may arrive at that outcome.

Just as in deliberative groups, fairness and awareness of others is particularly important in most games. Game players typically start on equal footing, and if they do not, the game system tries to correct for it. Consider handicaps in golf. The resulting procedural fairness (Schminke, Ambrose, & Cropanzano, 2000) is integral to the smooth functioning of the game. The magic circle of games frequently depends on continual fair play and sensitivity to the feelings and state of mind of others, unless, of course, it is disrupted by a "spoil sport" or a "cheat" (Dibbell, 1998; Huizinga, 1950). Games are systems that a player enters voluntarily, wherein the goals of the game are distinct from the social goals of the world outside. Although there may be blurring in the implications of outcomes (gambling on sporting events) or the location of game boards (augmented reality games like Pokémon Go!; Duggan, 2017), play must remain for its own sake for the player to play. As such, when considering how games interact with civic process, the primary consideration is how systems collide. It is not a matter of turning planning, for example, into a game. It is a matter of overlaying a game on top of a planning system so that one can inform the other (Flanagan & Lotko, 2009).

While learning games are often characterized as situated, cultural, problem-based activities in which players have legitimate, authentic experiences to practice skills, negotiate knowledge, and experience domain-specific ideas, challenges, and norms (Williamson, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005), for our purposes, it is worth addressing a distinction made, between psychological perspectives of learning and anthropological perspectives of learning, between practice fields and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Barab and Duffy (1998), following Senge (1994), describe practice fields as

> contexts in which learners . . . can practice the kinds of activities they will encounter outside of schools . . . . Every attempt is made to situate these authentic activities within environmental circumstances and surroundings that are present while engaged in these activities outside of schools. (Barab & Duffy, 1998, p. 30)

Meanwhile, Lave and Wegner (1991) describe communities of practice as "a collection of individuals sharing mutually defined practices, beliefs, and understandings over an extended time frame in the pursuit of a shared enterprise" (pp. 99–100). Although many learning scientists claim that learning is best when situated in a social and experiential context (Durning & Artino, 2011; Sawyer & Greeno, 2009), they do not often make the distinction between simulated and real-world stakes. When games are applied to civic contexts, they necessarily carry with them the tension between simulating practice (practice fields)

and situated practice (communities of practice). In other words, the game is often inserted into a community of practice, wherein there are prescribed norms and behaviors that the game is actively resisting or reinforcing.

Practice fields have designed features: learners engaged in domain-related practices; learners owning their own learning; mentors or facilitators providing coaching and modeling of thinking skills, providing opportunities for reflection, and taking place in a learning context that is motivating. Conversely, as Barab and Duffy (1998) say, communities of practice have observable requisite features: a common cultural and historical heritage, learners are becoming a part of something larger and reproducible, meaning that "developing an identity as a member of a community and becoming able to engage in the practices of the community, including the negotiation of meanings, are one and the same" (p. 36). This distinction matters because practice fields could be seen as a way to prepare learners for something that they may encounter in the future, whereas a community of practice provides a context for learning that is always necessarily situated. Barab and Duffy advocate for shifting education from learning even in well-designed practice fields to learning through direct induction of learners into society. So although games exist as practice fields, there is real power when practice fields are placed inside and in tension with communities of practice.

The concept of playing a game to cultivate or enable civic life implies a collision between practice fields and communities of practice. When appropriately scaffolded in a social process, games can push players to move, sometimes uncomfortably, into unfamiliar territory (Bruner, 1978). This can happen inside the game, or, what is special interest to us, it can happen outside the game (or, as Suits, 1978, calls it, in an "extralusory" context). For example, when the game Macon Money (Taylor & Whatley, 2012) was played in Macon, Georgia, to motivate use of an alternative local currency, the practice field pushed up against existing communities of practice to compel those within it to rethink norms and boundaries.

But how does this happen? Players can enter into a community of practice by moving through what Vygotsky (1978) refers to as the zone of proximal development. This is the space between what a learner can already do and what she cannot do. A well-designed game provides a safe, and clear structure to achieve the possible.

Lerner (2014), in his discussion of civic games, makes an important point about the kind of learning that takes place in civic process. It is not simply a matter of learning content but rather of learning and participating in a process. A game about politics, Lerner says, is "designed to educate, motivate, or raise awareness" (p. 35), and he points to historical examples, such as Prussian Kriegsspiel (a military simulation game) and the New Games movement of the 1960s in the U.S., as well as contemporary video games such as Ayiti: Cost of Life (a game on poverty in contemporary Haiti), PeaceMaker (a video game on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict), and A Force More Powerful (a game on nonviolent strategies), often associated with the concept of Serious Games and the Games For Change organization and conference. And although Lerner (2014) describes these games as having positive impacts on interest and engagement in politics, he describes the limitations of these types of games: "The tenuous connection to politics and community groups is perhaps the greatest limitation of social issue games . . . . Most of the games are isolated projects, not embedded in longer term campaigns or political

processes" (p. 37). The biggest challenge for "civic games" is to find meaningful, extended connections to the kinds of learning that takes place within communities of practice. Scholars are beginning to seek evidence for games to build trust (Gordon & Baldwin-Philippi, 2014), community connection (Ruiz, Stokes, & Watson, 2013), and empathy (Gordon & Schirra, 2011; Raphael, Bachen, & Hernandez-Ramos, 2012), but the empirical evidence is still light.

Lerner (2014) discusses the hope of games as political action, describing movements that "integrate games directly into political campaigns, meetings, actions and discussion . . . not only affect[ing] political decision-making but often becom[ing] decision-making processes in their own right" (p. 43). He cites the, "puzzles, role-playing games, and physical and mental challenges . . .such as assassin, charades and model jury" (p. 43) that Freirean popular educators use to help participants "understand their world and in the process change it" (p. 37). They do this by both "explor[ing] complex issues and devis[ing] strategies for addressing them" (p. 43). Lerner also describes the forum theater and legislative theater of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, in which actors would perform plays about oppression, and then spectators would, through game mechanics, be asked to struggle against the oppression in the play and invent solutions that would improve the world or even write legislation. Finally, Lerner (2014) points to participatory budgeting (PB) as an endeavor that uses game-like environments as part of the political process. Participatory budgeting works by taking an existing participatory process (budget consultations) and making it more like a game:

> The city adds transparent rules (which structure deliberation, decision-making, and allocation), artificial conflicts (new competition between neighborhoods and districts), and measurable outcomes (specific amounts of budget money and concrete public works). In the end, a typically inaccessible and technocratic process becomes more participatory and democratic. (p. 45)

Lerner (2014) here makes the connection between game mechanics and the PB process itself, suggesting that the rules and structure of PB are similar to that of a game. But the question remains: Can a game effectively move beyond a simulation, or a game "about politics" to become a system that enables meaningful public deliberation? To answer this question, we need to understand that group learning outcomes in public deliberation are emergent, not prescribed, and that the scaffolding of the deliberative process, through a game, must support that emergence.

Keith Sawyer (2014) introduces the concept of group creativity in his research on jazz and theater improvisation. He develops a theory of symbolic interaction in which group members in these settings both accept and elaborate on the ideas of one another. He synthesizes research across many disciplines to define three themes for group creativity: improvisation, emergence, and interaction. Improvisation is any aspect of a group process not scripted in advance. Emergence is the idea that the outcomes of any creative group cannot be entirely predicted. And interaction is "the processual essence of collaborative emergence" (Sawyer, 2014, p. 137). In other words, it is the basic interactions between individuals in a group as they work together toward specified goals but unspecified ends.

Deliberative groups, we argue, are creative entities, engaged in a process not dissimilar from that of a jazz combo trading improvisations, searching for a truly cosmic moment. Deliberators are working together in a creative process while being very much aware of what is at stake beyond the practice field. Indeed, 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. This, we argue, is the condition of playing a game within a deliberative process, whereby the conditions of deliberation are such that participants can invent and explore within a safely bounded structure, such that the outcomes of that invention and exploration can be impactful on a civic or community process. It is within this context that we present an empirical study of a role-playing game within PB and ask whether or not it creates greater opportunity for civic creativity.

**Method**

This study was conducted within the PB process in New York City. Participatory budgeting is a public process whereby a designated portion of a budget is given over to public decision-making. Participatory budgeting was first developed in Brazil in 1989, and there are now more than 1,500 participatory budgets around the world. Most PB processes exist on the city level and are focused on the allocation of some portion of a municipal budget. However, PB has been used for counties, states, housing authorities, schools and school systems, universities, coalitions, and other public agencies.

Though each experience is slightly different, most PB processes follow a similar basic structure: residents brainstorm spending ideas, volunteer budget delegates develop proposals based on these ideas, residents vote on proposals, and the government implements the top projects. For example, if community members identify recreation spaces as a priority, their delegates might develop a proposal for basketball court renovations. The residents would then vote on this and other proposals, and if they approve the basketball court, then the city pays to renovate it.

Many PB processes include icebreaker games during the first delegate meeting as a mechanism for connecting people and building community. We partnered with the Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), a New York–based nonprofit led by Josh Lerner, to test the use of a card game we designed called @Stake. The game plays out in three rounds, each of which is framed around a question that affects the community of players. For example, a question used in the PB process was, "How can we make our neighborhood more youth friendly?" The game starts with the group deciding who will be the first round's "decider." Then, the table is set up. Three tokens are put in the "pot," and each player is given three tokens to start, except for the round's decider, who is given five tokens (the decider is unable to win the first round). All other players are given a character card, which includes a short bio, and two secret agenda items (characters include a mayor, youth activist, business owner, college student, etc.). Players have 60 seconds to pitch an idea from their character's perspective and an additional 90 seconds as a group to ask questions of other players and respond to the decider's questions. Players try to get the decider to pick their idea over their competitors', and each player tries to get their secret agenda included in the winning idea. The player with the winning idea gets the pot, and bonus points are handed out to those whose secret agenda items are included in the winning idea. This repeats for two more rounds. The player with the most amount of tokens at the end of Round 3 is the winner.

Our study took place between November 2014 and March 2015. The study population included participants in six budget delegate meetings, each in a different district in New York City: three meetings played @Stake (treatment group), and three meetings played a trivia game as an icebreaker (comparison group). The How Well Do You Know Your District? trivia game asks players, in large groups, to produce answers to questions in two different categories—people and places. Groups fill out answer sheets for questions on the population and demography of their district as well as boundaries and civic amenities in their district such as parks, schools, and subway stops. Each delegate meeting had an average of 40 people in attendance. The districts were selected for their socioeconomic diversity, with both the treatment and comparison groups composed of one affluent (and mostly Caucasian) district, one middle-income and racially and ethnically diverse district, and one low-income and mostly minority district. Importantly, for the vast majority of participants across both study groups, this was their first time engaging with the PB process.

All participants were surveyed after the delegate meeting. Paper surveys were left on tables, and participants were asked to complete the survey before leaving. The survey questions focused on attitudes about the democratic process and existing and anticipated civic behaviors, and the answers were reported based on a 5-point Likert scale. For example, respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "I learned something new from facilitators," and "I learned something new from other players." These were meant to capture openness to learning, exploration, and creativity. Statements such as "I feel that everyone was heard" were meant to capture issues of trust and procedural fairness. To measure perceived efficacy, we asked participants to rank perceptions of the participatory budgeting process and assess their satisfaction and whether the workshop impacted their decision-making. Those in the game group were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up phone interview. Thirty-two participants expressed interest, and seven interviews were completed. Additionally, structured observation of gameplay recorded players' affinity toward the game process, player behavior, game strategy, partnership, and trust building between teams of players.

The data from the surveys were analyzed using STATA 13 principally investigating pairwise correlation coefficients. We also examined basic descriptive statistics to ensure comparability between samples. In the following analysis, education and income are estimated based on survey data solicited in ranges.

Seven semistructured interviews were conducted with players over the phone between March and April 2015. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and entered in Dedoose (Sociocultural Research Consultants, n.d.), a qualitative analysis software system. The interviews were coded using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where codes were inductively sourced by the research team through the process of reading and comparing theme identification. The coded interviews (see the Appendix for the codebook) informed the thick description presented in the Discussion section.

**Results**

The results of our survey were largely inconclusive. We were unable to identify any particular impact of the @Stake game on learning outcomes or perceived efficacy. However, there was one significant correlation that was quite generative and helped to guide our analysis of the qualitative data (in

the Discussion section), including interviews and observations. Those in the treatment group were more likely to have indicated that they developed a new idea for their community that evening if they also learned from a peer, $r(65) = .57$, $p < .05$, than those in the comparison group, $r(51) = .09$, $p < .05$.

The correlation in the treatment group between new ideas and learning from peers is compelling. It would seem to suggest that new ideas for those who played @Stake had something to do with the experience of being open to learning from a peer. That this was not the case in the comparison group suggests that the specific context of the role-playing game created the conditions for the correlation of peer learning and individual creativity. In the Discussion section, we analyze the game observation and interview data to provide texture to this finding and search for additional evidence of possible explanations.

## Discussion

The IRE method of student engagement identified by Mehan (1978, 1979), in which a teacher Initiates an exchange by asking a question, the student Replies, and then waits for the teacher to Evaluate the reply, is a cultural tool and still the dominant interaction style in many classrooms. The trivia game obeys this structure: participants are asked a question, they answer it, and await evaluation by the PB project staff. This sort of methodology sees communication in these settings as ritualized and as an act of transmission. This state of affairs was called "the banking method of education." As Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (2000) writes,

> Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. . . . In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. . . . The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. (p. 58)

The game @Stake does not subscribe to the banking model. As specific content emerges out of role-play, evaluation does not come from a single keeper of knowledge but comes from the group and is based on what emerges from group interaction. There is evidence that @Stake generated more "new ideas" from participants than the trivia game. The generation of new ideas resonates with literature on creativity. As such, there is evidence that this particular role-playing game contributed to an increase in group creativity. Resonate with Sawyer's concept, in @Stake the qualities of improvisation (unscripted), emergence (outcomes arise through role play), and interaction (outcomes are contingent on the dynamics of the group) motivated the perception of having had a new idea.

The game @Stake scaffolded the group process in such a way that helped to foster idea generation among the group. What we need to understand, that the survey data do not tell us, is precisely how this particular game created those conditions and in what ways they are supported and sustained by the uniqueness of the civic context. Is this group creativity produced through the tensions described

between the safety of the magic circle (practice field) and the real-world consequence of civic process (community of practice)? The design of our research can shed light on this question, specifically because we are not comparing a game to no game, we are comparing a role-playing game to a trivia game.

The game @Stake is a role-playing game. With an eye toward democratic processes, Lerner (2014) writes that "roleplaying games in particular create compelling characters that let players experience and interact with different identities and points of view. Strong and vivid characters help players empathize with the game situation and live vicariously through it" (p. 78). When thinking about the benefits of role-playing/identity work of gaming for learning, James Paul Gee (2000) speaks of a "psychosocial moratorium," in which, "learners can take risks in a space where real-world consequences are lowered" (p. 67). He says that "learning involves taking on and playing with identities in a way that the learner has real choices . . . and ample opportunity to meditate on the relationship between new identities and old ones" (Gee, 2014, p. 208). While these theorists are referring primarily to video games, we believe that the role-playing aspects of @Stake allow players to encounter their fellow players in a way that allows them some breathing room. They can take risks and relax even as they prepare to participate in the "more serious" and possibly anxiety-inducing space of deliberating about public money.

By contrast, the trivia game locates players squarely in their communities and asks them whether they know things about their communities. Many of the participating communities may become shy because they are unaware of facts on which they are being quizzed, or they may experience stereotype threat (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Walton & Cohen, 2003), underperforming because they are made aware of how "people like them" are perceived in the dominant culture. The organizers of any event are almost certainly not interested in challenging power dynamics in the deliberative process, as it potentially threatens the smoothness of the meeting. However, it is imperative that games inserted into public process directly address these issues, lest they appear to placate publics through a veneer of fun. One reason that @Stake was productive in generating creative ideation is that it used play to draw attention to the process as opposed to using play as an icebreaker or prelude to a process.

Both games, by virtue of them being games, have some guarantees of fairness (Heuer, Penrod, & Kattan, 2007). But in games, beyond the system's considerations, one demands participants be their own watchdogs and enforcers. The staff from the Participatory Budgeting Project did not check in advance if players of the trivia game were more or less likely to answer trivia questions, nor did they attempt to evenly distribute people with skills relevant to @Stake before play, but, as with most games, it is likely that people play in a good-natured way. This is almost certainly true with a civic-minded group like the budget delegates.

Players in @Stake have one principle resource to manage, which, as described above, allows them to trigger a win condition and allows them to gain additional opportunities to speak. Lerner (2014) writes of resources as game-design mechanics: "Because resources are scarce [by design], players must manage them efficiently to achieve goals. If players can accrue things, and later use them, they have more incentive to keep coming back to the game" (p. 75). In @Stake, we were not interested in players coming back to the game so much as staying focused throughout, but the same principle applies. By creating easily measurable indicators of performance and decision-making, we are removing ambiguity

and allowing for clearer decision-making. As media theorist McKenzie Wark (2007) writes about games, "To target is to blaze across the agonizing gap between self and world, between cognition and its object . . . . To target is to discriminate and rank possibilities within an event" (p. 131). Being able to make interesting decisions leads to compelling gameplay. Discussing uncertainty and roleplaying games, Salen and Zimmerman (2003) argue that

> each of these choices involves not just dramatic narrative outcomes, but different uses of the roleplayers' limited resources. As players make a choice and its outcomes slowly unfold, new choices present themselves, each emerging option cloaked in its own narrative uncertainty. (p. 389)

And this uncertainty contributes to a sense of fun or engagement in discovering outcomes (Costikyan, 2015).

This engagement with limited resources is useful both because it keeps players focused and listening to one another and it allows them to practice the work that they will be doing throughout the PB process. The game tokens are stand-ins for the social capital that their character and project have accrued, and, on another level, the capital they are building within their group. This is not necessarily positive social capital, but within limits this gives budgeters opportunities to make their faux pas in this early practice space within the participatory budgeting process—a safe space, as in Gee's psychosocial moratorium.

An @Stake player shared how the game facilitated a useful practice space in preparation for the PB process:

> I thought it was a good preparation for making a case for a project. This is what we ended up doing at the budget delegate meetings: we did a lot of research, talked about the project and described it, made a case for it. It was good preparation. I think people represented different interests. Where people were coming from was interesting, and it helped us understand people's interests. (Personal communication, February 4, 2015)

In addition to enhanced understanding of other people, the game seemed to generate an enhanced understanding of the process itself. Several players spoke about the game as a useful simulation for the budget delegate process. According to one: "I learned more about the people and the community, and I learned more about the participatory budgeting process, how it works in my district, and how it works at all" (personal communication, March 23, 2015). The game clearly served the purpose of a practice field, simulating the actual process with diminished stakes. But in simulating deliberation with the actual people with whom one is soon to deliberate, it seemed to have taken on a more significant role beyond just practice. Relations actually formed, and ideas were actually generated.

This is an offering for process design, particularly for processes with democratic/civic dimensions. A different player, reflecting on empathy and ideation, had this to say:

Because it made me think, okay, how am I going to respond to this in a real-life situation? To me that seems like that's the whole point is you're going to have all kinds of different members of a community in the end, rather than being there advocating for your own thing, use your moment to not only listen to someone else, but to understand from what perspective they come. And then being able to shut up and listen and put yourself in their shoes, and think about what they are advocating for, what their whole life might be like, what their professional life might be like, why they are here advocating this. I think a legitimately done, polished response, is the most valuable aspect of that game. (Personal communication, March 2, 2015)

The empathy generated through @Stake was productive for creating new ideas. We contend that the playful creation of empathy functioned similarly to what Sawyer refers to as a "readymade." For Sawyer (2014), readymades are, "short precomposed motifs or clichés" (p. 102) that performers use to facilitate the performance of something new and spontaneous. "Some of the most famous jazz improvisers relied on a large repertoire of stock phrases" (p. 114). According to Bastien and Hosteger, conventions "capitalize on the formal structure of the music to integrate the individual creativity of musicians into seamless, unitary, coordinated behavior" (as cited in Sawyer, 2014, p. 51). Deliberation may be more complex a system than musical expression, but game playing, through the creation of the shared attention of the magic circle, seems to somewhat unify and coordinate this creative activity (if not seamlessly). Game players were more likely to generate new ideas in @Stake because the understanding of other people served as a kind of readymade for riffing and exploration. When people are asked to move immediately into deliberation with real stakes, even when the process is heavily structured, lacking the empathetic common starting point, hinders one's ability to generate new ideas.

### Limitations

Although we are quite encouraged by the implications of this research for incorporating game-based empathy into civic process, there are limitations to our findings. The community may have consisted of people ready to deliberate as the PB process tends to attract already civically engaged participants. It would be useful to study role-playing games in more "routine" or "mundane" civic processes.

Another concern may be the use of a game that has a competitive aspect. Freire (2000), in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, warns that "the first characteristic of antidialogical action is the necessity for conquest. The antidialogical individual, in his relations with others, aims at conquering them increasingly, and by every means" (p. 138). We heard from several players that they were turned off by the competition, where the decider has to pick only one proposal and the players are hiding their secret agendas. The design decision to build a competitive game came from prioritizing ideation, the process of individuals pitching an idea in 60 seconds, and the desired narrative tension we wanted to build, required this kind of design. And competition, properly contextualized, can be quite productive. Learning theorist David Perkins has recently written that "in carefully chosen circumstances, certain kinds of mild competition can help to foster learning" (Perkins, 2009, p. 19). We continue to believe that competition is important for

the particular design of @Stake but understand that the impact of empathy on creativity did not need competition. Future research should look specifically at the role of competition in these kinds of games.

Additionally, another limitation of introducing any game into a process is how people interpret the very idea of a game. There were people we witnessed who were unwilling to participate in the process. One group had organized before the meeting and, we were told, planned to force through a capital project that was important to their group. When informed that they would be playing a game to encourage the dialogic process and facilitate interaction, this group left the meeting. In another instance, a representative from a district was actively rude to the game facilitator, believing that playing a game was a waste of time, and that the use of the game was a means of distracting the gathered citizens from their important work.

How might we interpret these events? The perception of the game itself is always a challenge in "applied games," as they may appear to be a deliberate distraction, or simply come across as frivolous (Gordon & Schirra, 2011). Johan Huizinga (1950) coined the term *spoilsport* to mean someone who, for whatever reason, refuses to play the game:

> The spoilsport shatters the playworld itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the playworld in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion—a pregnant word which means literally "in-play." (p. 11)

Consider children playing tag on a playground. When one child says, "I don't want to play that game," the voluntary play world is disrupted until willing players reconvene around an accepted play world. In civic settings, when people are gathered to do "serious" work, it is quite possible, if not probable, that the very idea of playing a game seems itself to be disruptive. The spoilsport, in this case, is simply trying to preserve the social context that they intended to operate within. As games ask players to voluntarily enter into a magic circle, where they must abide by a separate set of rules, they require a leap of faith and some generalized trust in the game designers. Although most people were rather willing players in the game, that some were not reinforces how important it is to garner trust in the game designers. In future research, it would be important to provide a written explanation of the game and its purpose to all participants before playing.

### Conclusion

In *Infotopia*, Cass Sunstein (2006) argues that deliberation is best at "eurekatype problems, where the answer, once announced, appears correct to all," and that it is a superior way to "elicit information, promote creativity, [and] improve decisions." In his view, "mistakes often come from informational and reputational pressure . . . [deliberating groups] should attempt to create their own incentives for disclosure" (pp. 200–201). Our research demonstrates some compelling evidence that role-playing games can enhance creativity in deliberation, specifically as empathetic identification with others functions as a readymade in group creative process and consequently can increase the likelihood of eureka moments. There is also evidence that role-playing games may be particularly effective in eliminating informational and reputational pressure to keep information hidden. Even though the @Stake

game asks players to hide their secret agendas, it seems to produce in people the desire to share more. And the very act of safely practicing deliberative process offers those who may feel shy or nervous in such settings a psychosocial moratorium to practice to learn about deliberation.

The current study represents a compelling bit of empirical evidence of effective use of games in deliberative processes. Future research should focus on the longitudinal impacts of civic game play. Is there evidence that role-playing games have an impact beyond the event itself? When a process is started by establishing the conditions of group creativity, do the affective qualities of the game persist over time? Is there less conflict, greater understanding, or better decisions when role-playing games are played throughout a process? And what are the best conditions for introducing gameplay into a civic process to minimize feelings of distrust? As this study suggests, games should not be seen as mere distractions or insertions of fun into a boring process. In the civic context, they are synthetic conditions of social interaction that allow people to step outside of everyday life to practice the skills and behaviors that have direct and immediate implications to that life outside. Role-playing games, in particular, seem to have a distinct impact on group creativity, which has implications for how they can be incorporated into civic processes. Understanding the limitations of game methods, civic designers and practitioners should consider role-playing games as essential components in getting people to work together and generate new, unexpected ideas about problems in their communities.

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**Appendix**

**Codebook**

1. Self-perception of engagement
   i.   Not engaged
   ii.  Engaged
   iii. Very engaged

2. Perception of others
   i.  Assuming others' perspectives
   ii. Perception changed

3. Learning
   i.  From other players
   ii. From game

4.  Deliberation
    i.    Uncomfortable
    ii.   Comfortable
    iii.  Very comfortable

5.  Listening

6.  Enjoyment of game
    i.    Meeting/getting to know others
    ii.   Role-playing
    iii.  Competing
    iv.   Winning

7.  Investment in civic issues
    i.    Not invested
    ii.   Interested/potentially invested
    iii.  Very invested

8.  PB process
    i.    Positive experience
    ii.   Confusing, room for improvement

9.  Quotable