

Expressions Presents: Gamifying Democracy: Board Games and the 2024 Presidential Election

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By Joshua Chand, '24 English

This article was originally published by the [College of Humanities and the Arts](#) in the spring 2024 edition of [Expressions](#), a newsletter created by students in HA-187: Creative Team Practicum. The internship course gives students the opportunity to gain professional experience in writing, graphic design, photography, and video production.

Voters were lined up in a row like game pieces in the well-lit room. They were separated by a few feet of space. It was a warm afternoon at the Provident Credit Union Event Center. Each student looked down at their ballots and rolled the dice. Some had their foreheads furrowed as they read. The sound of light scribbling was the only noise. With every bubble filled in, a choice was made. A heavy sigh escaped someone's mouth. This day was March 5—the final day to cast a vote for the United States Presidential Primary Election.

From March 2 to March 5, San José State held an on-campus vote center at the Provident Credit Union Event Center. Students who visited could vote for several candidates. By the end of March 5, it was clear who won the primary: the two front runners would be Democratic incumbent Joe Biden and former Republican president Donald Trump. The next election was going to be a rematch from the previous one. So, when the voting booths begin opening in November, most voters will decide between these two candidates on the ballot. Some people will vote and others will not. Whatever voters choose to do, it is all a choice; they all still play the same game.

Against this political backdrop, Experimental Democracies, an event spearheaded by SJSU lecturers Steve Durie and James Morgan alongside experimental philosopher Jonathan Keats, delves into gamifying democracy. Durie, Morgan and Keats want to help attendees analyze and question their political choices.

The importance of choice, emphasizes Keats, is paramount for Experimental Democracies. "If we don't care about the decisions that we have been empowered to make," Keats states, "then we will make poor decisions." Subsequently, Keats hypothesizes that said poor decisions will impact generations further down the line, making the examination of our choices seem all the more important.

Durie, Morgan and Keats point to board games as a fun and informative way to reveal the underlying mechanisms behind voter choice. Instead of playing Monopoly, Battleship and Connect Four, attendees will play a handful of student-created board games curated by Morgan and his students.

Lecturer in the art and design department and frequent collaborator with Keats, Durie explains that board games have a universality to them. They are a "language that people understand," says Durie. Due to this quality, board games can educate on the decision-making process, especially in critical moments like voting in a presidential primary election. Most people have played a board game at least once. With this in mind, Durie highlights the ability of board games to communicate and act as the bridge for larger political discussion. Players will peel back the layers of their decision-making process with each turn, hiding behind every roll of the dice, every space moved, and every card. With each choice they make, more is revealed about themselves.

Morgan, who teaches courses on games, expands more on this idea. Players are provided the opportunity to look back on how they played, notes Morgan. Some might ask, "What kind of skills do I have?" and "How did I impact the outcome?" Whether they win or lose, players are afforded time to recall their decisions. With this time, players may consider the results of their game. Different players will choose different outcomes. For this reason, board games lend themselves as pathways for political discussion. By transforming board games in this manner, Durie, Morgan and Keats establish a relationship between players, board games and politics. Now, politics and voter choice can be studied in a familiar environment.

According to Morgan, board games and politics are not unrelated. In fact, the way governments operate, in general, is akin to a game he says. Governments operate like a "zero-sum game," states Morgan. Morgan further explains that a zero-sum game describes a situation where a limited amount of resources are present. As a result, resources are only allocated and transferred between players. Zero-sum games draw a parallel to governments more broadly since revenue from taxes acts as the limited resources in this game. In Monopoly, for example, the in-game currency and property are also considered a limited resource being transferred between players, creating a zero-sum game. Furthermore, the connection continues: government allocation of resources for public services like education and roads mimics zero-sum games like Monopoly. As described by Morgan, board games offer a chance to deconstruct and reflect real-life processes in another environment. Thus, board games can teach about political choices.

Besides their political relatability, Morgan also argues that the level of interaction with board games facilitates political discussion. Agency is key. Players can mold their experience and choose the way they play; they weave themselves into the game. It is up to them to discover what outcome they produce. Their actions over the course of the game will determine the outcome. "We enter into these games and have agency," says Morgan. "We are making decisions that affect the flow of the game."

Agency, or choice, differentiates games from other modes of entertainment. Morgan says people don't think the same way about games as they do about books and movies. Morgan knows that players will ponder their effects on the outcome of a game. Books and movies, unlike games, have no sense of agency according to Morgan. There are no choices for players to be made or outcomes to be changed in a book or movie. "You're just following along with books and movies," states Morgan. "Your choices don't have a direct impact on the outcome." Agency in games, Morgan stresses, marks the key difference between these mediums. Games are different as they not only can be interacted with but also can serve as a mirror for mental processes for making choices. Outcomes can be traced back to the decisions players make.

This cause-and-effect chain, where players trace back their decisions, provides an opportunity for reflection. Take the following for example: a person is playing a board game. After they roll the dice, they come to a fork on the game board: There are three game tiles on the left and three on the right. They have something to consider here. Their choice will affect whether they win or lose. What's key isn't what they choose; it's the ability to choose. Being able to change the outcome makes games special, according to Morgan. The outcome also reflects a player's good or bad choices. "If you've made smart choices, and maybe you had a little bit of luck, you find yourself winning," Morgan asserts.

Playing board games, then, not only serves as a teaching moment but also as a chance for fun. Without fun, the message may fail to be received. Keats, who collaborates with SJSU faculty members and the [CADRE Center for New Media](#) on [The Future Democracies Laboratory](#), remarks that fun is one of the keys to delivering political messages through board games. They offer a fun avenue to explore and examine voter choice. Board games act as both entertainment and education. So, by focusing on fun, people are attracted to and engaged with this medium and it communicates a clearer message. "Polemical" games can be "antithetical" to the ideas embedded hidden within them, Keats proposes. Players won't successfully understand the political message if they aren't engaged in the first place. Fun is required to deliver a message through board games.

Soon, November will be upon America. The leaves will change from their green hue to a muted red, gold or brown. As the wind blows, the leaves will fall, crunching under the feet of voters as they walk to their nearest voting station. Mailboxes will be filled with early voting ballots. Voting stations will be staffed and prepared, and dividers propped up. Once again, a few feet of space will separate each station. While it may not be at the Provident Credit Union Event Center, when this event's participants arrive at the polls, each will be armed with the foresight and analytical skills needed to participate in the upcoming presidential election. Ballots become game boards as pens act as game pieces. The invisible die will spin and, once again, the game will be played.

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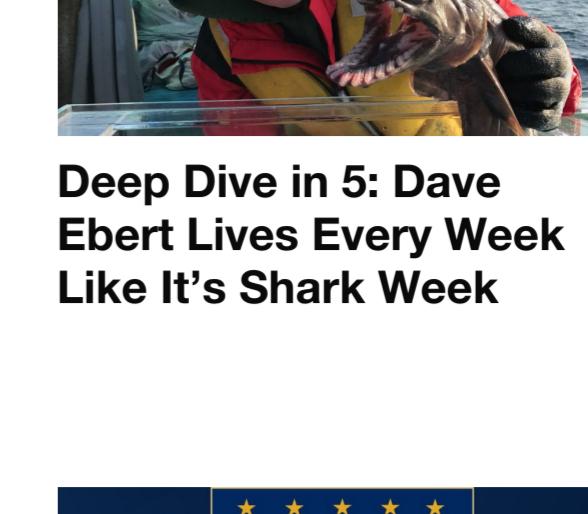
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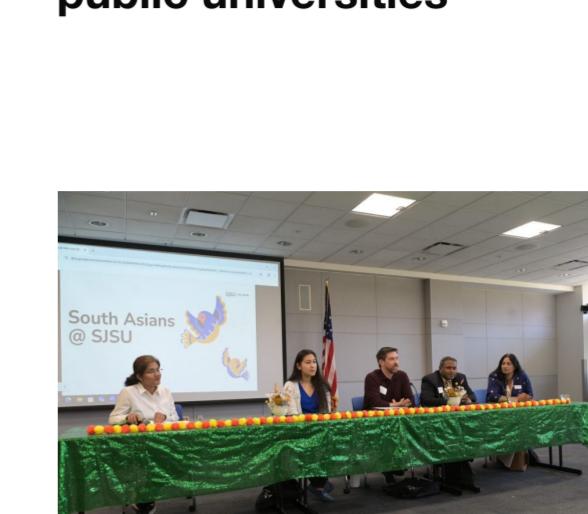
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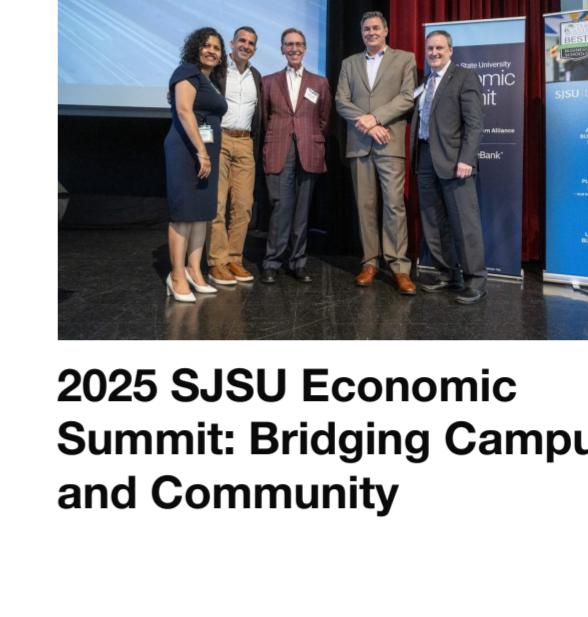
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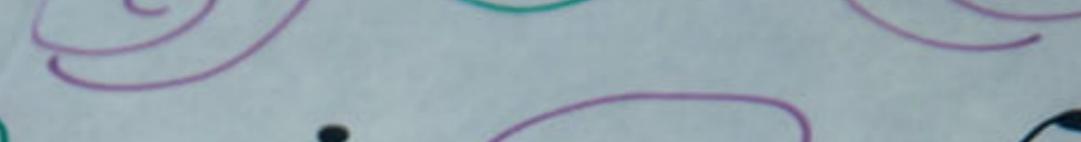
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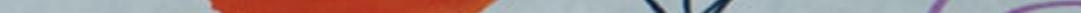
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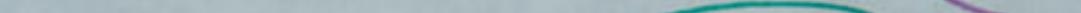
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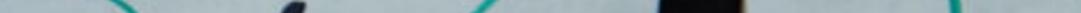
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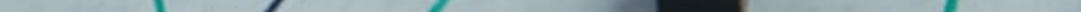
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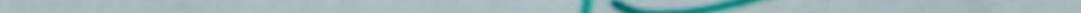
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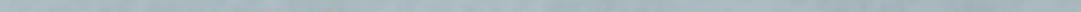
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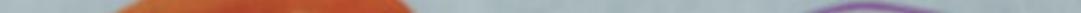
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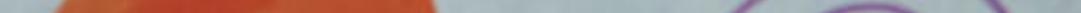
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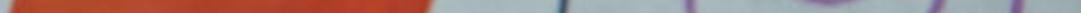
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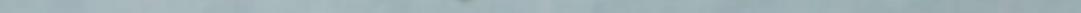
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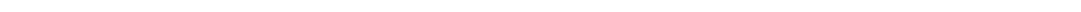
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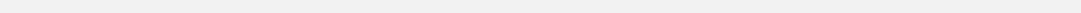
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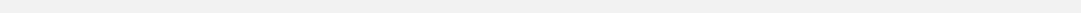
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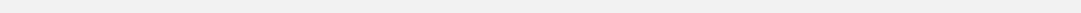
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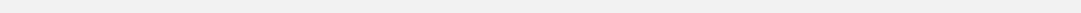
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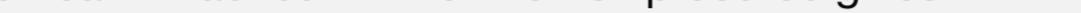
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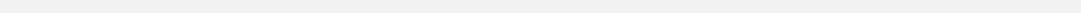
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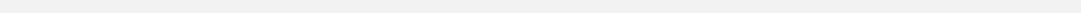
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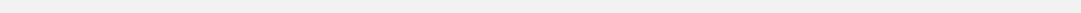
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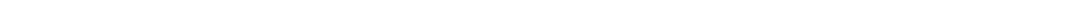
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