

I'll be posting my grade when I get it back! Thanks guys for the support!

### Values on r/WeeklyDictator

r/WeeklyDictator is an online community which simulates the power politics of a dictatorship, and thus has all the attributes of a multiplayer video game, without technically having an official way to “win”. Because of this, it’s difficult to say what the values projected to the members of the community are, as the difference and relationship between “real” values and “in-game” values is hard to find. Indeed, there are two relevant sets of values which could be analyzed in relation to r/WeeklyDictator: values which entice people to be part of and be active in the community, and in-game values which will affect the way people act as role playing members of the community. In this essay, I will propose and support a model to relate these sets of values to one another, and explain how some of the in-game values might have emerged within the community.

Understanding the platforms supporting this community is a critical step towards understanding the way this community functions. r/WeeklyDictator is a community based on both Reddit.com and a Discord server. The subReddit<sup>1</sup> is a wall of posts onto which members of the community can upload content ranging from simple textposts to videos. The Discord server is a collection of chat channels allocated to different members of the community. Some spaces are entirely public while other channels can only be posted on by select members of the community. r/WeeklyDictator is limited to these platforms, and keeps to a strict rule about making no references to real-world events. Because of this rule, the community is entirely self-referential, as the only points of reference are events and institutions within the community.

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<sup>1</sup> A “subReddit” is a community on Reddit.

On r/WeeklyDictator, there is an office of “Dictator” which can only be occupied by one person at a time. When a dictator comes to power, they obtain certain duties and powers. On the first day of their dictatorship, they must appoint a series of assistants with different roles<sup>2</sup>, choose an official “anthem” for the sub, as well as the “theme” of that week’s propaganda<sup>3</sup> (for example, the last week of October had a Halloween theme). The dictator also controls the economic<sup>4</sup> and gun-related<sup>5</sup> policy of the community. In order to replace the incumbent dictator, an ambitious member of the community must accumulate a certain number of “points” which can be gained from the endorsement of party leaders<sup>6</sup>, the support of the “oligarchy”<sup>7</sup>, the amount of propaganda posted on either platform, or the amount of upvotes on a revolution proposal<sup>8</sup> ([redacted]).

In the analysis of this community, it is difficult to differentiate values that are espoused solely within the context of the community and values which go beyond the universe of r/WeeklyDictator. To trace this line, I have decided to consider if the people holding and projecting these values hold these values outside of the game, or whether they solely hold these values when they are participating in the community.

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<sup>2</sup> There are four roles, as explained in the rules of the community: the propagandist (in charge of creating propaganda), the State Secretary (the Dictator’s right hand), the Diplomat (making the sub grow) and the Judge (who tries cases on the Discord server).

<sup>3</sup> Propaganda is media content supporting an incumbent dictator or a revolutionary, usually in the form of memes.

<sup>4</sup> On the Discord server one can obtain money by investing in different ventures or by being paid for different political favours.

<sup>5</sup> One can purchase “guns” which, if used against someone, will silence them on the Discord server for 24 hours

<sup>6</sup> There are three parties on r/WeeklyDictator, which have their own affiliated subReddits. The Lenican, Unicratic and Courtinant parties, as they are called, all elect party leaders and have different esthetics. Every new member needs to join a party, which grants them the right to vote in the party elections.

<sup>7</sup> The oligarchy is a group of the five wealthiest citizens.

<sup>8</sup> A revolution proposal is a post which delineates a member’s desire to initiate a revolution. If the post has 10 upvotes or more, a revolution becomes official.

For example, anti-democracy is a value projected to people forming the group, but this projection is solely relevant in the context of the game. The community is structured in a way which makes people dictators only if they can accumulate the support of the loudest and most influential, as opposed to popular support. Furthermore, because this is a roleplaying community, there is a current in the in-game culture which opposes any democratic structures in the sub (as can be seen in memes deriding democracy). Beyond the posts on the subreddit, there has been some backlash at the idea of electing party leaders instead of using some other less democratic system. All of this opposition to democracy, however, only refers to the “democracy” within the community. Through interviews with people who have posted memes adamantly condemning democracy, I’ve learnt that in their day-to-day lives, they do vote and do not support groups which would like to abolish democracy.

Paradoxically, however, r/WeeklyDictator also projects the value of civic engagement. People who choose to be part of this community usually have an urge to get involved in some form of political power dynamics, but don’t have the option because of age or other contextual hindrances. To derive any sort of pleasure from being part of the community, a member cannot be completely apathetic about the political activity of r/WeeklyDictator.

Paired with the value of civic engagement, however, is the value of personal power, prestige and influence. The structure of the community does not offer any benefits to those who are civically engaged apart from the promise of prestige. In real life, civic engagement can promise more rights, freedoms and comforts, and personal power can be justified as a tool to certain ends. In r/WeeklyDictator, however, there are no such ends and the only thing players can strive for is the

prestige that comes with different signifiers. For example, once in power, you can get a tag next to your name stating the role you play in the community<sup>9</sup>, as a party leader, dictator or member of the government.

After conducting interviews with individuals and participating in group conversations on the Discord server, the most important value I derived from r/WeeklyDictator was the importance of community. Even though there are 3,200 people officially part of the community on the subReddit, it seems like there is a much smaller caste of people who are part of the Discord server, and even fewer who are active on this platform. Among this clique of more active members, there are people who have overthrown each other as revolutionaries, and who have publicly slandered each other by the means of propaganda. If r/WeeklyDictator looked anything like a real political community, these people would probably refuse to talk to each other. However, the people on the discord seemed to have very affable relations to one another and when asked about one another privately, only had favourable things to say about other engaged members of the community.

According to the 16th overthrown dictator u/made-u-look<sup>10</sup>, escapism plays a role in shaping the values of the community. According to him, the community “[tries] to emphasize how this is a simulator so I think that many use it as an opportunity to ‘become’ someone else” (Made-u-look). Indeed, when members of the community took a political compass text, most of them were much more libertarian than their personas in the community.

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<sup>9</sup> My username is tagged with “College Diplomat”, as the moderators seem to have taken a liking to me and decided to support my investigation of their community.

<sup>10</sup>“u/” in front of a string of text indicated that this is a username. “r/” indicates that this is a subReddit.

There are different reasons why players might hold certain values within the community, of which escapism seems like the most prominent reason, based on the data I collected. Many players have felt a sort of “political fatigue” from their real-life political context, and seek a place where they can act out political machinations and make a difference in the communities they occupy.

This, however, does not explain the reason why some players might support specific values within the community and not outside of it. Indeed, they could just as easily adopt the democratic values they have in real life on r/WeeklyDictator. In this context, however, espousing democracy is extremely disadvantageous. There are democratic “factions” in the community, but they do not have much exposure, and none of their members have become dictators.

To explain this difference, I’ve decided to look at the in-game values with an adapted dialectical materialist model. To use this model, I’ve decided to consider the institutions that govern the “lives” of the members, and the values of the members of the community, and posit that the institutions in the community have an effect on the behaviours of the players of the community. I have discussed values which players hold “for real” like their appreciation of community, and “in-game values” which they hold solely because they are part of the community like an opposition to democracy. Based on this, I think that the “in-game” values are only held by players because of the structure of r/WeeklyDictator, and that the incentives people are given will change the way they act.

In r/WeeklyDictator, there are no real-world incentives to be part of the community apart from the aforementioned sense of prestige and community. In other online communities, however, there are similar incentives, but people will act in completely different ways. For example, in r/WeeklyDictator's polar opposite, r/SimDemocracy, players simulate a democracy and espouse democratic values. Because r/SimDemocracy also offers prestige and community, the only difference between both is the way in which players can obtain these. In r/WeeklyDictator members are pushed to act undemocratically to get prestige, while members of r/SimDemocracy have to act oppositely. Based on this evidence it is possible to say that the incentives their context gives them will affect what is important to them.

r/WeeklyDictator is a valuable case study to look at the way values are created in general, as this community creates a space which is entirely separated from the offline world. Because of this separation, it is only by reference to institutions within the community that members can derive values. This model, which posits that values emerge from the context of the individuals holding them, can be applied to real life, and can serve to explain many values by simply looking at the material reality in which people live. In the same way that dictators on r/WeeklyDictator might be opposed to democracy, factory owners might be economically conservative or men in power might be opposed to feminism.

Because of the noticeable difference between the values members of this online community hold in this simulation and the values held by these individuals on a day-to-day basis, it is possible to establish that these two sets of values only relate to each other to the extent that their context relates to each other.

In conclusion, there are two sets of values on r/WeeklyDictator: the values like prestige and community, which push members to participate, and values which derive from the institutions of this community, which order the way members participate. Based on the data I've collected from this community, the values people have in the context of the community do not inform the values they have in their day-to-day lives. Perhaps the case of r/WeeklyDictator could eventually inform other discussions about class, gender and race: once we start to realize that often, the values people hold are created by the context they are in, we can start discussing steps to solve ongoing problems related to these issues.

## Works Cited

[this section has been redacted due to personal details being disclosed]