

No Dice, No Masters*

Procedures for Emancipation in *Dream Askew / Dream Apart*

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Abstract

This study of Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum’s Belonging Outside Belonging system for tabletop roleplaying games (ttrpgs) follows in Jacques Rancière’s project of ignorance, as set out in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987) and as continued in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008). With Rancière’s politics as a framework, this study works backward from Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games* (2007) to his *Unit Operations* (2006), and then to Alain Badiou’s *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1989), in order to recover the radical politics undergirding Bogost’s distinct method of game criticism. Badiou’s *Manifesto*, going beyond Bogost’s primary philosophical source, Badiou’s *Being and Event* (1988), clarifies the political stakes of Badiou’s ontology, allowing us to return to the present with a more robust politics of procedurality motivating our critical work. From here, Alder and Rosenbaum’s *Dream Askew / Dream Apart* (2018) furnishes us with a provocative model of emancipatory procedurality suited not only for radical play but radical design, challenging the limits of Bogost’s “persuasion” as an activist paradigm.

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Introduction

This study of Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum’s *Belonging Outside Belonging* system for tabletop roleplaying games (ttrpgs) follows in Jacques Rancière’s project of ignorance, as set out in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987)¹ and as continued in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2008).² With Rancière’s politics as a framework, this study works backward from Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games* (2007)³ to his *Unit Operations* (2006),⁴ and then to Alain Badiou’s *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1989),⁵ in order to recover the radical politics undergirding Bogost’s distinct method of game criticism. Badiou’s *Manifesto*, going beyond Bogost’s primary philosophical source, Badiou’s *Being and Event* (1988),⁶ clarifies the political stakes of Badiou’s ontology, allowing us to return to the present with a more robust politics of procedurality motivating our critical work. From here, Alder and Rosenbaum’s *Dream Askew / Dream Apart* (2018)⁷ furnishes us with a provocative model of emancipatory procedurality suited not only for radical play but radical design, challenging the limits of Bogost’s “persuasion” as an activist paradigm.

To begin, let us situate ourselves in Rancière’s project of ignorance. Summarizing this project in *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière locates the impetus for it in “the eccentric theory and singular fate of Joseph Jacotot, who created a scandal in the early nineteenth century by claiming that one ignoramus could teach another what he himself did not know, asserting the equality of intelligence and opposing intellectual emancipation to popular instruction.”⁸ Contrary to the “self-vanishing mediation” of the “pedagogical relationship,” contrary to the subsumption of knowledge to the “position” of the knower, Jacotot’s proposition of equality refuses this elevated position, arguing that knowledge is, quite simply, a “collection of fragments.”⁹ To unify and purify this heterogeneous collection, while teaching the pupil that, in their ununified, unpurified state, they are *without* knowledge (that is, without the cohesion of the collection that would constitute the ‘true’ position of knowledge), is the work of “stultification,” the institution of the gap of “inequality” into the procedure of learning that obfuscates the

¹Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

²Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, UK: Verso, 2021).

³Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

⁴Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁵Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

⁶Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

⁷Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum, *Dream Askew / Dream Apart* (Buried Without Ceremony, 2018).

⁸Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2021, 1.

⁹Rancière, 8-9.

operational logic of this procedure that is *actually* the case.¹⁰ What *is* the case, Rancière argues, is that “there is no ignoramus who does not already know a mass of things, who has not learnt them by herself, by listening and looking around her, by observation and repetition, by being mistaken and correcting her errors.”¹¹ The schoolmaster denies that this procedure is in fact constitutive of knowledge, designating “such knowledge [as] merely an *ignoramus’s* knowledge, knowledge that cannot be ordered in accordance with the ascent from the simplest to the most complex,” or, we might say, from *appearances* to *ideal truth*.¹² The schoolmaster introduces a *bar* into actuality, a split or scission that is the primary formal structure to which emancipation is opposed.

Intellectual emancipation, on the other hand, is predicated on the “verification of the equality of intelligence.”¹³ Knowledge does not require the purity of a position artificially separated from the procedure of its conception; knowledge simply requires an intelligence to “venture into the forest of things and signs surrounding it,” to “observ[e] and compar[e] one thing with another, a sign with a fact, a sign with another sign.”¹⁴ Learning is not possible due to the transcendental illumination of the sun of truth, as mediated by the schoolmaster who vanishes into its searing light. Learning is possible because a learner “observes what is before her, says what she has seen, and verifies what she has said.”¹⁵ The bar does not exist by nature; it is a construction. “From the ignoramus, spelling out signs, to the scientist constructing hypotheses, the same intelligence is always at work,” argues Rancière, because there is no bar to separate these intelligences from each other, no “radical gulf that can only be ‘bridged’ by an expert.”¹⁶ Intelligence is always and already “translation,” proceeding by “comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavouring to communicate to it.”¹⁷ The distance between two intelligences is never a gulf between knowledge and not-knowledge (i.e., *ignorance*), but between *knowledges*; it is the “path,” for the learner, “from what she already knows to what she does not yet know, but which she can learn just as she learnt the rest.”¹⁸

Rancière’s project of ignorance can be named as such precisely because it remains in the space of ignorance, never learning the “inequality of intelligence” because such inequality, once more to emphasize, is not a fact to be learned but to be *constructed*.¹⁹ For a learner to situate herself in this project of ignorance is for her to “learn not in order to occupy the position of the scholar, but so as better to practise the art of translating, of putting her experience into words

¹⁰Rancière, 9.

¹¹Rancière, 8-9.

¹²Rancière, 9.

¹³Rancière, 10.

¹⁴Rancière, 10.

¹⁵Rancière, 10.

¹⁶Rancière, 10.

¹⁷Rancière, 10.

¹⁸Rancière, 10.

¹⁹Rancière, 11.

and her words to the test; of translating her intellectual adventures for others and counter-translating the translations of their own adventures which they present to her.”²⁰ This is a radically egalitarian project, one in which *mastery* is “uncoupled” from *knowledge*, in which we “venture,” together, “into the forest of things and signs, to say what [we] have seen and what [we] think of what [we] have seen, to verify it and have it verified.”²¹ The transcendental distance between ignorance and knowledge is abolished; we are all ignoramuses who know innumerable things and who continue to learn ever more. The only distance that remains is “factual distance,” the distance of a path from the known to the not-yet-known, a “path that constantly abolishes any fixity and hierarchy of positions with their boundaries.”²² To situate ourselves in this project is to make ourselves ready for the work of emancipation. And by situating ourselves in this project, we make ourselves ready for the work of the present study.

Procedurality

Having situated ourselves in Rancière’s project, we can now proceed to address the key technical terminology of this study. In his *Persuasive Games*, Bogost defines procedurality as a “way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes.”²³ Processes, in turn, are the “way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems.”²⁴ We can condense these definitions by saying that *procedurality* is a way in which we “structure behaviour.”²⁵ To use the above discussion of Rancière as an example, procedurality helps us understand knowledge not as a position but a procedure. Knowledge is a procedure of *observing*, *saying*, and *verifying*, the results of which are communicated by *translating*, *comparing*, and *illustrating*; future results are *anticipated* on the basis of past results, and we *structure our behaviour* in particular ways in order to act toward desired ends in accordance with anticipated results. No position makes knowledge what it is; it is the open set of these processes, the quality of procedurality, that describes knowledge in its actuality.

Reading a rule book and gaining a knowledge of the rules makes the procedurality of knowledge even more explicit. One does not merely *understand* a rule book; to understand a rule book, one must know *how to put it into practice*. I can read Alder’s *Dream Askew*, tell my friends about it and how I think we should try to play it, and then we get together, we talk about how to play, and we play it. Afterward, we keep talking about our experience, comparing our thoughts and feelings—was it good, was it bad, what new modes of thought did it teach? We share stories, we laugh, we recollect. And then we go about our lives, all these fragments going with us. And perhaps we play again, tell other friends about the game, play with a different group. Or perhaps we never

²⁰Rancière, 11.

²¹Rancière, 11.

²²Rancière, 11.

²³Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 2007, 2-3.

²⁴Bogost, 3.

²⁵Bogost, 3.

play again, but always remember that experience, who we were with, how it worked, what we did. Perhaps even we do none of this, reading the text only and allowing our imaginations to be directed by the rules, envisioning interactions, scenarios, worlds, a silent play for one. In these various experiences, we see that *understanding* is so much more than understanding the text, understanding the *rules*; understanding is about being *carried along* by the various processes dictated by the procedure that is the game. To understand a rule is not merely to understand the content of the words, but to be *transformed* by it.²⁶

Importantly, procedures are not “fixed” or “unquestionable” entities.²⁷ Procedures, as we have seen in these examples, often consist of “intersecting,” “interleaved,” and/or “nesting” processes, and users of procedures frequently “muster[] new processes” and “seamlessly blend[] them with the procedure” to achieve different results.²⁸ In the case of tabletop gaming, “rule zero” enshrines this procedural arbitrariness: if a rule doesn’t work, “alter” or “discard” it.²⁹ Procedures are *assumed* and *enacted* by “actors,” which means that procedures can also be set aside by those actors.³⁰ Understanding the rules means knowing how to put them into practice, but it also means knowing when a set of rules *isn’t for us*, when to close one rule book and open another.

This is the first emancipatory kernel that we encounter at the formal level of games, the emancipatory kernel of procedurality as such. If knowledge is a position, then knowledge becomes something to be *explained*; the rules need a *master* to ensure their transmission. But if knowledge is a procedure, an open set of processes, then no master is required. There is no need for a master to induct us into the hidden mysteries because we can all *look for ourselves*; we do not need to seek to make our rules disappear in the mediation of the master’s *rulings*; we simply adopt the rules as a procedure and begin to play. It is the relation between procedures and their *adoption* that we must now unpack.

²⁶Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 4. In the rule “a transformation is carried out. This transformation . . . implies a radical reformulation of the very conceptuality that up until that moment articulated the relationship between human action and norm, ‘life’ and ‘rule,’ and without which the political and ethical-juridical rationality of modernity would be unthinkable.”

²⁷Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 2007, 3. As Jean Baudrillard writes, rules are “conventional and arbitrary, and ha[ve] no hidden truth”; as such, “only their observance matters, and the resulting giddiness”; likewise, if one no longer finds passion in the rules, “one simply leaves the game.” See Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montréal, QC: CTheory Books, 2001), 132.

²⁸Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 2007, 6-8.

²⁹Jon Peterson, “The Origins of Rule Zero,” *Playing at the World*, January 16, 2021, <https://playingattheworld.blogspot.com/2021/01/the-origins-of-rule-zero.html>.

³⁰Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 2007, 10.

Unit Operations

“Intellectual emancipation,” writes Rancière, “is the verification of the equality of intelligence.”³¹ But the equality of intelligence “does not signal the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence,” only the “self-equity of intelligence in all its manifestations.”³² If the emancipatory kernel of procedurality can be located in the arbitrariness of procedures, this also means that emancipation is not guaranteed. We can adopt a rule set unwittingly—through ideology, through cultural influence, through the recommendation of a friend. Or we can have a rule set forced upon us—by a police officer, a boss, a game master. Procedurality does not guarantee emancipation. As Rancière writes, all we can affirm is that we “have seen certain facts. We believe that this could be the reason for it. We (and you may do the same) will perform some other experiments to verify the solidity of the opinion.”³³ But that is all. To assert an “identity of cause and effect,” an identity of *fact* and *reason*, is simply to “sum[] up the ideas that tell the story of the fact” with a *name*, forgetting that the “name of a fact is not its cause, only at best, its metaphor.”³⁴ Such *summing* up requires one to take a position *external* to the procedure of knowledge, to take up a position of authority whereby one can “*therefore-ize*” about the facts.³⁵ The desire to *guarantee* the facts enacts a closure of their emancipatory possibility. If we do this, we mistake “our opinions for the truth”—that is, we become transfixed by the *guarantee of truth* when opinions, *as opinions*, are most important.³⁶ To undertake a procedural critique that retains the possibility of emancipation, then, we must remain *with* the facts, remain *internal* to the procedure of knowledge, thinking that “our opinions are opinions and nothing more,” that our “words,” indeed, “are merely words.”³⁷ Rancière writes:

One mustn’t see in this an obstacle to communication. Only the lazy are afraid of the idea of arbitrariness and see in it reason’s tomb. On the contrary. It is because there is no code given by divinity, no language of languages, that human intelligence employs all its art to making itself understood and to understanding what the neighboring intelligence is signifying. Thought is not told *in truth*; it is expressed *in veracity*. It is divided, it is told, it is translated for someone else, who will make of it another tale, another translation, on one condition: the will to communicate, the will to figure out what the other is thinking, and this under no guarantee beyond his narration, no universal dictionary to dictate what must be understood.³⁸

³¹Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2021, 10.

³²Rancière, 10.

³³Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1991, 45.

³⁴Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2021, 14, and Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1991, 49.

³⁵Rancière, 49.

³⁶Rancière, 45.

³⁷Rancière, 45, and Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2021, 23.

³⁸Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1991, 62.

“What is essential,” then, “is to avoid lying, not to say that we have seen something when we’ve kept our eyes closed, not to believe that something has been explained to us when it has only been named.”³⁹ It is the “explicators” with their “truth” that we must actually fear, those who interrupt the procedure of knowledge with the “form of stultification.”⁴⁰ These masters cannot teach knowledge, only “inability.”⁴¹ In telling their subjects what they do not *know*, they obscure the fact that the “virtue of our intelligence is less in knowing than in doing”—the first lesson the master teaches is always how to say the words “I can’t.”⁴² There is no knowledge here, only “self-forgetfulness,” a denial of the “privileged relation of each person to the truth.”⁴³ A “society of the emancipated,” on the other hand, would admit of no such mastery, only a myriad of voices saying *I can*.⁴⁴ The society of the emancipated “would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone.”⁴⁵ We must identify those procedures that do not clamp down on the arbitrariness of procedurality, that do not stultify the emancipatory energy of a situation. And to do so, we must familiarize ourselves with Bogost’s concept of the “unit operation.”

Introduced in *Unit Operations*, the unit operation is a “discrete,” “disconnected,” “meaning-making” entity.⁴⁶ More concretely, a unit operation, defined according to its constituent terms, is “a material element, a thing,” and “a basic process that takes one or more inputs and performs a transformation on it.”⁴⁷ Compared with systems, which are “characteristically protracted, dependent, sequential, and static,” unit operations are “characteristically succinct, discrete, referential, and dynamic.”⁴⁸ However, systems and unit operations are not opposed. Rather, contemporary systems can be described as “fluctuating assemblages of unit-operational components rather than overarching regulators.”⁴⁹ “Unit operations articulate connections between nodes in networks,” writes Bogost, and so thinking in terms of unit operations allows us to think systems from the bottom up, beginning with the open logic of procedurality instead of the closed logic of systematicity.⁵⁰ Units operations “build relations,” doing so “according to a broad

³⁹Rancière, 59.

⁴⁰Rancière, 59.

⁴¹Rancière, 65.

⁴²Rancière, 65, 57.

⁴³Rancière, 57. Alexander Galloway, citing François Laruelle, characterizes this privileged relation as “direct or radical,” the work of which is the work of “generic science. See Alexander Galloway, “Superpositions,” *Culture and Communication*, October 11, 2014, <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/superpositions>.

⁴⁴Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1991, 67. Rancière uses the example of painting, citing Jacotot: “There is no pride in saying out loud: Me too, I’m a painter! Pride consists in saying softly to others: You neither, you aren’t a painter.”

⁴⁵Rancière, 71.

⁴⁶Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 2006, 3.

⁴⁷Bogost, 7.

⁴⁸Bogost, 4.

⁴⁹Bogost, 4.

⁵⁰Bogost, 8.

range of diverse logics.”⁵¹ As such, thinking in terms of unit operations prevents us from falling into totalizing or universalizing interpretive modes. Indeed, unit operations “privilege function over context, instances over longevity.”⁵² Bogost is not arguing against contextual and historical critique, but rather arguing for an understanding of contextual and historical structures as emergent from the “material and conceptual logic” of unit operations.⁵³

Bogost avoids the reification of units as substantial entities through the philosophy of Alain Badiou. Unit operations are first and foremost *relational* because a “unit is never actually unitary; it is always a multiplicity.”⁵⁴ Bogost deploys Badiou’s concepts of the “situation” and the “count as one” to get to this point.⁵⁵ Being as such is a “multiplicity of multiplicities,” the “set” of which Badiou names the “situation.”⁵⁶ A situation is always a “structured presentation” of these multiplicities, a *configuration*.⁵⁷ This “structuring process” and its result is the “state” of a given situation, that which renders a situation *this* situation.⁵⁸ The structuring of a situation is a work of *articulation* and *instantiation*, a “process or a frame” for rendering multiplicity “a multiplicity.”⁵⁹ This is the “count as one,” the action that “*produces a particular set*,” that “takes a multiplicity and treats it as a completed whole.”⁶⁰ A unit operation, then, can be understood in the sense of the count as one: “an understanding, largely arbitrary, certainly contingent, of a particular situation, compacted and taken as a whole.”⁶¹ The unit is a multiplicity made unitary through a name.

As Rancière tells us, a name is not a reason. Bogost supports this point: “the count as one tells us scarcely little about the way that the configured elements of a set function: what they do, and how they do it.”⁶² Consequently, unit analysis or procedural critique is necessary if we are not to mistake metaphors for causes, if we are to engage in critical description and not authoritarian prescription—which is precisely the danger of critique, to become intoxicated with naming, to enter into the college of explicators through a side door so as not to be seen by the *demos* of which we purport to be members. Insofar as procedurality, for Badiou, is explicitly political, working back to Badiou from Bogost’s application of his ideas will provide us with the necessary radical motivation to avoid a recuperation of critique by power. Indeed, where Bogost comes to emphasize persuasion, Badiou is always interested in revolution, in *emancipation*. It is Badiou to whom we now turn.

⁵¹Bogost, 8.

⁵²Bogost, 4.

⁵³Bogost, 8.

⁵⁴Bogost, 12.

⁵⁵Bogost, 11.

⁵⁶Bogost, 12.

⁵⁷Bogost, 12.

⁵⁸Bogost, 12.

⁵⁹Bogost, 11.

⁶⁰Bogost, 11.

⁶¹Bogost, 13.

⁶²Bogost, 14.

Truth Procedures

Badiou's *Manifesto for Philosophy* opens with the problem of possibility, which he frames as the possibility of the intervention of the "unthinkable into thought."⁶³ Looking at the history of the twentieth century, Badiou names "Hitler and his henchman" as the most horrific of instances of such an intervention.⁶⁴ Contrary to the philosophers who, after Nazism, considered philosophy to be impossible, who considered Nazism itself an impossible "object for philosophy," Badiou sees the unthinkable possibility of Nazism as indicative of the nature of possibility as such and of the work of philosophy yet to be done.⁶⁵ The "crux of the matter," writes Badiou, "is to know what the following means: taking *one more step*."⁶⁶ How is a "single step" to be taken within a given situation; how is the "moving-itself of thought within the articulated element of its conditions" possible?⁶⁷

This possibility Badiou frames as the possibility of "discontinuity in time and space."⁶⁸ Between "Greek city-states, classical Western absolute monarchies and bourgeois parliamentary societies," there is a remarkable discontinuity of "social formations," and yet philosophy persists between them, understood by each subsequent formation as continuous with itself in the previous formation.⁶⁹ The "conditions of philosophy are transversal," Badiou contends, cutting across history, across ideology, by way of a "relation to thought [that] is relatively invariant."⁷⁰ Badiou names this invariance "truth," and the conditions of philosophy, as a result, "truth procedures."⁷¹ Badiou restricts the number of these procedures to four, but myself and others expand this set to include other "*generic procedures*" that can also be characterized by the truth procedure Badiou elaborates.⁷² What is essential, no matter the number of such procedures, is that they "stand out from the cumulation of fields of knowledge by their *eventful origin*."⁷³

In a given "state of things," in a "situation," there can be "cognition, correct statements, accumulated knowledge."⁷⁴ All the processes of the *knowledge* procedure that we described above are real and efficacious. But if there is not

⁶³Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 1999, 31.

⁶⁴Badiou, 31.

⁶⁵Badiou, 30.

⁶⁶Badiou, 32.

⁶⁷Badiou, 32, 38.

⁶⁸Badiou, 33.

⁶⁹Badiou, 33.

⁷⁰Badiou, 33.

⁷¹Badiou, 33.

⁷²See Eric Stein, *Lost Scriptures* (Zine Quest 2: itch.io, 2020), <https://vagrantludology.itch.io/lost-scriptures>; Terence Blake, "Generic Ontology Vs Specific Biography: Badiou as Symptom and Cure," *Agent Swarm*, February 5, 2017, <https://terenceblake.wordpress.com/2017/02/05/generic-ontology-vs-specific-biography-badiou-as-symptom-and-cure/>; and Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁷³Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 1999, 36.

⁷⁴Badiou, 36.

an event to “supplement” this situation, “there is no truth.”⁷⁵ Truth requires an event that “can neither be named nor represented by referring to the resources of the situation,” an event that is “inscribed by a singular naming, the bringing into play of an *additional signifier*.”⁷⁶ This additional signifier is the *unthinkable*, that which could not have been named before its irruption. Philosophy is, therefore, that which “*gather[s] together all the additional names*,” that which “configurates the generic procedures, through a welcoming, a sheltering, built up with reference to their disparate simultaneity.”⁷⁷

At a first glance, Badiou’s conception of philosophy seems to directly contradict Rancière’s project of ignorance upon which we have heavily relied here. Indeed, without truth, Badiou contends that there is only “veridicality,” while Rancière denies that thought can be “told *in truth*,” but only in “*veracity*.”⁷⁸ It would seem that these two thinkers are opposed. Not so. Though Badiou relies heavily on the language of truth, his conception of truth makes an authoritarian mastery of it impossible. Philosophy “does not establish any truth,” but rather “sets a locus of truths.”⁷⁹ The welcoming and sheltering that philosophy performs is not the unifying and purifying of knowledge that Rancière rebukes. Instead, the “common place” of philosophy is a “conceptual site in which the generic procedures are thought as compossible.”⁸⁰ The place or site of thought is a unity only insofar as it is the “unity of a moment of truths,” a moment the “aim” of which is to “think ‘together’” the discontinuity or disparity of its terms.⁸¹ “Philosophy does not pronounce truth,” argues Badiou, “but its *conjunction*, that is, the thinkable conjunction of truths.”⁸² In this way, Badiou’s philosophy, like Rancière’s learning, is also a work of *observing*, *saying*, and *verifying*, with Badiou more interested in this work *at* and *subsequent to* the moment when a term is introduced to the situation for which no one yet has a name.

Badiou goes on to seal this complementarity that we have identified between his truth and Rancière’s ignorance: the “philosophical operators must not be understood as summations, totalizations,” because their “eventful and heterogeneous nature . . . excludes their encyclopedic alignment.”⁸³ The conditions of philosophy are not conditions of mastery but “precarious, nascent conditions,” the operational logic of which are characterized by “crises, paradoxes, and breakthroughs,” by “quaking” and “wavering,” by “revolutions and provocations.”⁸⁴ Truth is not a position, but a “hole in knowledge”; as such, truth is profoundly “fragile.”⁸⁵

⁷⁵Badiou, 37.

⁷⁶Badiou, 36.

⁷⁷Badiou, 37.

⁷⁸Badiou, 37, and Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1991, 62.

⁷⁹Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 1999, 37.

⁸⁰Badiou, 37.

⁸¹Badiou, 37.

⁸²Badiou, 38.

⁸³Badiou, 37.

⁸⁴Badiou, 37.

⁸⁵Badiou, 37, 38.

If we look to other writings of Rancière's, we see a further complementarity with Badiou in his conception of the "distribution of the sensible."⁸⁶ Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible as the "dominant system of self-evident facts of sense perception."⁸⁷ We learn by observing, saying, and verifying, by comparing what we see and what we think about what we see with others, but these processes are always overdetermined by the "structure of domination and subjection."⁸⁸ Intellectual emancipation is *predicated* on the proposition of the equality of intelligence, but it *begins* when we intervene in the "system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience."⁸⁹ This intervention in a system of forms is a process or operation that Rancière and Badiou share, a process vital for the work of emancipation.

So, then, how does Badiou's truth procedure actually work? We can describe the truth procedure as consisting of four processes, each of which are defined in *Being and Event: nomination, intervention, fidelity, and forcing*. Nomination is the process that "constitutes" the event "as susceptible to a decision concerning its belonging to the situation."⁹⁰ Intervention is the process of "unfolding the consequences of this nomination in the space of the situation to which it belongs."⁹¹ Fidelity is the process that "separates out, within the set of presented multiples, those which depend upon an event."⁹² And forcing is the process whereby a term is "*positively* investigated with respect to its connection to the name of the event."⁹³ Put more simply, nomination is the *naming* of the event, intervention is the *elaboration* of the terms of the event, fidelity is the *gathering* of the terms of the event, and forcing is the *verification* of the terms of the event as belonging to the situation they extend. The result of this overall procedure is the "generat[ion]" of "veridical statements that were previously undecidable" according to the terms of the situation prior to the event.⁹⁴ In this way, an event can be considered *true* because the truth procedure demonstrates that the terms of the event are "the truth *of* the situation, and not the absolute commencement of another."⁹⁵ After the event has occurred and its investigation by the truth procedure been completed, "no information can be extracted" from the event "which was not already present in . . . the fundamental situation" because the truth has effected a "generic extension" of that situation.⁹⁶ By the process of forcing, the final step of the truth procedure, the truth itself is shown to be veridical in the situation in which it originally appeared like a hole, revealing that the forest of things and signs extends farther than previously thought.

⁸⁶Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 7.

⁸⁷Rancière, 7.

⁸⁸Rancière, 13.

⁸⁹Rancière, 8.

⁹⁰Badiou, *Being and Event*, 2013, 203.

⁹¹Badiou, 203.

⁹²Badiou, 232.

⁹³Badiou, 417.

⁹⁴Badiou, 417.

⁹⁵Badiou, 417.

⁹⁶Badiou, 416-417.

Truth functions neither as master nor guarantor. Truth is that which emancipates the situation, freeing it from the paralysis of the state. The possibility of truth is the possibility of rupture, the possibility of change that always troubles the borders of the situation. Truth “is by itself *void*,” it “operates but presents nothing,” it “refer[s] to nothing in presentation,” only to the *possibility of the new*.⁹⁷ Neither master nor guarantor, truth forms no allegiance with the good. The possibility of truth is the possibility of *any* truth whatsoever, including the most undesirable of such. Consequently, human subjects are invested with a profound responsibility—not as pious adherents to transcendental forms, but as “militant[s]” of truths investigating their consequences here and now.⁹⁸ Explication is replaced with “active fidelity”; the rule of master over subjects is replaced by the “zeal of citizen-militants” side-by-side in the streets.⁹⁹

If we are to deploy Bogost’s method to the ends of an emancipatory critique, we must retain Badiou’s militancy. Indeed, it is precisely the “feverish exploration” of militant fidelity that Badiou sees as vital to overcoming the “almost global paralysis of a political thinking of emancipation.”¹⁰⁰ What is more, for Badiou there can be no subject other than the subject that is “a *local* configuration of the procedure.”¹⁰¹ The subject is always “internal to the situation,” and insofar as truth arrives in the situation from the outside, we cannot say that the subject “knows the truth, or that it is adjusted to the truth.”¹⁰² The subject is the “local moment of the truth,” but it is neither “consciousness nor unconsciousness of the true,” because it has no being *apart from* the truth of which it is a moment.¹⁰³ Given that procedural criticism is performed by a subject, procedural criticism relies, at a fundamental level, on the emancipatory activity of the truth procedure by which the subject is itself instantiated. The subject cannot remain aloof from this procedure because it is a *consequence* of the procedure.

The militancy of Badiou’s philosophical project is easily overlooked in the struggle to comprehend its terms. But a system without “strife” or “combat” has not been successfully realized in the mode Badiou proposes.¹⁰⁴ Badiou’s *Manifesto* clarifies his polemical objectives. The “*polemos*” that Badiou seeks to preserve is that of a war against “dogmatic terror,” against “tyrannies,” against such disasters of the “State” as Nazism.¹⁰⁵ “*Philosophy is possible*,” asserts Badiou, and not only possible, but “*necessary*,” a “new responsibility” for thought that is both “*duty*” and “*desire*.”¹⁰⁶ It is with such duty and desire that we at last proceed to the work of critique itself.

⁹⁷Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 1999, 124, 127.

⁹⁸Badiou, *Being and Event*, 2013, xiii.

⁹⁹Badiou, xiii, 353.

¹⁰⁰Badiou, 329, xi.

¹⁰¹Badiou, 396.

¹⁰²Badiou, 396.

¹⁰³Badiou, 396-397.

¹⁰⁴Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 1999, 134, 135.

¹⁰⁵Badiou, 134-135.

¹⁰⁶Badiou, 136, 137.

Emancipation

Every Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum's *Dream Askew* and *Dream Apart* are dreams of emancipation. Made possible by the equality of intelligence, these games make this equality a theme. Each game focuses on a "marginalized group of people living together in precarious community."¹⁰⁷ Emancipation from the powers that be is not a guarantee for these groups, but the fragile possibility of such is generative of the stories that will carry players forward. Player-characters will "work together, fall in love, fight, hurt one another, heal together, enact ill-advised plans, and all the rest."¹⁰⁸ Emancipation does not preclude strife. But it is the play itself, as an exercise in emancipatory procedurality, in the adoption of procedures without guarantee, in the assumption of the possibility of the new and the otherwise, that constitutes an emancipatory space. Not every manifestation of the procedure will be equal, but the self-equity of those enacting the procedure is born forth in every one of its manifestations.

Alder and Rosenbaum's dreams are predicated on equality, but they begin with a statement: "no dice, no masters."¹⁰⁹ In the "referential universe" of tabletop roleplaying games, this statement signals the "occurrence of that indiscernible of the situation," which is a mode of play with neither dice rolls nor game masters.¹¹⁰ As the statement of a subject, *no dice, no masters* is "bound to the future anterior of the existence of an indiscernible"—it is a "hypothetical signification."¹¹¹ It is a signification to be explored, to be investigated, to be tested, and eventually, to be verified (or not). *No dice, no masters*, signifies a possibility that may or may not be shown to be true by "the retroaction of the *existence* . . . of an indiscernible part of the situation."¹¹² The situation dictates that we must play with dice and we must play with masters, but in the verification of this statement we discover that we could play without dice and without masters all along. We play the game and so discover its terms to be veridical, extending the situation of play itself.

The subject who pronounces the statement *no dice, no masters*, the subject who plays such a game, is constituted as the finite moment of this possible truth. This subject's play is "a matter of confidence, or of knowing belief," which carries the subject from the indiscernible of the truth to its verification in the situation.¹¹³ This confidence is realized in the process of forcing, the subject's "*fundamental law*."¹¹⁴ Forcing verifies if a statement is veridical for the "universe of sense," the universe that is "suspended" from the infinite void of possibility.¹¹⁵ There are three possible outcomes for this process of enquiry: the "statement cannot

¹⁰⁷Alder and Rosenbaum, *Dream Askew / Dream Apart*, 4.

¹⁰⁸Alder and Rosenbaum, 6.

¹⁰⁹Alder and Rosenbaum, 8.

¹¹⁰Badiou, *Being and Event*, 2013, 405.

¹¹¹Badiou, 400.

¹¹²Badiou, 400.

¹¹³Badiou, 400.

¹¹⁴Badiou, 403.

¹¹⁵Badiou, 403.

be forced,” the “statement can be universally forced,” or the “statement can be forced by certain terms.”¹¹⁶ The event of the truth does not guarantee any outcome; it is a shock triggering action. If the statement cannot be forced, then our language for the articulation of the event needs to be revised; but if the statement can be forced in part or in full, then the terms of the situation can be extended accordingly.

Alder and Rosenbaum acknowledge that many of their readers “will have a long history of roleplaying games,” and that “some instincts developed in other games may lead [them] astray here.”¹¹⁷ “Play is driven by the choices that players make,” rather than by the chance of dice rolls.¹¹⁸ This play is “not strictly competitive or cooperative,” but rather is interested in “exploring the drama that wells up between the main characters and all around them.”¹¹⁹ Rather than having the action directed by a game master, players “are encouraged to make authentic, interesting choices with a spirit of curiosity.”¹²⁰ The “situation-to-come” that is indicated by the statement *no dice, no masters* presents a radical reconfiguration of the situation of play, one where “conversation,” “exploration,” and “experiment” are not peripheral, as to the violent and extractive action of tables past, but central to the experience.¹²¹ It is possible to configure a space of action otherwise, to overflow the rigid channels of traditional agency.

The elaboration of a truth procedure can require a “break with historicism,” a “desire . . . against history.”¹²² The emancipatory statement, *no dice, no masters*, appears as a “bright opening of eternity, without God or soul,” appearing from the “very fact that its effort,” the effort of play, “put[s] us in agreement” with the possibility of the truths it pronounces.¹²³ To modulate and transform Badiou’s concept of philosophy, we can say of tabletop roleplaying that its history is “the history of its ethics,” of its failures and its successes, of the “succession of violent gestures through which [it] is withdrawn from its disastrous redoubling.”¹²⁴ Such a history is a history of the “a desubstantialization of Truth” and the “self-liberation of its act,”¹²⁵ a history wherein play is emancipated from its rulers, its procedures self-liberated from their guarantors. To declare *no dice, no masters*, is to force the terms of this new situation; to approach this declaration as a critic is to recognize it as the thematic of a new procedural genre.

The first operation of play in *Dream Askew / Dream Apart* is to “establish[] a food plan.”¹²⁶ Alder and Rosenbaum encourage “[e]ating together,” preparing food from “on-theme recipe suggestions” if the such an opportunity is afforded

¹¹⁶Badiou, 403-404.

¹¹⁷Alder and Rosenbaum, *Dream Askew / Dream Apart*, 8.

¹¹⁸Alder and Rosenbaum, 8.

¹¹⁹Alder and Rosenbaum, 8.

¹²⁰Alder and Rosenbaum, 8.

¹²¹Alder and Rosenbaum, 8.

¹²²Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 1999, 137.

¹²³Badiou, 137.

¹²⁴Badiou, 144.

¹²⁵Badiou, 144.

¹²⁶Alder and Rosenbaum, *Dream Askew / Dream Apart*, 10.

by the play space.¹²⁷ The food plan is one process in a set that we can name the *comfort procedure*, a set of rules considering nutrition, bathroom, and accessibility needs.¹²⁸ This procedure is not separate from play, but integral to it. Likewise, the *safety procedure* that follows on the subsequent page is also integral to play, consisting of one simple process: “*pause*.”¹²⁹ This process is “an agreement” that allows players “to take risks and play seriously,” to diligently enquire into the conditions of the situation *no dice, no masters* describes.¹³⁰ Alder and Rosenbaum continue to elaborate procedures for *asking, correcting, and teaching*, continuing to extend the space of play with new terms, dislocating these responsibilities from the traditional site of the game master and redistributing them equally between the members of the table.¹³¹ From here, procedures for *character creation* and *world creation* are established, but there is no distinction between these procedures and the preceding. The multiple of these terms constitutes the game, and fidelity to this multiple, the gathering together of these terms, is a necessary step in the procedure of the game as a whole.

To act in play, players utilize the “move” procedure.¹³² The process driving this procedure takes a “prompt” for an input and produces narrative action as an output, operating any time a player-character wants to “take action.”¹³³ The outline of this operation is striking in its distinction from the operation of a dice roll in traditional roleplaying games. With the dice roll, a player-character is confronted with a challenge to be met with a certain power—be it intelligence, strength, charisma, or otherwise.¹³⁴ The dice roll musters the terms of the state to exercise the player-character’s situational authority, their position in the state. Power is leavened with chance, but the mechanical trajectory of such games is the ultimate suppression of chance through the operational logic of the level up. As the numbers go up, the possibility of a negative outcome goes down. The move, on the other hand, uses a token-exchange operation and does away with chance entirely. Negative outcomes are no longer to be feared because any time a player-character makes a “weak move” and shows their “character’s vulnerability, folly, or even just plain rotten luck . . . they also earn a token.”¹³⁵ In the future, a player-character can spend tokens they have gained to make a “strong move,” where they show how their “character’s skill, power, astute planning, or good luck come to bear and transform a situation.”¹³⁶ The overdetermination of the dice roll by a character’s state paralyzes the threat of possibility; the move, on the other hand, mobilizes this threat in its very structure, welcoming it as necessary to the possibility of emancipation.

¹²⁷Alder and Rosenbaum, 10.

¹²⁸Alder and Rosenbaum, 10.

¹²⁹Alder and Rosenbaum, 11.

¹³⁰Alder and Rosenbaum, 11.

¹³¹Alder and Rosenbaum, 13-15.

¹³²Alder and Rosenbaum, 31.

¹³³Alder and Rosenbaum, 31.

¹³⁴Alder and Rosenbaum, 31.

¹³⁵Alder and Rosenbaum, 31.

¹³⁶Alder and Rosenbaum, 31.

Bogost proposes three “purposes of persuasion” that games can realize as instruments of “procedural rhetoric.”¹³⁷ The first, “assessment,” is aligned with power, and “always requires an appeal to an existing domain.”¹³⁸ Assessment measures the results of a procedure against the terms of the situation as it exists now. The second, “deliberation,” “sit[s] ambiguously between the support and ouster of an existing logic.”¹³⁹ Deliberation is the “motivated recognition of the situation’s structure,” which may lead to the reinforcement or challenging of that structure.¹⁴⁰ The third, “conversations,” is the way in which “communities use discourse to establish and refine their beliefs.”¹⁴¹ Conversation “creates and prolongs” the process of deliberation, a sort of *generalized critique*.¹⁴² It is conversation that Bogost ultimately considers to be the process whereby we can “recognize the persuasive and expressive power of procedurality,” seeing how procedures “seed changes in our attitudes, which in turn, and over time, change our culture.”¹⁴³ Conversation is a means for us to be “conscious of the procedural claims we make, why we make them, and what kind of social fabric we hope to cultivate through the processes we unleash on the world.”¹⁴⁴ But if we do not understand Bogost’s conversation in the *militant* register that we encounter in Badiou, such procedural efforts will ultimately be in vain, yet more disruptions to be recuperated by the state.

It is one thing to comment on the effects of a dice-and-level system in tabletop roleplaying games; it is another to design a procedure that shatters that system from within, dismantling its logic and replacing it with something new. Alder and Rosenbaum take the terms of “player” and “character” and “action” and reconfigure their relationships to each other, supplementing them with additional terms like “comfort” and “safety,” extending the situation of play to include ends that would have been impossible in the prior state. *Dream Askew* and *Dream Apart* do not seek to persuade people of their truths, but to militantly elaborate them through play. Emancipatory thought is not a thought of relative positions but of absolute rupture. Truth is an absolute imposition that demands passion, fervour, and commitment from its subjects. To inaugurate a truth procedure is not to persuade another of the reasonableness of one’s own position, but to undertake a criminal enterprise. Truth does not belong to the situation, it comes from outside, it is deemed “illegal” by the state.¹⁴⁵ The nomination of the event of a truth is an “illegal representative” that goes unrecognized by the state.¹⁴⁶ It cannot be recuperated by the state because it demands the emancipation of its subjects, those revealed by the truth procedure to have belonged to it all along,

¹³⁷Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 2007, 317, ix.

¹³⁸Bogost, 322.

¹³⁹Bogost, 333.

¹⁴⁰Bogost, 332.

¹⁴¹Bogost, 335.

¹⁴²Bogost, 333.

¹⁴³Bogost, 340.

¹⁴⁴Bogost, 340.

¹⁴⁵Badiou, *Being and Event*, 2013, 206.

¹⁴⁶Badiou, 208.

to have belonged outside the belonging the state decrees. This is not simply a matter of persuasion, but of revolution, the demonstration of the insufficiency of the state through the retroaction of one's very existence.

When Alder and Rosenbaum pronounce *no dice, no masters*, they begin the elaboration of a truth procedure that they nominate as “Belonging Outside Belonging.”¹⁴⁷ They provide guidelines for their readers to write their own Belonging Outside Belonging games, to effect the procedure in their own localities, to carry it forward in a mode of ongoing intervention, fidelity, and forcing. Belonging Outside Belonging proposes the existence of “marginalized group[s] who've gathered together to build community,” groups that “stand[] in sharp relief to a larger, looming dominant culture.”¹⁴⁸ These groups do not belong to the state, but to the indiscernible of the future situation. And yet, these groups are already here, as the process of forcing reveals, and Alder and Rosenbaum encourage designers to lean in to this, “to start from a place of lived experience and personal affinity.”¹⁴⁹ There is no bar between lived experience and experience at the table, no hierarchy of realities. A given belonging outside belonging is not a situation alternative to the situation, but an otherwise *of* the situation, an “outsiderness” that is “muddy and complicated” insofar as it is “outside the larger culture in one sense, but in other senses . . . entangled with, dispersed throughout, and uneasily pushed up against it.”¹⁵⁰ Play is not a frivolous activity, but a deadly serious enactment of a procedure that cuts across all artificial divisions of the situation and revolts against those who would maintain them.

The event of truth does not entail the end of strife, but often instead its magnification. Alder and Rosenbaum do not shy away from such conflict. Rather, in their fidelity to the truth of the situation, in their militant investigation of the statement *no dice, no masters*, they recognize conflict as being a sign of emancipation to come. The procedures they outline, the two games, *Dream Askew* and *Dream Apart*, consist of sets of processes that invite players into the work of emancipation, to become subjects of the truth of a particular belonging. In turn, Alder and Rosenbaum invite these subjects to write their own belongings, to give names to other truths, to invite other players to continue the work of emancipation. No one of these games, no variant of play, is final, because truths always transcend their finite moments. But truths are also always *here*—to be explored, experimented with, improvised upon, creating ever new subjects through their play. This is the radical fact of the event that Alder and Rosenbaum verify in their design, a fact that they invite others to verify in turn. To describe *Dream Askew / Dream Apart* as a work of procedural rhetoric, as Bogost might, would be too weak. *Dream Askew / Dream Apart* is a handbook for a militant praxis of emancipation.

¹⁴⁷Alder and Rosenbaum, *Dream Askew / Dream Apart*, 162. At the time of writing, there are 98 items with the Belonging Outside Belonging tag on itch.io. This is an excellent place to begin exploring: <https://itch.io/physical-games/tag-belonging-outside-belonging>.

¹⁴⁸Alder and Rosenbaum, 162.

¹⁴⁹Alder and Rosenbaum, 162.

¹⁵⁰Alder and Rosenbaum, 162.

Conclusion

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière uses his project of ignorance to open a discussion of the “paradox of the spectator”: the spectator is not necessary for theatrical performance but “there is no theatre without the spectator.”¹⁵¹ A performance can indeed take place without an audience. Spectation does not contribute to the performance; it is passivity, the “opposite” both of “knowing” and “acting.”¹⁵² Indeed, Rancière notes that throughout the history of the theatre, spectation is considered a “bad thing,” a poorer or lesser thing, than the performance of what is spectated.¹⁵³ And yet, without the spectator, there is no *theatre*. Such is the paradox to be overcome.

A “true community” of the theatre would “not tolerate theatrical mediation,” its “measure” instead “directly incorporated into the living attitude of its members.”¹⁵⁴ To arrive at such a community, a “different theatre” is required, “a theatre without spectators: not a theatre played out in front of empty seats, but a theatre where the passive optical relationship implied by the very term is subjected to a different relationship,” which Rancière names “*drama*.”¹⁵⁵ Drama, as opposed to theatre, would pull the spectator “into the magical circle of theatrical action.”¹⁵⁶ Rancière identifies two exemplary dramatic projects working toward this end: Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theatre” and Antonin Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty.”¹⁵⁷ Brechtian drama is “an assembly in which ordinary people become aware of their situation and discuss their interests”; Artaudian drama is a “purifying ritual in which a community is put in possession of its own energies.”¹⁵⁸ Each dramatic project relies on “the Romantic vision of truth as non-separation” and seeks to “restor[e] to spectators ownership of their consciousness and their activity.”¹⁵⁹ Drama accomplishes the work of a “self-vanishing mediation,” drawing the spectator from the “evil of spectacle” to the “virtue of true theatre.”¹⁶⁰ But, as we have already seen above, such self-vanishing mediation is not ultimately emancipatory but stultifying. This mediation is “the very logic of the pedagogical relationship,” positioning the spectator as the “ignoramus” to be educated.¹⁶¹

I have argued elsewhere that tabletop roleplaying games, especially the sub-genre of lyric games (a set in which many Belonging Outside Belonging can be included), operate in the same tradition as Brechtian theatre and other active arts that rose to prominence in the twentieth century.¹⁶² I would still maintain that there is

¹⁵¹Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2021, 2.

¹⁵²Rancière, 2.

¹⁵³Rancière, 2.

¹⁵⁴Rancière, 3.

¹⁵⁵Rancière, 3.

¹⁵⁶Rancière, 4.

¹⁵⁷Rancière, 4.

¹⁵⁸Rancière, 6.

¹⁵⁹Rancière, 7.

¹⁶⁰Rancière, 7.

¹⁶¹Rancière, 7.

¹⁶²Eric Stein, “Bodies in Form, 2: Tabletop Roleplaying as Cosmic Poetics” (May 28, 2021),

something structurally radical to such games, something that responds directly to the concerns Brecht and Artaud sought to address. But if we position tabletop roleplaying games, lyric games, Belonging Outside Belonging games, as some mystery into which players must be inducted, if we treat players of mainstream games like *Dungeons & Dragons* as passive ignoramuses requiring education, we unwittingly negate the emancipatory energy that our games hold, stultifying our players before they have a chance to see for themselves, to say what they have seen and what they think about what they have seen, and to have their experience verified by others in the community of play. In short, if we take such a position we become the pedagogues, the dogmatists, the fascists, the tyrants, policing the intelligences of others and instituting, over and over again, the bar between ignorance and knowledge.

Dream Askew / Dream Apart does no such thing, and so if we are to remain committed to the truth of the event it names, elaborating its terms with the fervour of a militant fidelity, investigating and working to verify the statement *no dice, no masters*, we cannot be so presumptuous as to take up the position of masters ourselves. It is “not a matter of making great” *players*; “it’s a matter of making the emancipated: people capable of saying, ‘me too,’” *I play too*.¹⁶³ There is no pride in this simple statement, “only the reasonable feeling of power that belongs to any reasonable being.”¹⁶⁴ As Rancière powerfully argues, pride “consists in saying softly to others: You neither,” *you do not play*, not correctly, not in truth.¹⁶⁵ This is in no way to vindicate the maintenance of power by power, not to prop up the positions of tyrannical game masters. We verify the *equality of intelligence* but not the equality of its *manifestations*. But it is to say that one who does not play indie tabletop games, who has never heard of Belonging Outside Belonging, still “acts,” still “observes, selects, compares, interprets,” still “links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen” at other tables, “in other kinds of place.”¹⁶⁶ To assert otherwise is not to do the work of emancipation, but to maintain yet another “embodied allegor[y] of inequality.”¹⁶⁷

Our procedures make no guarantees, even the most radical of procedures, as I have argued of Belonging Outside Belonging. We cannot “presuppose an identity between cause and effect,” because the play itself is “an autonomous thing,” the “third thing” between the one who knows and the one who does not-yet-know.¹⁶⁸ Play is “alien to both,” the elaboration of an event “to which they can refer to verify in common” what the one who does not-yet-know “has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it.”¹⁶⁹ Play is “owned by no one,” its “meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any

<https://zenodo.org/record/4824078>.

¹⁶³Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1991, 66-67.

¹⁶⁴Rancière, 67.

¹⁶⁵Rancière, 67.

¹⁶⁶Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2021, 13.

¹⁶⁷Rancière, 12.

¹⁶⁸Rancière, 14.

¹⁶⁹Rancière, 15.

uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect.”¹⁷⁰ Certainly, I believe that games in the Belonging Outside Belonging genre, and lyric games in general, have “produced many enrichments” of tabletop roleplaying, just as Brecht and Artaud did for theatre.¹⁷¹ But these enrichments do not guarantee a particular reception, only the extension of a situation that each subject must observe, say, and verify for themselves. Rancière makes the point most compellingly:

This shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals, makes them exchange their intellectual adventures, in so far as it keeps them separate from one another, equally capable of using the power everyone has to plot her own path. What our performances—be they teaching or playing, speaking, writing, making art or looking at it—verify is not our participation in a power embodied in the community. It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else. This capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations.¹⁷²

When it comes to tabletop roleplaying games, a particular procedural form may be more or less illustrative or inspiring, more or less provocative to this or that player. But there is “no more a privileged form than there is a privileged starting point.”¹⁷³ Rancière maintains that “[e]verywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions that enable us to learn something new.”¹⁷⁴ Rancière hopes to “restore” the “theatrical stage” to an “equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image.”¹⁷⁵ We might add, *play at the table* to this list. His vision is for a “new scene of equality where heterogeneous performances are translated into one another,” where experience becomes a game becomes a story becomes a theatrical performance becomes an experience for another, and another, another. . . . *Everywhere there are starting points*, everywhere there are things to learn, to say, narrate, to translate. To work in this new scene of equality is to work with a “better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in.”¹⁷⁶ And indeed, to play a Belonging Outside Belonging game in this mode is to militantly work toward such emancipatory change, one table at a time.

¹⁷⁰Rancière, 15.

¹⁷¹Rancière, 15.

¹⁷²Rancière, 17.

¹⁷³Rancière, 17.

¹⁷⁴Rancière, 17.

¹⁷⁵Rancière, 22.

¹⁷⁶Rancière, 23.

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