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Dimension 20 and Collaborative Moral Imagination

"Safe Harbor," the ninth episode of *Dimension 20: A Crown of Candy* (Dropout, 2020), opens as all episodes of this season do, with a roaming camera traversing a map that is at once familiar and not. Geographically, the map is recognizable as inspired by Westeros from George R. R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* (1996), but instead of the standard trappings of high fantasy, we see steaks and pizza and cereal and rock candy delimiting the borders of this fantasy continent, named Calorum. The camera slows at the bottom of the map and the title card appears, with "A Crown of Candy" displayed in a font that confirms the reference to *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–2019). As the series' game master, Brennan Lee Mulligan, has confirmed, the core idea for this show was *Game of Thrones* meets the board game *Candy Land* (1948).

The episode cuts to Mulligan, who welcomes the audience, along with the cast, configured in their typical arrangement around the game table: Ally Beardsley, Brian Murphy, and Emily Axford to Mulligan's left, and Zac Oyama, Lou Wilson, and Siobhan Thompson to his right. The visual form of the show cuts between these three master shots and close-ups of each performer. For *A Crown of Candy*, this arrangement positions Axford and Thompson, whose characters are sisters, next to each other physically at the end of the table, though they are never in the same shot. With that, Mulligan

begins a *previously on* summary of recent events in the series and a recap of the previous episode. During the synopsis, the players regularly interject commentary about the figures described by Mulligan ("House Bleu . . . More like House Boo") or Mulligan's incessant punning (Mulligan: "their ship was scuttled by the Dairy Air"; Thompson: "Stupid"; Mulligan: "no, not stupid. In fact, great").

As the episode shifts from summary to game-play, one of the unique features of tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) appears: the players are able to move seamlessly between talking within and beyond the game world. For example, Thompson asks Mulligan a question about the rules of succession in this medieval fantasy world, particularly concerning Beardsley's character, and following Brennan's response, Beardsley and Axford start speaking as their characters discussing these rules and their feelings about being royalty. The atmosphere at the table feels half like a pitch meeting, with jokes flying back and forth, and half like a serious performance space, with the players embodying the characters they have developed for the series.

This gets to one of the difficulties of describing actual play shows. If you try to simply describe narrative (maybe diegetic) events, it requires not only disavowing the disjunction between what we see (players at the table) and the location of the diegesis (the theater of the mind) but also ignoring how conversation between the players-as-players informs and prompts the conversation between the players-as-characters. While TTRPGs encourage participants to speak in the first-person present-tense as players and discourage engagement in meta-gaming or table talk (relying on your knowledge outside the game world rather than playing your character based on what they would know and do), that boundary is necessarily porous. When the game master asks a player for a roll of the dice, the player has to respond with the numerical result of the roll, information their character does not have in-world, but players aim for immersion, reacting as their characters in the moment when something happens in the world. The improvisational atmosphere of these players at this table emphasizes the porousness that allows them to slip in and out of character and makes necessary that we track both the reality of the game world and the materiality of the table as we account for what we are seeing.

In the game world, "Safe Harbor" narrates King Amethar Rocks (Wilson), his daughters Ruby (Thompson) and Jet (Axford), bodyguard Theobold (Murphy), ward Liam (Beardsley), and cousin Cumulous (Oyama) returning to their home, Castle Candy, after many episodes of danger and conflict. A sense of normalcy and comfort emerges in the slippage between character and player, a sense that the players can let their guards down and reflect on the drama of the situation they find themselves in. King Amethar has to talk with his wife about secrets that have compromised their safety and marriage while Theobold wrestles with having failed to protect the royal family. In short, the pause in the action provides moments for the adult characters to live in the reality in which they find themselves.

Meanwhile, the three teenagers, Jet, Ruby, and Liam, finally get to be teenagers again, "hearts full of sugar and mischief," and go off on their

own to investigate gossip about Jet and Ruby's parents. Leaving the ostensible safety of the castle, Mulligan cuts away from the teenagers, and both Axford and Thompson have knowing looks on their faces as if the cut were a cliffhanger, portentous because there is no going back. When a player at a *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) table says something happens, it actually happens in almost all circumstances. Different systems of play will have different boundaries and prescriptions about this, but neither the other players nor the game master can simply stop your character from doing something when you say it happens. Indeed, it is the job of game master to help you translate your intentions into mechanical effects of the game system.[1] There may be repercussions from your actions at your table (e.g., don't be an asshole or people won't want to play with you), but the more interesting dynamic is how repercussions play out in the game world.

Before returning to the teenagers, Mulligan cuts to Amethar in a meeting with an ally who proceeds to literally stab him in the back. The tone of the episode darkens here as the players realize that the comfort of safety was merely a veneer. When Mulligan cuts back to the teenagers, the danger of the situation has registered for the players, though not for their characters, in a transformation from shock to fear. As the cliffhanger resolves and the teenagers are attacked in an ambush, Axford and Thompson look on the verge of tears and begin holding hands. Appearing in separate shots, Thompson reaches out of frame to Axford as we cut to Axford taking her hand. Axford thematizes these developments, noting that the danger Jet, Ruby, and Liam face is precisely a consequence of acting like teenagers ("I can't believe that the message from this is that we're poorly behaved"). Attacks land on Ruby and Jet, and it's clear that death is a real threat here because there is neither aid on the way nor an obvious means of escaping their fate together. As Mulligan announces the damage the sisters take from the attacks, Jet falls unconscious, dying, while Ruby has only a limited amount of health remaining. Axford, now incapable of acting, begins rolling death-saving throws to see if Jet will die while Thompson has a look of absolute dread on her face as she realizes that there is nothing Ruby can do to save her sister. Thompson begins describing an attack on the sisters' assailants, but Axford and Beardsley tell her, urgently and definitively, to run. The diegetic status of these appeals to Thompson are suspect. Although in the game world these characters are shrouded in darkness, the tone of the appeal from Axford and Beardsley obscures the player/character division because it sounds like Jet and Liam, if they could actually speak. Thompson follows the advice to run knowing that the choice means permanent death for Jet. The combat ends. Jet dies. Both Thompson and Axford begin crying. Even Mulligan looks misty-eyed while describing the closing moments of the episode, resolving the very likely fatal attack on King Amethar (Wilson). Thompson (Ruby) now reaches over to hold Wilson as dice are rolled and rules are checked to see if his character can survive,

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1   Jon Peterson, "The Role of the Referee," in *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).

and a rush of relief comes over the table when, miraculously, he does. That relief is short lived though, as Mulligan narrates King Amethar learning of his daughter's death.

What I want to assert is that "Safe Harbor" in its form and in the affects it arouses tells us something about the nature of collaboration in creative contexts. What happens in this episode relies on three factors that constitute creative collaboration: trust, heterarchy, and contingency. First, the players agree to both act in the world of the game and be bound by one another's actions. There is thus a certain minimum trust required for the game to function because it operates on a heterarchical basis, in which "each element is ruled equally by all the others."[2] Furthermore, they also agree to be bound by the randomness and contingency of dice rolls. As Mulligan says in the aftershow podcast accompanying the episode, "That's why this type of storytelling, where you invite collaboration from little math rocks, is as gripping as it is."[3] Things could have been otherwise; the players could have made different decisions, and the dice could have resulted in more positive outcomes. More concretely, Jet's death was not inevitable. It was the result of risky behavior and two unlucky dice rolls. She could have survived, but she didn't, and the performers, their characters, and importantly the audience have to live with those results.

In another episode of the aftershow podcast from this season, the performers discuss a skeptical online comment asserting that the show is scripted. In response, Thompson makes an astute observation about how such a process would have to look: "What we would do is, if we were writing it, just play the game that we play and then write that down and then do it again."[4] In other words, the form the show takes requires actually playing the game, whether the camera is rolling as they play or not, with each player giving themselves over to the trust, contingency, and heterarchy of play. These elements provide the open-endedness constitutive of roleplaying games, which in turn gives the events their weight.

While the role of heterarchical collaboration and contingency helps us describe one aspect of what happens in "Safe Harbor," another aspect is that the people who work at Dropout are both co-workers and friends.[5] The teary emotional reactions from performers and audience alike derive at least in part from the (perceived) authenticity of their relationships. All of what I have so far described—the silliness of the premise that is *Candy Land* meets *Game of Thrones*, the alternation between player and character, and the fact of watching a bunch of grown adults play a game for hours every week—is backstopped by the real relationships between the performers and between

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2   Seymour Papert, *The Children's Machine: Rethinking School in the Age of the Computer* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

3   *Dimension 20: Adventuring Party*, season 1, episode 9, "Slammed Down, Big Style," aired June 10, 2020, on Dropout.tv.

4   *Dimension 20: Adventuring Party*, season 1, episode 1, "Are the Dice Scripted?," aired April 8, 2020, on Dropout.tv.

5   Thompson and Axford describe each other as "best friends" explicitly in the *Adventuring Party* episode "Are the Dice Scripted?"

the performers and their characters. As the performers describe on the post-show podcast:

> **Siobhan:** It was so hard going in to work the next day after this, feeling the very, very real emotions of having my twin die and have to be like, "I'm just feeling really sad today 'cause my twin died in D&D. A fake game that's not real."
>
> **Emily:** And my twin is a piece of licorice. I am as well.
>
> **Zac:** Impossible to explain to anyone.[6]

The real human performers on our screens and their relationships with one another and with their characters are not fictional. Put another way, because we see the performers in and out of character we start from a position of trust and belief rather than disbelief. But trust isn't trust without some form of risk. In this case, there is risk that the idyllic vision of collaboration underlying that trust could be undermined in the future should the relationships undergirding this collaboration break down. After all, this is a workplace for the players involved, even though the relationships between players feel personal and authentic. Conceiving of the workplace as a space of friendship or family immediately raises concerns about what Jeff Menne calls "the emancipated workplace," which displaces problems of economic exploitation through a vision of the workplace as a kind of family.[7]

The most prominent recent example of the false emancipated workplace is the *Bon Appétit* Test Kitchen prior to June 2020. The popular YouTube channel, known for its compelling and earnestly friendly contributors, collapsed first through the resurfacing of photos of the magazine's editor-in-chief appearing in brownface and then through the revelation that the channel's performers of color received lower compensation than their white counterparts, among other forms of racial and gendered discrimination.[8] The fandom surrounding the Test Kitchen had taken on a distinctly parasocial character, and the response from fans to these revelations was disappointment, betrayal, and anger. The risk attendant to fans of *Dimension 20* and other shows produced by Dropout is that the same thing could happen to them and the artists they admire and like.

I want to end by suggesting that this kind of risk is ultimately inevitable in any kind of parasocial relationship and that the fact of this risk should not dissuade us from engaging in deeply personal(ly) affecting works such as "Safe Harbor." Pulling from John Dewey's aesthetic philosophy, these kinds of connections and the risks they entail are part of a fulfilling environment of aesthetic expression. Dewey's aesthetic philosophy aims to undermine the

6   *Dimension 20: Adventuring Party*, "Slammed Down, Big Style."

7   Jeff Menne, *Post-Fordist Cinema: Hollywood Auteurs and the Corporate Counter-culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

8   Chris Crowley, "Six *Bon Appétit* Stars Have Now Exited the Test Kitchen," *The Cut*, August 12, 2020, accessed June 25, 2024, https://www.thecut.com/2020/08/three-bon-appetit-test-kitchen-stars-quit.html.

attitude toward art in which "art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement."[9] While actual play shows such as "Safe Harbor" show the impossibility of reliably maintaining that separation in a delimited domain, I think the lesson is more capacious than that. Showing collaborative creation in this way reminds us that the reason we should take the risk of trusting the good faith of artists is that to not take that risk erects a barrier between our experience of art and our everyday lives. In short, the works produced by Dropout and their formal modes of collaboration demonstrate the potential for a vision of aesthetic production that is properly friendly, loving, and, indeed, collaborative.

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9   John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Perigee, 2005).