

Justice: A Role-Immersion Game for Teaching Political Philosophy

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This is an uncorrected author's draft of an article that appears in *Teaching Philosophy*. The early view version of the paper is at <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil202085125>.

Abstract: We created *Justice: The Game*, an educational, role-immersion game designed to be used in political philosophy courses. We seek to describe *Justice* in sufficient detail so that it is understandable to readers not already familiar with role-immersion pedagogy. We hope some instructors will be sufficiently interested to use the game. In addition to describing the game we also evaluate it, thereby highlighting the pedagogical potential of role-immersion games designed to teach philosophy. We analyze the game by drawing on our observations as designers and playtesters of *Justice*, along with feedback from students obtained in focus-groups conducted shortly after playtesting ended. We present evidence that *Justice*, compared to conventional instructional methods alone, plausibly enhances student learning of philosophical skills and content by requiring them to practice those skills and put their content-area knowledge to use in a highly-motivating and engaging context.

1. Introduction

Role-immersion games are thought to be an especially effective approach to active-learning.² Faculty who have implemented role-immersion games have found them to be a highly engaging way of helping students learn course material while developing communication and collaboration skills. Recent research has suggested that while role-immersion games not specifically designed for teaching philosophy can be successfully adapted to that purpose, they are not without their limitations.³

Notably, existing role-immersion games are not designed with the philosophy classroom in mind. That is, they are designed to support general learning outcomes or those of other disciplines, rather than outcomes such as reading and analyzing philosophical texts and evaluating, constructing and communicating arguments. Indeed, existing role-immersion games may well come at the cost of philosophical skills and understanding.⁴ Moreover, some games, as designed, are insufficiently open-ended for use in many philosophy classrooms, since they are set in a historical or cultural context that constrains the space of possible views or lines of argument available to the roles students will play. So, while these games can be implemented across instructional contexts, their ability to support the pedagogical aims specific to the philosophy classroom is imperfect.⁵

While existing role-immersion games can be adapted by philosophy instructors to better suit their aims, this presents its own challenges. First, it can be laborious. Second, its success is far from guaranteed. Third, it can have unforeseen results, depending on the design of the adapted game. While these challenges are hardly insurmountable, they are non-trivial, suggesting an unmet need: role-immersion games tailored to the philosophy classroom. With this in mind, we created *Justice: The Game* (hereafter, *Justice*), an educational, role-immersion game designed explicitly to teach philosophical content and skills in the context of political philosophy courses.⁶

In what follows we seek to describe *Justice* in sufficient detail so that it is understandable to readers not already familiar with role-immersion pedagogy. We hope some instructors will be sufficiently interested in using the game to access the game materials at the web site referred to below.⁷ In addition to describing the game we also evaluate it, thereby highlighting the pedagogical potential of role-immersion games designed to teach political philosophy. We analyze the game by drawing on our observations as designers and playtesters of *Justice*, along with feedback from students obtained in focus-groups conducted shortly after playtesting ended. We present evidence that *Justice*, compared to conventional instructional methods alone, plausibly enhances student learning of philosophical skills and content by requiring them to practice those skills and put their content-area knowledge to use in a highly-motivating and engaging context.⁸ At the same time we note challenges that come with using this approach. On the whole our analysis suggests that a role-immersion game like *Justice*, which is tailored to its subject matter, can be especially valuable as a supplement to conventional instruction, introducing elements of active learning and student interaction that are infrequently emphasized in traditional political philosophy classrooms. What's more, *Justice* helps students experience, for themselves, the connections between philosophical theorizing, policy, and the lives they lead—a difficult gap to span via conventional means alone.

2. Justice: Concept and Design

Every role-immersion game requires a setting, explicit or not. In *Justice*, students likewise have roles and goals to achieve in-play as they work to pass consequential proposals. *Justice* is set in the legislative assembly of a contemporary state. In-class game sessions are student-run and managed with instructors serving as “Gamemasters” (GMs) that facilitate play.

Justice is most appropriate for instructional settings where course content relating to political philosophy is delivered in a traditional, lecture-based format. It is important to emphasize that *Justice* is best viewed as a supplement to material conveyed in this traditional manner, and is most effective in settings where students have read and discussed the material in advance. (As we discuss at length below, we playtested *Justice* during the final three weeks of a ten-week quarter course in political philosophy aimed at undergraduates, many of whom were not philosophy majors.) The unique contribution of *Justice* is in concretizing the course material and making explicit its practical consequences, dramatically increasing student uptake and enhancing learning outcomes. We expect this feature to be of broad interest to political philosophy instructors.

Game Concept

Each student plays the role aligned with an assigned political philosopher or theory, from whose point of view they give speeches, write essays and engage in debate. Key objectives include (1) increasing student familiarity with the philosophical texts on which roles are based, (2) promoting active learning and application of concepts to concrete issues, and (3) improving student comfort and facility with debate and public speaking. Class sessions are run entirely by students; instructors are present to advise and guide, as well as to evaluate student speeches and writing.

The game takes place in an alternate universe, in the same country in which the game is being played. Students are organized into a unicameral National Assembly, which is the sole organ of government. Membership in this assembly is divided on an ideological basis, consisting of three main factions and numerous indeterminate roles between (and beyond) them. Where players in a faction work together, indeterminates pursue individual goals.

Students take on the role of representatives who are proponents of particular philosophical positions. While “in character”, they give speeches, write essays, and vote on motions. Each role begins with 50

assembly votes: each player is imagined to represent a block of 50 legislators who vote in unison. As gameplay progresses, players can gain additional votes for especially commendable play.⁹

The presiding Speaker of the Assembly, elected from among the representatives, is empowered to invoke cloture and sets the agenda for assembly meetings based on player input. The assembly's rules are up to the students, subject to minimal constraints: the Speaker begins the game with the powers just described, motions or resolutions are to be proposed, discussed, and then voted on, and (time permitting) all who wish to address the assembly to discuss a motion/resolution may do so.¹⁰ And while the game in principle grants the assembly extremely broad powers, in practice the assembly's ability to revise its procedures is limited by two considerations. Role sheets, which are players' primary game documents (see below), direct them to focus on substantive rather than procedural legislation. In addition, procedural changes that reduce the ability of any students to fully participate in the game defeat its purpose, and so should not be allowed by the GM.

Over the course of multiple game sessions, the starting agenda calls for votes on several important issues of concrete political philosophy. Students are free to modify the agenda with majority support, including modification (or removal) of existing items or the addition of entirely new resolutions. The game is designed to elicit fierce competition to add issues to the agenda, and this competition introduces substantial pressure to present one's own issues in a manner consonant with the objectives of other factions or indeterminates, promoting the stated learning objectives. Alliances formed over the course of play tend to reflect actual points of agreement among the philosophical factions represented.

As students run game sessions themselves, the instructor's role as GM is primarily to facilitate gameplay in the few cases where it is required. For example, the GM might remind a passive student of the importance of making a speech or clarify a point of procedure or time management with the Speaker.

Justice is unlikely to produce straightforward winners and losers. Players do better in the game by persuading the assembly to pass legislation furthering their role's objectives. In *Justice*, as in political life more broadly, victories are often incomplete, and so a given playthrough of the game is apt to produce a mix of victories and defeats for many players.

Roles and Factions

Three multi-member "factions" are present in the game. They include a Libertarian faction, which pursues a legislative agenda based on the work of Robert Nozick and F.A. Hayek; an opposing Uniform Liberal faction, whose policy goals are inspired by the work of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin; and a Difference Liberal faction, inspired by Will Kymlicka and Alan Patten, who pursue their own objectives which variously conflict or overlap with those of the other two factions. Different numbers of students can be assigned to each faction depending on the size of the class. In initial playtesting each faction had three members, each of whom was given the same role sheet outlining the faction's commitments and goals.

Remaining students play individual roles based on works by particular political philosophers who are not beholden to any faction. These "indeterminate" characters are free-agents who have policy agendas of their own, some of which overlap with those of one or more faction, some of which strongly oppose a particular faction's goals, and some of which are of unclear relation to any faction's agenda. The game includes role sheets for characters based on works by Elizabeth Anderson, Richard Arneson, Joseph Carens, Chandran Kukathas, Alasdair MacIntyre, John Stuart Mill, Martha Nussbaum, Susan Moller Okin, Derek Parfit, Amartya Sen, Judith Shklar, Peter Singer, K.C. Tan, and Michael Walzer. For each role, students receive a "role sheet" of 2-3 pages summarizing the views of their assigned philosopher and suggesting further reading.¹¹

Figure 1: A sample assembly – of 21 seats total, 9 are occupied by factions and 12 by indeterminates.

DIFFERENCE LIBERALISM	MILL	KUKATHAS		PARFIT	MACINTYRE	LIBERTARIAN
DIFFERENCE LIBERALISM	TAN	ANDERSON	WALZER	SHKLAR	ARNESON	LIBERTARIAN
	DIFFERENCE LIBERALISM	NUSSBAUM	OKIN	SEN	LIBERTARIAN	
		UNIFORM LIBERALISM	UNIFORM LIBERALISM	UNIFORM LIBERALISM		

Importantly, each indeterminate role is based on one article or chapter by a given philosopher, many (but not all) of which had been assigned to all students earlier in the course. The Arnesonian character, for example, is only responsible for the ideas contained in Arneson’s essay “Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare,” not Arneson’s corpus as a whole. Similarly, students in factions are obliged to master only two or three texts in total by the two thinkers with which their faction was aligned.

By design, players have the opportunity to become acquainted with the core texts on which roles other than their own are based, but they are only expected to be deeply familiar with the text(s) behind their own roles. So, while the game does not expect players to have access to others’ role sheets (though it does not preclude the possibility, either), each player has the resources to understand the views and corresponding reasoning motivating other players in the game.

3. Justice: Using the Game

A complete guide to using the game is found in the Gamemaster’s Guide (GM Guide), available at <https://andylamey.com>. The page hosting the game requires a password, which can be obtained by emailing the third author listed above.¹² The game as a whole consists of this document, the 15 separate role sheets for faction members and indeterminates and an optional player’s guide, all available for free at the same site. The GM Guide is confidential, in order to ensure that no students gain an advantage by coming across a public version, and to preserve an element of mystery regarding mystery roles, described below, and other game elements. For these reasons we do not reproduce the GM Guide in its entirety here, and instead provide a general overview of using the game for potential practitioners. Readers who have questions concerning game mechanics or other details are encouraged to consult the GM guide.¹²

Role Sheets

GMs have the option of providing players with a two-page players guide that answers generic questions about the game, which is also available at the site mentioned above. For students playing the game however the most important document is their role sheet. It provides specific guidance on what their objective are and tips and strategies on how to achieve them.

For the game to work, students should have access only to their own role sheet. Instead of including an actual role sheet in this article, which would make a confidential document public, we have included a role sheet written specifically for illustrative purposes as Appendix B.¹³ It is based on Charles Taylor's well-known essay, "The Politics of Recognition."

The Taylor role-sheet follows the typical role-sheet template. A broad overview of the thinker's ideas is followed by specific guidance on how the role relates to specific resolutions that are default topics in the game. While most indeterminates are open to working with anyone, the Taylor's character's objectives are broadly similar to those of the difference liberal faction, and so the role sheet emphasizes trying to work with them.

All role sheets include specific "Victory Objectives" with point values assigned to them. Objectives of central import to a role are assigned relatively higher point values than those of peripheral import. While all members of a given faction share the same objectives, it is common for members of different factions or indeterminates to have objectives in tension with one another. In the case of the Taylor character, the role sheet encourages the player to regard the libertarian faction as their opponent.

While the victory objectives label suggests that players might "win" the game by earning the most points, these point values are primarily used to signal to students how important a given game outcome should be to them, in play, and to give some guidance where their role sheets underdetermine the sorts of policies the assembly considered. Not every objective is equally possible to achieve, given the balance of viewpoints and objectives present in various roles. Even so, the roles and their victory objectives are designed to loosely balance the background probability of successes and failures for all players, such that no faction or indeterminate role is likely to achieve total victory, or defeat.

Grading students on whether or not they achieve their victory objectives is strongly discouraged. This is order to avoid students becoming fixated on securing victory above all else, and also because students should not be formally assessed on something that is ultimately beyond their control. The GM should rather make clear that they are graded on their participation. GMs do have the option of discussing victory objectives in the discussion that follows the last game session (See "Post-mortem," below).

Role Selection

Instructors have discretion regarding which of the 15 pre-existing indeterminate roles to include in a given game. We find an ideal number of players to be 20-24, half in factions and half as indeterminates. This allowed for sustained debate from multiple perspectives with sufficient time for each student to participate over the course of a standard game, which is typically four classes followed by a fifth class devoted to the post-mortem. Because the game is designed to be used with 20-24 players, game sessions should be at a minimum 50 minutes. The default game resolutions can also sustain the same number of students over four 80-minute sessions at a more relaxed pace of play. In most game sessions students will want time to meet and negotiate before voting on one or more resolutions. The student who plays the role of speaker has discretion over meeting time, which can be shortened or lengthened depending on how much time is available.

An odd number of players is desirable (to facilitate voting) but not required. In larger classes, we anticipate that indeterminate roles could be shared by two or more students, allowing them to make collaborative speeches and proposals. The number of indeterminates can also be easily raised or lowered without affecting the core procedures of play, enabling classes of varying sizes to participate. While the game can be used with fewer than 20 players it requires shrinking factions from three to two members each. As there should be more indeterminates than faction members the absolute minimum number of players is 13. Games with more than 24 players are likely to be unwieldy for all but the most experienced GMs.

Role Assignments

Instructors can choose among different methods of assigning students their roles. Roles may be assigned randomly, chosen by students, or instructors may choose to handpick which students are assigned which roles. As the game is intended to be used at the end of a semester or quarter, GMs will have a record of which students are academically strong: these students should be spread among factions and indeterminates, rather than concentrated in one faction.

The GM guide includes a questionnaire that can be given to students to solicit information relevant to gameplay, such as how comfortable they are with public speaking. This allows the GM to cast roles in a manner that ensures that confident speakers are again spread out across roles rather than concentrated in a single faction.

A particularly helpful aspect of the questionnaire is that it assesses individual student interest in so-called mystery roles. These are roles based on readings that, unlike standard roles, are not covered in class lectures or discussion. Mystery roles are optional. The advantage of including some is that it allows the GM to include roles based on readings that they were not able to cover in class due to time or other constraints. Mystery roles also introduce an element of intrigue to the game, as they give the student the option of withholding their identity from other players.

A student playing the Taylor role, for example, might find it advantageous to present themselves as a utilitarian. This could allow them to obtain information from the libertarians or other players that they secretly transmitted to the difference liberals. Such a strategy would require the student to provide some explanation as to why they consistently voted with the difference liberals, and so may not be sustainable over the entire game. On the other hand an academically strong student might well come up with convincing utilitarian explanations for all their votes.

A disadvantage of mystery roles is that they require a student who plays one to familiarize themselves with an additional reading beyond those on the syllabus. They may be challenging for students with extensive commitments outside of class or who are academically struggling. GMs are advised to only consider students who indicate an openness to mystery roles in their questionnaires. The game includes a role sheet based on an article by Joseph Carens that works well as a mystery role, as it is easy for an undergraduate to understand without instructor assistance.

Assembly Agenda

The first order of game-business is the election of the speaker. The player who occupies this influential position oversees the running of the assembly. The speaker schedule resolutions to be voted on, call for votes and determine when and for how long the assembly can break for meeting time. The election is best held in the final 15 minutes of the class *before* the first game session: doing so gives students a taste of public speaking before the game begins in earnest and makes the first session less hectic and hurried. Role sheets require each faction to nominate one member to stand for election. Similarly, the role sheets of

several indeterminates strongly encourage them to also run. Before the election is held the class should arrange classroom furniture to resemble an assembly: one natural arrangement is to place libertarians on the right, difference liberals on the left and uniform liberals and indeterminates in the center. Precise location is less important than that members of each faction should sit together. Rearranging furniture, however it is done, symbolizes entry into the gameworld.

During the first game session the assembly is required to vote on the welfare resolution. This resolution reads in its entirety:

Economic inequalities will only be permissible if they are to the benefit of the worst off members of society. The worst off members of society are those who have less than half the median level of wealth and income.

This resolution affirms a Rawlsian approach to welfare and is sponsored by the uniform liberals: their role sheets and victory objectives require them to pass it. If the assembly appears unwilling to pass it outright the uniform liberals will need to pass a resolution that comes as close to it as possible. The game rules require that the assembly vote on some version of this resolution during the first game session. A normal occurrence during the first session is for the speaker to call for meeting time, after which uniform liberals speak in favour of the resolution and the libertarians speak against it. Other players will support, oppose or propose amending the resolution according to how they interpret their role sheets. It is not unusual for the assembly to vote on the welfare resolution with time to spare, and for enterprising players to propose new resolutions, as suggested by their role sheets.

The default resolution of the second session concerns open borders. It states in full:

State and international borders shall henceforth be opened to allow the free passage of citizens and non-citizens alike. This free movement shall be restricted only in specific instances in which its allowance would thereby violate individual rights or their necessary protection.

The default resolution of the third session concerns the rights of Indigenous people (native Americans). It states in full:

In a previous meeting the national assembly voted to strip Indigenous peoples of their cultural rights. Tribal courts, the reserve system and government support for Indigenous languages were all abolished. These elements should be fully restored in order to protect Indigenous peoples from unwanted assimilation.¹⁴

The open borders and Indigenous rights resolutions are sponsored by the libertarian and difference liberal factions respectively. Both factions are just as invested in passing some version of their sponsored legislation as the uniform liberals are in passing the welfare resolution. The latter two resolutions differ from the welfare resolution, however, which is the subject of a mandatory vote in the first session in order to give some direction to the game when students are still familiarizing themselves with it. The open borders and Indigenous rights resolutions are the default topics for subsequent sessions so as to increase the possibility that the assembly gets to them. However, because the game is meant to be student run, the assembly also has the option of delaying either resolution to a later session or even ignoring them altogether. (The indigenous rights resolution also draws attention to a vote that occurred before the game begins, and so contributes toward “worldbuilding” the universe of the game.)

Instructors can shape the content of these initial resolutions to reflect the particular aims of the course, but the general idea is that the initial agenda should include contentious issues of genuine importance and

contemporary relevance, to which students will be able to react “in character” on the basis of their assigned roles.

It is open to members of the assembly to propose amendments to any resolution, including the welfare resolution. As such, part of the drama of the game can involve vigorous debate and negotiation as to which particular amendment will be voted through.

The fourth session does not come with any required or default resolutions. This is in order to leave time for resolutions that indeterminates are sure to propose, in keeping with their role sheets. GMs can familiarize themselves with resolutions of the kind indeterminates will propose by reading two or three indeterminate role sheets before the game.

Speeches

Student speeches can in principle be on any topic, including what procedures the assembly should use to conduct its business. In general however their role sheets direct them to give speeches that seek to achieve two broad goals. The first is to show mastery of their role and its philosophy. The second is to achieve passage of their favored resolutions. Given the nature of the resolutions their roles require them to support, these goals normally go hand in hand. It is also in keeping with all student’s role and objectives to challenge the philosophy of other factions or indeterminates, a form of speech-making that experience suggests many students will perform with enthusiasm.

GMs have the option of requiring students to meet a minimum total speaking time. In a standard game of 20 players and four 50-minute game sessions, for example, students can be required to deliver speeches totaling at least five minutes in length over the course of the four game sessions, i.e. averaging 75 seconds per session. Repeatedly drawing this requirement to players’ attention evens out disparities in speaking time by obliging reluctant students to participate. It also encourages particularly vocal students to limit their own speaking time to allow for widespread participation. In games with more than 24 players that do not have correspondingly longer game sessions enforcing the rule becomes unwieldy. It is therefore not recommended for larger game.

Voting

Students have freedom to vote in any manner they wish, but as with speeches, are well advised to operate within constraints set by their role. Role sheets and the game-narrative assignment oblige players to seek particular goals that have direct bearing on how they should vote. A member of the libertarian faction, to take an obvious example, will be predisposed to vote against expanding the welfare state. While it is conceivable for some situation to arise in which it would be appropriate for a libertarian to vote for an enhanced social safety net, such outcomes will be rare. In cases in which students appear set to vote or act in a manner at odds with their roles, GMs are encouraged to touch base with them. Gentle inquiries from the GM are often enough to prevent a student from going off track. Alternatively, such discussions sometimes reveal that a student has a reason for their action that the GM overlooked.

The game deliberately allows students to engage in vote trading and other forms of transactional politicking. Negotiating and deal-making serve the pedagogical role of promoting engagement and make the game fun to play. Students can solicit votes from one another in breaks during game sessions as well as outside of class. Indeed, students often devote significant energy to lobbying one another outside of class, and GMs are encouraged to provide players with a list of class emails for this purpose. Potentially any conversation between two students touching on game matters—whether it occurs in class, the cafeteria or on social media—is part of the game.

Post-Mortem

The class after the fourth game session should be reserved for the post-mortem. Here students speak as themselves again, not as their characters. This is important because some students will want to publicly disassociate themselves from their role. Students in general however often want to discuss the game and how it unfolded. The GM can ask them to describe their major decisions, how close they came to achieving their victory objectives and to reveal any secrets they held during the game.

Game Narratives

After concluding play, students are required to write a narrative of their gameplay. It should cover all their major choices, including speeches, motions and votes, as well as any important negotiations that took place outside of class. It should also justify how those choices reflected the political philosophy on which their role was based. Role-immersion games occasionally lead students to act according to their own values as opposed to their role. The essay justifying their game play is intended to safeguard against this and to incentivize more reflective gameplay by connecting students' decisions during play to the content of their role. It also provides a way for the GM to respond to students who in the course of the game may be tempted to do something inconsistent with their role. Asking the student, "How does this help your game narrative?" is a simple and effective means of nudging students back on track.

While a student's overall game grade is at the instructor's discretion, *Justice* is designed to support basing game grades on student participation in concert with their game narrative, weighted according to whatever scales the GM deems appropriate.

We hope to have described the game in sufficient detail to make it intelligible to readers unfamiliar with role-immersion. Those who have further questions or, better yet, are considering using the game, are encouraged to consult the GM's guide referred to above.

4. Playtests and Student Feedback

Some instructors may be more open to adopting a new teaching device if they have some advance sense of the likely outcome of doing so. In order to generate such information we organized two separate playtests of *Justice*, conducted at a research university in the United States. Each playtest lasted four sessions and was played by undergraduate students taking an upper-division course in political philosophy (majors and non-majors), composed of students in their junior and senior years. The course explored different perspectives on central issues in contemporary political philosophy, such as the limits of government and individual liberty, liberalism and its critics, distributive justice, what the metric of justice should be (capabilities vs. welfare vs. resources etc.) and issues related to immigration and minority rights.

Our playtests occupied the final two weeks of a ten week course on political philosophy. A class of 43 students was divided into two separate game groups with 21 and 22 respective players. Each game group played the game independently of the other, producing its own Speaker, agenda, and voting results. With three exceptions, all game roles were based on class readings covered in the non-game portion of the class. Thus most students had the benefit of lectures, discussion or writing assignments about their assigned texts.

After the conclusion of play, students were asked to participate in focus groups, one dedicated to each game group, organized by Q2 Insights, Inc.¹⁵ The course instructors were not present and questions focused on the contribution made by the game to student learning outcomes, and how these contributions might be enhanced in future sessions. Eighteen students participated in the first focus group, and 19

participated in the second. Student responses were generally positive, and combined helpful feedback regarding the game mechanics with evocative endorsements of the game's learning objectives.

Skill Development

Overwhelmingly, students endorsed the learning experience and unanimously recommended that the game be used in future philosophy classes (B-34). The game was reported to be engaging, immersive, informative, “objectively fun” (A-14, B-21, B-28), and an “amazing learning experience” (B-15). Students mentioned numerous skills enhanced by the game, including public speaking, compromise, negotiation, bargaining, courage, initiative, time management, empathy and communication (e.g. B-16, B-24). They reported a high degree of outside-the-classroom participation, and some students indicated that this was where the real substance of inter-faction agreements was concluded.¹⁶ While philosophy majors reported comfort with the back-and-forth required by the debate, non-majors reported initial trepidation but eventual comfort (A-19) with the “behind-the-scenes scheming” (A-6) and “quid pro quo” (A-8).

In their comments, students emphasized the value of the political nature of the game, citing its effect of motivating them to understand other factions' positions in detail (B-1). Practice at public speaking was also highly valued – as one student said, “I really liked the public speaking aspect of it. Normally in classes, I'm just dead silent. I never talk at all, and this assembly really forces you to be active and actually speak, so that was what I really liked about this. [The game] pushed me out of my comfort zone” (B-18). Students appreciated that defending the views of an assigned philosopher rather than their own required less emotional investment, allowing them to focus on the mechanics of the position and obtain practice debating (A-18).

An additional benefit reported in the focus groups was the creation of a community (e.g. B-14). As one student put it, “I like to call it the Breakfast Club effect, whereas if we had not engaged in this way, I probably would not say hi to any of these people outside of class. But, now, I definitely will” (A-20). Another student agreed, saying “these are some really nice people, and it's nice to get to know them” (A-20).

Charitable Reconstruction of Arguments

Students were generally comfortable representing the views of philosophers with whom they disagreed, and often reported an increased respect for the foundations of alternative positions (B-13). In fact, several students directly stated that their increased facility with opposing viewpoints was useful both in more fully understanding the issues at stake and in forming a more convincing argument for their own views.¹⁷ As one put it,

I mean, yes, I'm definitely not my philosopher's viewpoint. But, I was like, oh, you know, now that I'm learning a little bit more in depth about it, like who knows? Maybe it will convert me or something by the end. The answer's no, it didn't at all. But, the thing that I do like, just as like a personal reason, is now when I have peers like that, and I like to debate with them, now I have evidence from the inside out against them. So, in a way it's helpful to know the other viewpoint in such depth, because then it can help you argue against it, or better... Like, you know, to fight against something you have to understand it. So it strengthened my outside position, because I know my own holes of the argument, since I was that side as well (A-6).

Those students representing positions they sympathized with had the opportunity to significantly deepen their understanding of their work. One student said, “I definitely appreciate my philosopher way more now. Like I actually ordered one of her books last night. And... I was watching interviews of her all

weekend, because I think she's so incredible and amazing" (A-7). Even students indifferent to the views of their assigned philosopher appear to have been moved. As one put it, "I was assigned to analyze a philosopher that I hadn't really put a lot of thought into. I found his readings challenging, and...this forced me to look at something that I would have never looked at again afterwards. It forced me to actually interact with it, and understand it in a better way. And I've come out of this now knowing a lot more than I probably would have, had I just had to write a paper" (A-7).

Students tended to revise their support for theoretically attractive positions once they became familiar with the practical consequences. For example, one student reported encountering the practical drawbacks of a position she had hitherto held:

Yeah, so before I even got my role, the philosopher that I got was what I mostly agreed with, or that I was most in line with, but after having to read deeper into it, and apply the knowledge I learned, oh there's a lot of weaknesses in the practical aspects, but when I was just reading it, it sounded good to me, and I agreed with it, and then... So after the game, after realizing where there's weaknesses in the practicality of the application of the philosophy, that's when I really started to disagree, so having a better understanding after the game, if I was in agreement with a different philosopher (B-13).

Finally, some students were sufficiently provoked by their assigned philosopher to reconsider their own positions on divisive issues (B-3).

Practical Implications of Theoretical Arguments

Students reported that the game gave them a more concrete grasp of the practical implications of theoretical arguments. They reported a substantial deepening of their understanding of the philosophical positions studied (A-3, B-5), and they specifically cited the process of moving from the theoretical to the practical level as a source of insight.¹⁸ While we had been concerned that students would find the open-ended nature of the process bewildering, students in fact strongly endorsed the pedagogical utility of applying arguments to new areas. For example, one student said that "it helped deepen my understanding of philosophy because you're dealing with a range of issues where...the stance of your philosopher is not necessarily very clear" (A-3). Students reported greater implementation and mastery of material through repeated application and practice, and they appreciated "being able to take a theory, and then actually think about it in real world terms" (A-5).

One student encapsulated this point nicely by comparing their learning experience with *Justice* to other instructional approaches.

I think to the point of the amount of raw material learned, I would say it's generally the same [as lecture-based classes]. But, what is different is how much I implemented my mastery of these thoughts because I'm using it, versus in the other classes I've taken before, I'm just like maybe I've read it, I wrote about it. But, this is the time when I actually played it out. (A-3)

Here, the student describes an experience familiar to other students in the game: playing *Justice* helped them bridge the gap between grasping theoretical, philosophical content and both the practice of policy-making and its potential impacts on the lives of the governed. In other words, the game demands that students *do* political philosophy, rather than merely hear about it, a feature students both noted and appreciated.¹⁹

Many students were similarly emphatic that the back-and-forth of discussion required them to return again and again to the assigned texts, and that this facilitated mastery not only of their own philosopher's position but of all the others, as they had to anticipate and respond to questions (B-3). One student remarked,

I would say a lot of times in philosophy classes, if you're not writing an essay on a reading, a lot of times you maybe read it once for class, and then don't really come back to it. But, because you had to be prepared for every single stance out there, it facilitated going back and really figuring out what the stances were, because you had to be ready, I had to be ready for, like, an objection. I had to know how to make my proposal attractive for other [unclear] and stuff like that. So, I think it really facilitated learning (A-3).

Another student found that the process of trying to gather support for resolutions forced them to "understand what they're thinking, and try to shape your argument in a way that they'll accept that maybe they'll support you on the votes, so you really have to understand which arguments they'll agree with, and then maybe emphasize those agreements, or cut back on some of the agreements they might not agree with, so it really forces you to understand their views, and how to pose your views in a way that's acceptable" (B-2).

Gameplay Feedback

In general, students seem to have been energized by the game. One student said "It was pretty cool because it didn't feel like work. You were going back and looking at other people's readings, or having to interact with people outside of class a ton, and email a ton. And it never really felt like work. It was always pretty exciting and cool." (A-4). Another student reported that participation in the game helped alleviate the symptoms of end-of-term burnout. "[I]t really hyped me up at the end of the quarter. You know, all this interaction between the students, and the professor, and scheming and all that. Instead of being burnt at the end of the quarter, going oh, another paper, another reading, I got something else [to be] excited about. And that really helped me" (A-4).

Students requested additional procedural clarity across all aspects of the game. They reported that the victory conditions for particular role sheets were harder to achieve than others (A-5), and that the role sheets slightly overdetermined game behavior, reducing their ability to persuade one another (A-9). Students cited substantial learning from the speeches given during debate – as one put it, "everyone...impressed me so much with their speech giving. And they actually taught me so much about the philosophers who [we] are representing, more than I understood from just doing the reading" (A-12). Several students marveled at the civility of it all. As one said,

I'm actually very impressed by our ability to figure things out on the fly...A lot of the rules that we ended up working with were ones that we created ourselves, and just kind of happened. So, these email chains, long email chains, were things that we just devised on our own. Nobody told us to do that. And it wasn't the most efficient solution, it wasn't the best solution, but we ended up figuring something out. I'm like really impressed that we were all able to do that. And we all respected each other. No one called anybody names, no one was ever mean, no one was ever disrespectful (A-12).

Students were unanimous that more time would be desirable, both longer game sessions and more of them (e.g. A-8, B-6, B-19). Majorities in both focus groups approved of spending more class time on the simulation (B-19). They noted that negotiations conducted over email could have been more efficiently conducted in person or via a live chat, and they suggested introducing role sheets earlier in the course to allow more time for preparation. The explicit powers of the Speaker of the Assembly seemed opaque to

students, and they asked for clarification and enumeration. Students suggested publishing minutes of the previous session's proceedings, recording votes and motions (B-31), as well as providing basic information on parliamentary procedure (B-32).

Students reported that grading them on their participation in the legislative process (speeches, amendments, etc.) generated superfluous speeches as well as suppressing genuine issue engagement by those who had already participated. As one student put it, "So, once you'd spoken twice, it just felt like you were being selfish going up there. Even if you...were super interested in the proposal" (A-14). However, students resisted reducing the size of the assembly, arguing that this would reduce the diversity of the perspectives on offer. Several students mentioned that their initial confusion cleared up immediately at the start of gameplay (A-8).

Some students tasked with representing marginalized viewpoints found the reception from their peers frustrating. As one student said, "honestly, being a Libertarian in the room, it's just hard, and lonely, and difficult. And people look at me like I just want people to die. You know? I don't" (A-23). The open borders resolution in particular provoked charged debate, and students advocating controlled immigration or immigration preferences for particular areas faced a cold reception. Another put it similarly, "when we made our speeches, everyone, I feel like everyone already has a bias. Especially going to a school like this that's very like liberal. And like everyone, once you get up there and start declaring like no, we should keep closed borders, everyone just kind of looks at you like you're a racist" (A-6). Two students mentioned that additional "conservative" philosophers might help balance the positions available.

Finally, some students were frustrated by the political process itself. The open-ended nature of the resolutions, the malleability of the agenda and the autonomy of action required by their roles were challenging for some students. One student called the proceedings a "mess" (B-6), but in the same breath compared it to the US Congress and sighed that it was probably realistic. Another student said of the open-ended nature of the game that "I like the fact that it gives us the freedom of what to do, but there should be something else to prevent chaos" (B-17). Other students immediately countered that to them, "the interesting part of this game is the free rein that we had over the game, and how we were able to form it to our own interests" (B-17). Some students shied away from the combative nature of debate, but acknowledged this as something at which they wanted to practice and improve (B-20).

A few students expressed strong approval of the game but were at a loss to describe their reasons. One student, when pressed, answered "Well, I don't know, it was just cool, I guess" (A-3). Responses like these suggest that *Justice*, like other role-immersion methods, has the capacity to engage and motivate learners beyond conventional methods, even in cases where students are unable to explain why.²⁰

5. *Evaluating Justice*

Present methods for teaching political philosophy are imperfect. Indeed, it was dissatisfaction with these methods that led us to develop *Justice*. Lecture-based teaching in this field can quickly devolve into a "greatest hits" presentation of famous names attached to abstract ideas. Without concrete application to relevant circumstances, experience demonstrates that these ideas are not retained by students. In a sense, learning political philosophy without applying it is much like learning mathematical operations without applying them. In both cases, students are left without concrete skills, much less the opportunity for authentic learning experiences in these domains.

By contrast, role-immersion games like *Justice* force students to apply concepts learned in the course to real issues. We thought it likely that repeated, concrete application would result in increased uptake of those concepts. Focus group results provide anecdotal evidence that this is indeed the case, and future

research in this area should focus on a control comparison with random assignment to treatment to allow for matching on non-observable characteristics.

Previous research suggests role-immersion games develop diverse skills, such as empathy and self-esteem.²¹ Such games have been shown to improve student attendance and participation as well as helping with the integration of students for whom English is a second language.²² Many of these benefits result from the social nature of role-immersion games, which often require students to work together to achieve clear goals. While these specific outcomes were not the central concern of our analysis, the observations offered in the student focus groups and our own findings are consistent with the claim that *Justice* compares favorably with other role-immersion games in these respects.

As a result, we contend that game-based and lecture-based formats are complementary, in that the combination of both approaches allow for deep exploration of many of the concepts flagged by a broad survey. Without an initial survey of the material, students might lack the context to take advantage of the opportunity for depth afforded by a role-immersion game, but when both approaches are combined, student learning outcomes are plausibly enhanced.

The Costs of Role-Immersion

It should be noted that the above discussed payoffs of using role-immersion games in the classroom are not without cost. Game-based learning can be time-consuming, especially when it involves extended role-immersion as *Justice* does. Students involved in the playtest of *Justice* were enrolled in a course that persisted in a normal lecture format for eight weeks, allowing students just two weeks (four class sessions) to engage in game-based learning.²³ These students also reported spending substantial (voluntary) time negotiating with one another outside the classroom, both in person and by email. Our contention that game-based and lecture-based formats are complementary emerges from the observation that the deepening effect of game-based learning is contingent on initial broad exposure to the topics under consideration – exposure that is provided by a lecture-based format.

Future Directions

Given the aim of our investigation, it is worth briefly considering how *Justice* compares as a tool for teaching philosophy. While available findings are limited, and though we did not observe a direct comparison between students playing *Justice* and other games, prior work affords us a defeasible basis of evaluation. *Justice* better supports students in attaining the learning outcomes typical of philosophy courses, and with less instructor effort, as compared to existing role-immersion games such as the popular *Reacting to the Past* series, even when those games have been adapted for use in philosophy classrooms.

Even so, *Justice* could perhaps do even more to incentivize students in practicing desirable philosophical skills and understanding the assigned content. Specifically, its incentive structure could be better tailored to capitalize on the game's ability to engage and motivate students. While *Justice* may so motivate students better than well-known role immersion games, it might yet do more in this regard. Where the current version of the game incentivizes students to attain mastery of their role and its philosophy, future iterations of *Justice* or subsequent games might potentially incentivize mastery of additional roles, for example, that of a designated rival, in addition to the one a student is assigned.²⁴

A further limitation evident in our investigation was that *Justice*, as designed, does not make it equally easy for players to achieve their role's objectives in play. Consistent with recent recommendations for implementing role-immersion games in the classroom, *Justice* includes a large proportion of indeterminates representing a diversity of views.²⁵ While this plausibly increases the chances that players assigned views their classmates find objectionable will be able to achieve some of their objectives, it does

not eliminate the resistance such views are likely to encounter. For example, in *Justice*, a number of indeterminates are naturally allied with the Libertarian faction on a range of topics. Yet, we observed, as did the students, that they found it very difficult to persuade others to join them in systematically opposing social welfare provisions.

Despite these limitations, we conclude that *Justice* as designed is well suited to successfully facilitating learning outcomes in philosophy courses, particularly those in which instructors are concerned with helping students appreciate the connection between theory, policy, and citizenship. Instructors of political philosophy who have used role-immersion games in the past might be well-served by implementing *Justice* in their classes because of its potential to support philosophy-specific learning outcomes more effectively than existing role-immersion games while delivering comparable benefits, and at relatively lower costs, since *Justice*, given its design intent, requires no special adaptation for use in philosophy courses. As a result, even if using educational role-immersion games can be time consuming as compared to conventional instructional methods, implementing *Justice* requires relatively less additional time and cognitive overhead for use in philosophy classrooms.

Justice is, in its current form, a playable prototype ready for use by instructors with experience implementing role-immersion games in the classroom and by instructors without previous familiarity with such games. Some instructors may prefer to play variant versions of *Justice* or even to create their own philosophy role-immersion games. *Justice* can be easily adapted by modifying existing role sheets or writing new ones to suit the course material and learning outcomes in a given context.²⁶ Since *Justice* did not require the development of an entirely new game architecture, the most labor-intensive aspect of its creation was role sheet development. Beyond role sheet writing, developing *Justice* required only writing the game rules and brief issue sheets outlining potential agenda items. In writing the role and issue sheets, the designers benefitted from prior familiarity with the texts on which those sheets were to be based. We estimate that a two-person team of game designers who were similarly familiar with an existing game architecture and a set of readings could easily develop a game to suit their needs over the course of a single summer.

6. Conclusion

The central pedagogical appeal of role-immersion has been its capacity to significantly enhance student engagement, without compromising attention to writing and other traditional learning outcomes. When a class is structured as a game, students are known to voluntarily spend hours on optional activities and to become passionate about fulfilling their assigned roles. Our primary goal has been to draw the game to the attention of instructors of political philosophy. We have additionally sought to provide evidence that *Justice* will work as designed: not only by offering the advantages typical of role-immersion games, but with the added benefit of effectively teaching political philosophy and philosophical skills like communicating, crafting, analyzing, and evaluating arguments. We believe game-based learning generally and *Justice* in particular have just as much if not more potential to meet these goals than conventional philosophical instruction, and as such should be considered for adoption by philosophy instructors. The method seems particularly well-suited to teaching political philosophy, including in contexts in which it is employed in addition to, rather than instead of, traditional lecture and discussion.

Notes

The authors are particularly grateful to the students who participated in the initial playtest of *Justice*.

1 This work is entirely collaborative. Authorship is equal.

2 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*; Davison and Goldhaber, “Integration, Socialization, Collaboration”; Francis, Russell, “Towards a Theory of Games Based Pedagogy”; Higbee, “How Reacting to the Past Games ‘Made Me Want to Come to Class and Learn,’”; Lightcap, “Creating Political Order.”; Montola and Stenros, *Beyond Role and Play*; Stroessner et al., “All the World’s a Stage?”; Weidenfeld and Fernandez, “Does Reacting to the Past Increase Student Engagement?”.

3 Joyce et al. “Teaching Philosophy Through a Role-Immersion Game: Reacting to the Past”.

4 Joyce et al. (2018) note that, despite being encouraged by their instructional team to craft sound philosophical arguments, students often advanced arguments with rhetorical, but not rational, force, since the design of the role-immersion game they tested did nothing to preclude this result or incentivize alternative gameplay choices.

5 Joyce et al. “Teaching Philosophy Through a Role-Immersion Game: Reacting to the Past”.

6 *Justice* was inspired by, and owes a structural debt to, the *Reacting to the Past* series of games, which are primarily intended for history instructors. In designing and playtesting *Justice* the intent was to create a game with many of the features that have made the *Reacting to the Past* series successful in the college classroom, but that can be used to impart specifically philosophical skills and knowledge directly “out of the box”, without requiring special adaptation.

7 Instructors interested in using the game can access all game materials at the web site referred to below. See the main text corresponding to footnote 12.

8 We do not suggest that no existing games are suited specifically to teach political philosophy. Rather, our emphasis is on role-immersion games, as opposed to the shorter game activities that have been developed for these purposes. Cf. Barry, “The Nozick Game”; Green, “The Rawls Game”.

9 After each game session, 20 additional delegates were available to be awarded to the players delivering the most effective speeches, as determined by the instructor. The normal practice was to give a block of an additional ten votes to the two students who in the GM’s estimation gave the best speeches.

10 Even these rules may be revised, subject to instructor discretion.

11 See Appendix B for sample role sheet.

12 alamey@ucsd.edu.

12 The third author is also happy to answer questions over email.

13 See Appendix B.

14 The game includes alternative resolutions for games set in countries that do not have legal safeguards for Indigenous groups.

15 Focus groups facilitated by Kirsty Nunez of Q2 Insights, Inc. were held on December 7, 2019. Students received credit for focus group participation but were not required to take part.

16 This extracurricular negotiation was not required by the instructors, and no extra credit was given for these conversations.

17 Compare John Stuart Mill’s concept of the marketplace of ideas (1859: 14-15).

18 Compare the concept of “reflective equilibrium” (Rawls 1971) or “working from both ends” (Goodman 1955).

19 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing the import of this point.

20 Carnes, *Minds on Fire*; Weidenfeld and Fernandez, “Does Reacting to the Past Increase Student Engagement?”

22 Stroessner, Beckerman and Whittaker 2009.

23 Higbee 2009; Davison and Goldhaber 2007.

23 A course conducted in a longer (e.g., semester) format would allow for broader coverage.

24 Joyce, et al. (2018) note in their analysis that the design of the *Reacting to the Past* games seems better suited to teaching history than philosophy (a sentiment echoed by students surveyed). Its play

incentives do nothing to discourage students from voting in response to forceful rhetoric or sophistical arguments, as opposed to careful reasoning. Students made no such comments as regards *Justice*.

25 Joyce et al. "Teaching Philosophy Through a Role-Immersion Game".

26 *Ibid.*

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Appendix A: Justice: The Game Readings

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Appendix B: Sample Role Sheet

Taylorite Role Sheet

Because role sheets are confidential, actual role sheets cannot be published. This one does not appear in the list of game roles; it was written specifically to provide an example of what a role sheet looks like.

Core Beliefs

You are a proponent of the philosophy of Charles Taylor as it is outlined in "The Politics of Recognition". This text is the foundation of your beliefs. At some moments in the game, it may be obvious how Taylor's arguments oblige you to speak and act. However, at other times it will likely be unclear how to apply the essay's abstract principles to current political issues. In such instances, you will need to decide for yourself what to say or do. So long as your speech and actions do not contradict your foundational principles, you will be living up to your role.

Taylor is committed to a political program that he calls "the politics of difference." It is based on the premise that individual human beings and groups require a need for recognition. This idea in turn is based on the thought that the identity of a person or group's is partially shaped by the view of him held by other people. Real harm can be inflicted on someone who lives among those who hold a demeaning conception of that person. Taylor cites the example of black-white dynamics: White society projected on the black minority a demeaning image, one that some blacks adopted and now need to overcome. Similarly, objections to Europeans' long-standing view of Indigenous people as "uncivilized" play out the same pattern. In each case, previously oppressed groups seek to replace the "grievous wound" of misrecognition with the "vital human need" of due recognition.

Taylor holds that recognition is important because human identities are "dialogical." This means that we acquire agency and the ability to understand who we are through the acquisition of languages of expression: language used here to include not only words but also the languages "of art, of gesture, of love and the like." These languages are not something we learn in isolation, but are rather picked up through interaction with our significant others. The languages this interaction imparts to us are crucial to our ability to understand ourselves. Because our identities are dialogical, who we are crucially depends on what other people think of us. A demeaning view of one's identity held by the people who shape us can therefore be deeply damaging. Thus the urgent need for recognition.

Taylor's main concern is with recognition in the public sphere. It requires that we recognize "the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else." Only by doing so will we overcome the historical legacy of marginalized groups being forced to assimilate into

a dominant or majority identity. According to the politics of difference, unwanted assimilation is a “cardinal sin” that a decent society must guard against.

Major Goals

Your views make you a strong ally of the difference liberal faction. Like them, your major concern is the minority rights resolution. During a previous session of the national assembly (one that took place before the start of the game), it voted to strip Indigenous peoples in the States of all their cultural protections. Tribal courts were abolished. Funding for Indigenous languages was slashed. The right of Indigenous peoples to be the sole occupants and owners of housing in Indigenous reserves was abolished. You believe that this was a major blow against justice, and you are committed to having the law overturned and rights protecting the culture of these groups fully restored or even made better than they once were. Indigenous people still form the majority on reserves and so acting now can still make a real difference. Indeed, the best outcome of all would be to not only restore all the lost Indigenous rights but also add new ones, of a kind to be determined by you.

A vote on national welfare provisions is likely to occur during the first game session. You are open to increasing the safety net for the economically disadvantaged, but you are not wedded to the Rawlsian formulation of the welfare resolution. While you can accept it as worded you are also open to possible modifications. In this way your views broadly align with the two liberal factions but oppose the libertarians. Indeed, you are strongly opposed to libertarianism on a wide range of matters, and so should not be surprised if you find yourself regularly squaring off against the faction advocating small government.

A third issue that is likely to come up in the game is a proposal for open borders. Not only your anti-libertarian disposition, but your support for the politics of recognition, make you opposed to any strong version of open borders. You believe the best way to improve the situation of cultural groups in other countries is for their home governments to implement policies that uphold the politics of recognition. Here at home, cultural minorities already face challenges due to the fact that they are a small proportion of the national population. There is little benefit in your mind to making them even smaller minorities. While you do not oppose modest increases in immigration the issue is at best a low priority, at worst a recipe for making national minorities even more vulnerable.

Other issues are likely to come up in the game. An important element of interacting with indeterminates will be to determine if they have objectives of their own that you could support in exchange for them supporting yours. Here as elsewhere you will need to decide for yourselves which measures your principles allow you to support. Remember that any resolution before the legislature can be amended or modified, which in some cases may allow you to support a motion that initially appears unacceptable.

Tips and Strategies

You are a natural ally of the difference liberal faction. You should make yourself known to them early in the game and try to work closely with them to pass the minority rights resolution and achieve other common goals. Note that your views have some similarities with “communitarian” thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre or Michael Walzer. If there are followers of theirs in the assembly you may be able to form an additional alliance with them and bring them around to your point of view.

The reading on which your role is based may or may not have been covered in class lectures. If it was taught and so is known to other players, they are likely to regard you (accurately) as little different from the difference liberals. They will thus know what your main objective and alliances are. But if your reading was not covered, it provides an opportunity for you to help the difference liberals beyond simply voting with them. Because other players will be unfamiliar with your role and objectives, you can withhold your true objectives from them or even lead them to believe that you are playing a different role altogether. The value of doing so is that it could allow you to obtain information from other players that you could then pass on to the difference liberals.

Victory Objectives

Points	Objective
1 / right	The assembly passes a proposal enshrining an additional right consistent with your philosophy, after you give a speech demonstrating why the measure is consistent with your philosophy
1	The game ends without a vote on open or more open borders
2	The assembly restores all the rights for Indigenous peoples that it abolished in a previous session
3	The assembly restores all the rights for Indigenous peoples that it abolished in a previous session <i>and</i> introduces additional rights that are to be uniquely exercised by Indigenous people
-2	The assembly fails to restore any rights for national minorities
-1	The assembly reduces current welfare levels

Primary Text

“The Politics of Recognition,” *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Amy Guttmann ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994), 25-73.

Further Reading

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