

Magic Performance

Although I wasn't there in class when Nemo presented, I was able to watch him teach his magic in the comfort of my bedroom. After pausing and rewinding several times to memorize the tiniest deck of cards trick, I practiced in front of my dog to ensure that I had everything correct before moving on to my final test - wowing my girlfriend. As instructed by Nemo, I went through the motions of the trick and acted shocked as I made her think I picked the wrong card before revealing that I had chosen the correct card all along.

After my performance, I asked my girlfriend if she wanted to know how I performed the trick, and to my surprise, she told me, "no, then it wouldn't be magic anymore." As I reflected on her response, I came to appreciate how vital the acting portion of a magic trick is to conjure a sense of wonder. Sometimes it may be better to stay ignorant about how you were misdirected. Despite my hesitance toward Nemo's first two tricks, the tiny deck trick blew me away as it was full of "false solutions" that left me unable to consider any possible points of misdirection¹. However, when Nemo began to teach the trick, I felt that source of wonder within me almost physically drain from my body. Although the scientist part of me wanted to figure out precisely what Nemo did, another part also wanted to hold onto that source of wonder. The moment I got a hint of the inner workings of cunning that went into the magic trick, I no longer could take the role of a viewer but rather a player in a game with neatly defined rules.

¹ Jones, Graham M. 2011. "An Apprenticeship in Cunning." In *Trade of the Tricks: Inside the Magician's Craft*. University of California Press. Pp. 34-76.

Although the Rappert piece compares the relationship between a viewer and the magician as a relationship of caring, I intuitively compared the relationship to what I know best- pickup basketball games². In most pickup basketball games, no one is going one hundred percent. Even though many games will have players of drastically different skill levels, the games themselves will be played in a balanced manner. Those with better skills will inevitably relax their effort and artificially allow the game to be more competitive since competition makes a pickup game fun for everyone. Thus, I agreed wholeheartedly with what many people in the Rappert piece had to say about the relationship between a magician and a viewer. When I was learning Nemo's tricks, I didn't want to get "sheepishly fooled." However, I still wanted to be lured in by the trick because I wanted the challenge of experiencing a situation full of incredible wonder. As a viewer who has the agency to make the trick harder or more manageable for the magician, the point was not to demonstrate this agency to the maximum of my capability. The payoff is in the challenge of the magic trick itself and not in the solution, and so, like an overly skilled pickup basketball player, I relaxed my agency to make the magic trick more successful.

In learning the magic trick, I had to consider all of the things that a magician would have to think about. I had to think about how explicit my language was to cover my tracks. And so, in the process of learning, I discovered the game-like nature between the magician and the viewer. Although I was now the magician with cunning secrets that I could use to exploit the viewer's lack of direction, I felt like I was in the hands of the viewer at all times. These acting skills that I learned felt like my only tools to defend the mental challenge of the magic trick, and I had to rely on an unspoken trust that the viewer would relinquish some of their agency for the sake of the

² Rappert, Brian. 2021. "Pick a Card, Any Card": Learning to Deceive and Conceal—with Care." *Secrecy and Society* 2(2).

trick. In many ways, a magic trick felt very far away from a zero-sum game. It would only feel like a zero-sum game if the viewer tried as hard as possible to foil the trick.

In conclusion, the performance of a magic trick is more closely analogous to a casual basketball pickup game rather than an exploitation of an unbalance in power. Although the magician comes onto the stage prepared with cunning plans meant to deceive the audience, the audience holds much of the power. However, instead of using that power to its full potential, audience members will intentionally relinquish much of their agency for the sake of a successful magic trick. Therefore, the relinquishment of the audience's agency is the unwritten code of conduct that allows for the distribution of improbable wonder. And this wonder can only be experienced without full knowledge of what goes on under the hood.

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