Tips at the Table: The Thing with The Thing with The Guy
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Transcribed by @Recombinatrix [0:00:00 - 0:15:20]; Daneran#6021 [0:15:20 - end]

[0:00:00]

AUSTIN: Hey everybody! Welcome to Tips at the Table, an RPG podcast about, uh, whatever the fuck I say at the beginning of this? Critical questions, hopefully smart answers, and fun interactions between good friends. I am your host Austin Walker, you can find me on twitter at @Austin_Walker. Also joining me today, Ali Acampora.

ALI: Um, hi! You can find me at @ali_west on Twitter.com, and you can find the show over at @friends_table.

AUSTIN: Janine Hawkins

JANINE: Uh, hey! You can find me at @bleatingheart on Twitter where I have asked everyone is it goord, gooerd, or gord –

AUSTIN: It's the last one.

JANINE: And I realized I should have added go-erd also.

AUSTIN: [cross] No-one says go-erd.

ALI: [cross] Wait, what? It's gord! [laughs]

JANINE: Ew.

DARCY: Yeah, it's gord.

AUSTIN: It's gord. [chuckles] This isn't a debate. Janine, you're inventing a debate.

[ALI & JANINE chuckle]

AUSTIN: Um? And also joining me, Darcy Swan.[1]

DARCY: Hi, you can find me on twitter at @goo-ord.

[1] The name/username in the audio recording are no longer in use, hence the audio/transcript discrepancies.

AUSTIN: Goord.

DARCY: [laughing] At [username removed].

AUSTIN: As always, you can find and support the show, and you already are so thank you, at freindsatthetable.cash over on Patreon. Patreon. Patre-on? Patre-un. Patreon. Patron.

[ALI laughs]

JANINE: Patreourd.

AUSTIN: Patreord. All right. We got a bunch of questions today so we should just hop right into it. First one comes in from Mitchell, who says:

> "I'm a big fan of Friends at the Table names, and they've been a huge inspiration for naming my own characters both as a GM and a player. I'm very proud of my cheerful halfling named Glee Gala Gaiety. My problem is that I have a player who is also a big fan of Friends at the Table names and has just rolled up a character with the religious background who is named 'The Covenant Between A Queen And Her People Must Be As That Between The Voice And The Heart', but I have no idea how to write Excerpt names. Do you have any tips for writing Excerpt names? Or do I just ask that player to name every religious figure?

AUSTIN: Janine? How do you write Excerpt names?

[ALI laughs]

JANINE: Do you want to know what my original inspiration for Excerpt names was?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: Because it's a twitter account that you follow. @gehenna_ebooks.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Ok, that makes sense. Do you want to spell that out really quick?

JANINE: Yes.

AUSTIN: I did immediately wonder if it was…

JANINE: [giggles] Uhum!

AUSTIN: …that account. So.

[ALI chuckles]

JANINE: It's at G E H E N N A underscore ebooks. And that account inspired me because there is a very particular and frequently consistent cadence to – and this is ironic because cadent, huh –

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.

JANINE: But there's a particular cadence to [chuckles] these, these tweets and for me an Excerpt name is, like, ninety percent cadence… [cross] ten percent content –

Austin: [cross] Yup, yup.

JANINE: It has to sound right, and if you don't know how to make it sound right – I'm not saying to imitate these tweets or anything – I think the best thing to do if you want to, like, get more intimately familiar with how to write in a cadence is to look at — this is a really trite, like, english-teacher-y thing to say — but iambic pentameter, um, and iambs in general. And just the way you can construct something to have a certain number of syllables with very specifically placed emphasis. So having the sort of soft-sound hard-sound soft-sound hard-sound. If you look into stuff like that — and you don't have to do like a deep dive or anything but — if you get very familiar with how that kind of stuff is composed and constructed I think it'll inherently give you a slightly better ear for the cadence of these kinds of lines, and that's like ninety percent of the battle.

AUSTIN: I think I've said that so many times when talking about how to figure out names. I've had lots of people ask me, I've had lot of people who GMs ask me "Hey, do you have a rules system for names for Twilight Mirage, or for COUNTER/Weight especially, or for specific sub-factions inside of things, for, where do you pull the names for Maelgwyn's Chosen, etc. etc," and often I… actually, similar people say things like "hey, how do I get the ruleset so I can build a bot that does it" and I actually think there's a way to do that, but I do think it ends up being about… either about just having a pool of potential names, or potential, like, fully formed, um, like words, and then some sort of system for putting them in context together to get things like alliteration right or something like that, –

JANINE: Uh huh.

AUSTIN: – or it's like you said, like, cadence and meter, more than about content and about words. So many of my names just start with, like, here is… here are sounds I like hearing together, and then massage them until they are words, or massage them until they sound, like… massage them until they sound good in pairing, or with another name nearby, like, Rix and Roe from the last Spring in Heiron episode.

05:06

JANINE: Mm-hmm.

AUSTIN: Like, Ricks is a fine name, Roe is a fine name, but together as, like, a brother and sister thief duo…

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: Rix and Roe has just like a really nice cadence to it.

JANINE: Uhum.

AUSTIN: So much of it comes down to that, and I've seen a lot of people–

JANINE: This is why I fuck with hyphens a lot. [cross] In names that I pick.

AUSTIN: [cross] Hyphens are great. Totally. A hundred percent.

JANINE: Because it lets you extend the rhythm in a way that, um, if you're using more standard recognisable last names is a lot harder.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I will say, shout outs to my mom who dragged me kicking and screaming to poetry readings as a kid…
AUSTIN: Yeah.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: [cross] because that is a way…

JANINE: [cross] That's a huge part of it. Yeah.

AUSTIN: That's a *huge* part of it. Like, um… I hated going to poetry readings as a kid. But the value of it has been so… so drastic in my ability to understand the value of meter and the value of spoken rhythms, understanding where… how you can play with breaks in language and in spoken word. And so, like, so many of those things are where I start and end.

[Pause]

AUSTIN: So, I guess for Mitchell the bigger question there tho is like, that's a hard thing to practice. For now, at your table, feel free to call on your player to help you come up with those. If

you go back and listen to us whenever we had a new Excerpt it was often a conversation between people who come up with a new name, or it was off screen where we talked about it. But go back and, you know, if you listen to some key moments where it came up to naming an Excerpt or naming a divine, or even naming some key characters throughout COUNTER/weight, there are definitely parts where like, if you listen to the faction names that like, Darcy, you and I and Sylvi[2], would come up with character names, start with a random generator of some kind and massage it until it felt right. And so much of it is feel.

AUSTIN: Darcy and Ali, do you have anything to add here? Ali, I know you came up with your… with Tender's name, eventually. So I'm curious if there was anything there that you were thinking of.

ALI: Oh, yeah. I… god, barely even remember that. Because it was at that point of Twilight Mirage where it was, like, [cross] you just keep walking forward.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. Uh-huh. Yup. A hundred percent! [chuckles]

ALI: The specific advice that I got from Janine at that point, which was like: when naming things other… when naming people besides ⌜Signet⌝ was, like, try to think of the arc of that person's story…?

AUSTIN: Hmm! Uhum.

ALI: Wich is why – I forget Tender's full name here – but I was, like, thinking something like around Sea, and other, like… Like, something that was going to describe sort of a landscape, essentially. And ended up going with something that, like, sounded more like a prayer for, like, finding unity between people or whatever.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

ALI: [cross] That's sort of what Tender's whole deal still was. Um, just kind of stuff like that. I think, you know, being able to find a name that also reflects the character, especially when you have these long and very specific names, will sort of help everyone at the table who isn't kinda used to that, [cross] because there will be an immediate association.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah

ALI: But besides that, yeah just um, you kinda just have to feel it out. The, like, name generator and then changing it thing has been a thing that I've done… for like the twenty years that I've been roleplaying. [laughs]

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[2] The name in the audio recording is no longer in use, hence the audio/transcript discrepancy.

AUSTIN: Oh yeah, of course.

Ali: Which is basically like just go to, find, like, a word that sounds pretty cool, change one of the syllables so it's perfect, and then you're good.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Totally. Darcy?

DARCY: I think something that has really changed the way I consume media, after, like, we started doing this podcast, is that now whenever I hear a cool name or a cool word it just sticks in my brain forever. Like, um, Even Gardner. The "Gardner" came from listening to a podcast about this, like, dude in, like, 1800s America who was named Awful Gardner and I was like "Ah! Gardner's kinda a cool name."

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah.

DARCY: And then, like, that just rumbled around in my head for, like, six months until we did Twilight Mirage. Um.

AUSTIN: Notes. Like, on that note, right, like…

DARCY: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Hear a cool thing, write a cool thing down. Play around with it. Say it.

JANINE: Some people still think the name book was a joke. That like, a joke.

AUSTIN: It's not

JANINE: No. I don't use it as often anymore, just because I moved rooms and then just kind of it ended up in the other – because I don't have drawers in this desk – it was, like, a thing that if I want to have it in here I had to, like, keep it on the desk or, like, bury it somewhere.

[others chuckle]

JANINE: And I buried it somewhere, and like, whatever. But you know like, I have a sepa… I have the name book, but I also have a piece of paper with names on it. I also have a note on my phone with names in it. Like…

AUSTIN: Righ, right.

JANINE: It's one of those things of like, sometimes it's just as simple as, like, you hear a name and you remember that you like it. And you don't want to lose that again so you just write it down, [cross] or you know…

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: Phrases, things… Things that you know you recognise the cadence that you like.

AUSTIN: Totally. I'll go one more thing with the Excerpts, specifically, that specific type of name. In fact I'll do two little things that are a little bit closer to what you think of when you imagine "oh there must be a ruleset for these." With Excerpts, I always wanted them to feel like what they were, which is an Excerpt from a larger text. Which meant that they should rarely feel complete, they should always feel like there's a question about what the context they originated were. So, like if you take a look at even just ⌜Signet⌝'s is a great example of this, [cross] right?

JANINE: [cross] Uhum.

AUSTIN: Do you know by heart Janine, or do I need to…

JANINE: Uh, "They marked scars of light in pitch," I think, semicolon, "born in fiercest purpose and beheld as the signet sealed upon our pact," comma.

AUSTIN: Right. Right.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: And so the question is, who is they? Who marked scars of light and pitch? Who was born in fiercest purpose? Um. Who was the pact between? Right? All of those conversations, all of those questions get opened when you read an Excerpt name like that. And I think that that's true of all of all my favorite Excerpt names in general, where it's like, ⌜Blooming⌝'s was "to the prince we offered twelve thousand flowers blooming in an untouched field". To what prince? Wait, in what situation was there where a Divine was offering flowers to some prince? And that helps communicate a sense of grandness to the culture of The Divine Fleet, and a sense of… time to it. And then similarly, with the Maelgwyn's Chosen names, which are all pulled from a certain school of puritan names. Like, if you do a search on the internet for "strange puritan names" you'll get the list that we… I think we talk about it in the worldbuilding episodes, in the Quiet Year episodes of… [cross] Marielda.

JANINE: [cross] There's like a Horrible Histories skit about something like this too. About kids named like…

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: That's victorian tho so they were naming their kids like Turnip, and Apple, and, like, Toilet and stuff.

AUSTIN: Right, right.

JANINE: Not like, The Virtuous Daughter, you know…

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Such and such. Right.

JANINE: Yeah. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Like, Fear-God Barebone, or Praise-God Barebone, or…

[DARCY laughs]

AUSTIN: Fear-Not Helly. Like, there's a bunch of these weird… Quote-unquote "weird names" from this period. And a lot of them were tied to virtues, things like "Fear Not" or "No Merit", things like "Praise God", and so those are the ones that became the Maelgwyn's Chosen names in Marielda, and for me the quote-unquote "ruling" there, the thing I wanted each of those names to communicate was some sort of moral thrust, some sort of, like, here is a belief that this family had at some point.

AUSTIN: The Dwarf names in Heiron have a similar thing. I think that they were all tied to a specific… job, if I recall? So, like, that's one thing that you could do if you want really interesting names is like: "how did they arrive at their names? How did they…" You know, many of our names were tied to jobs at some point. But that is not necessarily the case in other cultures. And so, like, the Walker was the name of someone who walked the… border of a given clan's area in Scotland or whatever. Many other cultures wouldn't have named someone for that, they would have named them for some other different thing. Right? And so look into just how cultures around the world have named… figured out names and that can give a real sense of peculiarity or particularity to your names.

JANINE: I really like the nordic naming convention that you see a lot where your last name is a parent's name plus, like, daughter or son. And, obviously, that's complicated in terms of, like, gender and…

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: …things like that. Because it's assigned at birth and it's a whole…

AUSTIN: Yeah-yeah…

JANINE: …you know. But… it is really interesting to see cultures that have this much more direct thing about like “this isn’t who your whole family was. This is who…”

AUSTIN: [cross] One person.

JANINE: [cross] “Who you as an individual came out as,” or whatever. This is just one person.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right right, yeah. Um, ok, I’m going to keep moving.

[0:14:26]

AUSTIN: This one’s from Nichole, who says:

> “Recently I bought a game called A Cosy Den, by queer trans tabletop roleplaying game designer Kira Magrann because it was recommended to me by a few people I met at a recent gaming convention. It’s a game about – please ask Jack to cover their ears if they are present – lesbian snakes who have a variety of needs and who approach these needs in various ways throughout the game. I did not know at the time how intrinsic to the gameplay cuddling and sex mechanics / roleplay were when I bought it. While I think I could be comfortable playing this game with people I trust, there just are simply not many people who are interested in exploring sex or relationships in roleplaying games.
>
> Do you have games you’ve bought that never get played? Does this bother you, or are you happy to support indie game makers? Do you have tips for finding safe, good people to play these sorts of games with, that perhaps are a bit more intimate than your typical tabletop roleplaying games. I know each of you has a different level of comfort when it comes to romance in games so your input would be helpful. Thank you for being awesome.”
> [15:20]

AUSTIN: Any answers for this that jump out? Well, there’s a lot of questions there, but pick your favorite.

[ALI chuckles]

DARCY: I am constantly buying games that I never play.

AUSTIN: [cross] Always. Same.

ALI: [cross] Yeah. I think that's the obvious one here… that we've done this and we're fine with it. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Um…

AUSTIN: [cross] I think it's…

JANINE: [cross] I've got that copy of herbalism in Vancouver. I'm… I know I'm never going to play that game…

[ALI laughs]

JANINE: …but damn it's gorgeous!

AUSTIN: Yeah. I think, like, a big part of the hobby of tabletop games — both pen and paper role-playing games and tabletop board and card games — is: "this is a cool thing. I want to support more cool things being made. Here is 25 to 75 dollars." [chuckles]

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: 5 to 75 dollars, really, once you start looking at, like, PDFs online and stuff like that. There's *so* many… Like… The first… All of the RPGs I bought from the time that I was first like "I should start buying RPGs! I'm a 15-year-old!" was games I never played. Or games I wouldn't play until college. Or until my mid-20s or whatever. Like, especially in the independent scene — where, like, if you don't have a group of people who is really experimental and really adventurous it's really hard to convince people to play strange games if all they want to do is play D&D. But that never made me stop buying them…? Because they are works in their own right! Like, they are… works of art, and works of craft that can be enlightening and fun — even if you never roll the dice. So I'm all for you buying stuff that you never play. [chuckles]

ALI Yeah. That's the other thing, is that I find… every time I read, like, a new game system — especially something that's kind of like… kind of small and, like, specific and has specific mechanics for a thing — it's always like: "oh I would love to borrow the way that this person talks about doing this sort of thing in the game that I play every day. Which is like *Dungeon World* or whatever." [chuckles]

AUSTIN: [cross] Right. Right.

ALI: [cross] Whatever other thing that we're doing. And I think that there's a lot of value in that… Just in terms of, like, being a systems collector, or whatever…? [chuckles]

[AUSTIN chuckles]

ALI: This question is tough because I… [chuckles] So… tomorrow, probably, sometimes this week… we're gonna do a Live at the Table game. And I definitely was, like, [chuckles] on Drive Thru RPG, like, just finding stuff and ended up like finding three different sort of, like, romance-centric systems. But then I was like "I don't know…" [chuckles] "who of this group would want to play it. And, like, which of these games to choose?" [sighs] It's tough. Because I think, like, especially with a system that kind of mechanic-izes…[3] That's not how you pronounce that. That's fine. [laughs]

AUSTIN: You got it. You're close enough. People get it.

ALI: [laughing] A system that is applying rules to relationships in that way is tough. I think that you can kind of… if you're playing with people who like… you like to play RPGs with and like to… you know, make characters and talk about them and maybe not have the romance thing you can kind of, like, figure out what intimacy is that isn't like: "oh, they're gonna have sex now," right? [chuckles]

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

ALI: [cross] Like, when I think about something like *Monsterhearts* even, which has, like, a very specific Turn On system… The, like… That, you know, that is doing a very specific thing in that game, but you can also, like, for Veils or for the comfort of the people at the table you could always just be like: "okay, what's happening here is that these people are becoming close in a very significant way in this time of their lives. And it doesn't have to mean the way that the game [chuckles] was written it to mean." Right?

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

ALI: [cross] You can kind of make those allowances.

AUSTIN: Another thing I'll say here is that there is an entire… So. My understanding with *A Cozy Den* is that there is actual cuddling involved. Like, it is… it is a game that includes physical interaction… between players. And inside of the LARP scene right now, like — or I'd say in the last decade, especially — there have been a whole range of really interesting games that include physical interaction across a variety of… degrees of intimacy and intensity.

So: one, looking to… start doing some searches into Nordic LARP, into kind of contemporary LARP in general, into romantic and erotic LARP, and see what tools are available for you to make sure that that space is as safe and as comfortable as possible. But also I can say for a fact that one of the things that happens inside of those spaces is that you can

[3] Pronounced it as "mechanick-eye-ses"

negotiate alternatives to… that physical interaction. Right? Because often, like, a pair of friends who don't necessarily want to touch each other still want to play a game together about romance — or who want to only touch each other by holding hands or by touching fingers together or whatever it is. Right?

And so you can… always hack a game in that way also — into being something that you're comfortable with. Maybe it's just, you know, pushing tokens together on a table. Maybe it's in fact nothing at all. Maybe it's just like having a Google doc. Where you're saying like: “alright, now we're touching,” and you type that out. Right? There's a huge range there and enable yourself to to play with the rules of the game until it's something that's safe and comfortable for you.

Because while I as a game *designer* respect the ability of a game design to say here's how I imagine this going and here's what works for me as a player and and is interesting to me as a designer, I also have to encourage players to always make a game their own and bring it into their… worlds and into their lives in a way that is safe, comfortable, and exciting. Because, you know, that is… if that's where you're going for it you should be able to transform it into something that kind of fits your needs.

[pause]

AUSTIN: Anything else here?

[pause]

AUSTIN: Okay. We're keeping… keep it moving! This one's from Jacob. Which actually has some interesting overlap with that last one. Because of the way we… kind of gamify or mechanize a character response to… kind of rulesets. So Jacob says:

> “I was wondering what you all feel is the best way to handle fear and terrific situations in a tabletop role-playing game? Most games I have played seem to only use it mechanically as a way to take away control from the players, which to me is very unfun. Less specifically, I also wanted to ask about the more general use of horror and tabletop games and how it is often used within the rules to influence play? Now, obviously, you folks have not played any horror-centric games but nonetheless shades of it do come up even in the latest game (with things like iconoclastic goop monsters) and I'd love to hear your thoughts about this stuff.”
> [21:47]

AUSTIN: And just a little background so that we're all on kind of at least a semi-even playing field in terms of what Jacob is getting at here: one of the things that happens in a lot of tabletop role-playing games that deal with horror is that the GM is in a position to take away a reaction

from a player character or to enforce a reaction from a player character according to them seeing something horrific. Right?

I think *Call of Cthulhu* is the most famous game in this space that does this — where if you see something truly horrific whether that is a dead body or a being from another dimension you roll a sanity check to see if you keep it together. And obviously, unsurprisingly, as so much horror is the entire notion of rolling a sanity check and having a kind of numeric clean quote-unquote "sanity score" and having insanity effects is caught up in a lot of tropish, like, stereotypical harmful bullshit that a lot of horror has dealt with over the years. And you see that stuff sneak into games that are often even, like, pretty good otherwise. Right? Like I've had a great time playing *Call of Cthulhu* in spite of that versus… you know, versus… encouraged by it.

And so I think that is part of what Jacob is saying here is. Like, in that moment… in the moment that a game says: "okay you see something scary. You know, roll to see how much it hurts you. Roll to see how scared you are." You're removing some degree of agency from the player, and instead of the GM saying how much does this scare your character — the GM and the ruleset isn't enforcing that.

I think that's happened for us a couple of times — I was just listening to something fairly… Oh! It was… Were recording… Was it *Lacuna*? Did that… Was it *Lacuna* that did this? Or was it… It was something recently, where it was like: "oh this is weird. I'm going to need you to roll blank to see how you react to it." And I don't remember what it was. Fuck.

ALI: I think it was *Lacuna*!

AUSTIN: [cross] It must have been.

JANINE: [cross] Yeah. It might have been *Lacuna*.

AUSTIN: But I can't remember what weird… Oh! It was the end of that first session that we recorded, Janine. You did… Was it Janine or was it… Maybe it was Jack. It was Jack. Jack got a phone call, is all I will say.

[ALI chuckles]

JANINE: [cross] Right…!

AUSTIN: [cross] And I was like: "oh, I'm going to need you to do blank." And so… And so that was… That was a situation where it's like "I'm making you respond because this should be… frightening to you. Roll some dice to see if it is frightening to you," basically. So I think there's a place for it. But I do think that it's something that, like romance, like being turned on in a game you should be willing to negotiate that at the table and make sure that everyone's comfortable

with effectively saying I'm giving up my character's agency to the dice — to see how this happens. Because otherwise you do risk crossing some boundaries.

Or just characterizing someone in a way that they didn't imagine they'd be characterized. [chuckles] Do you know what I mean? Where it's like: “but wait, no! My character would not be scared of a dead body. They are a forensic investigator! They see dead bodies all the time.” You know? Any thoughts here on horror and ways you'd like to see it played and ways you've enjoyed playing? I think the Iconoclasts are definitely a good touchstone for how we do it.

JANINE: Uhum… I think for me a big part of it is, like… When horror is purely antagonistic, it's purely used as something for player characters to oppose, or whatever, I get less interested in it. Um. The Iconoclasts are… I don't even feel like they're… I mean, they're an exception to that in a way, but also something about them was… [sighs] They were definitely antagonistic, but they were also just kind of their own thing…? Like, they didn't exist to eat people, necessarily.

AUSTIN: [cross, chuckles] Right.

JANINE: [cross] Like, you know, there was the fact that they had an agenda; there was, like, an aesthetic element to them; there was… a lot of the time when we were dealing with them they were *a* complication not *the* complication. So, they kind of skirt the thing there. But, like, you know, Weavers being a good example of, like…

AUSTIN: [cross] Mmm.

JANINE: [cross] Most of the time — [chuckles] 90% of the time — Weavers aren't the enemy, they're just scary.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: Because sometimes… sometimes things in life are fucking scary and they're not, like, directly there to kill you, or whatever.

[DARCY giggles]

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: So I'm… I tend to be interested in horror that — and I tend to find that also works better for me in games — where it's like: “this thing isn't just here to kill me, there's something else… there's something more to it.” Like, it's not just: “oh, this is horrifying” as a… as a means to guide my actions or whatever.

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

JANINE: [cross] Even with the system itself isn't guiding the actions. You know what I mean?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Totally. Um. Ali, we played that game of *Ten Candles* forever ago. That, like, at least… It was supposed to be a scar… I think it was a scary game.

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: We just didn't get to the big final, like, conclusion of it. Where it would have gotten super-scary. But I'm curious between that and maybe other role-playing experiences if you have any thoughts on horror as a genre.

ALI: Yeah. I'm trying to think of, like, kind of the best way that I've seen in the way that I kind of prefer it, like, used in games… In terms of being… In terms of mechanics. I think something, like, how *Blades* does it — or I guess, even like *Dungeon World* has it — where you can take a trait or something like that. Where it's like…

AUSTIN: Hm.

ALI: I feel like that makes something more sense because it's, like, you can sort of… You can have a character have this encounter or, you know, this thought or the situation — and then are able to kind of carry the effects of that with them in a way that the player is able to control where they want it to come up.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

ALI: And also… You know. Have it be more of an honest reaction than it being like: “Oh, well. You've seen this ghost and now you… can only roll one dice.” [laughs]

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah-yeah-yeah.

ALI: [chuckling] For the rest of the scene, you know?

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: Because I… That feels more honest to me in terms of, like, what fear is like, [laughs] I guess?

AUSTIN: Uhum.

ALI: So, yeah. I guess, yeah. I guess that's the only thing that I have to add right now. [cross] Like something like that. Where it's like… Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah… The thing you're getting at, too, that's super interesting is there are different ways to bring something like that into mechanics. Because that… the model of like: “oh your dice pole is reduced to nothing,” or “your sanity score drops,” or “you're frozen in place” or whatever encourages… or doesn't encourage it. It produces a certain type of play that is *restrictive*. It's like: “hey, you don't get to play the way that you were playing a moment ago because you're scared.”

But what something like the Haunted status effects, you know, happened in *Scum and Villainy* for us — or similarly that the trauma in *Blades* — was something that, like, *encourages* a certain type of play that *rewards* you playing up that you are haunted. Right? Systems can do things by restricting player action or by encouraging it. And I think one of the ways that I would definitely want to lean into this going forward if we do more horror stuff is to encourage the response that feels right to the player. Like: “okay, hey here's the situation. Does this scare your character? If so, play out how it scares your character.” And that should be something that is mechanically rewarded in the long run and not just something that is…

[0:30:00]

AUSTIN: You know, player… We say this a lot, but, like, what the character wants and what the player wants do not and often should not be in lockstep. If you're playing a horror game one of the things that I want to… I would want to achieve is for the players to want to get their characters scared. Actually, this kind of came up in *BFF* a little bit, right? Which is like: “we are playing… we are safe on on a stage…”

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: “...in bright lights, surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of people…” but our characters were at Halloween Summer Camp and were scared out of their wits. And so… You want to produce that effect. Darcy, do you have any, like, horror game back…

DARCY: [cross] God…

AUSTIN: [cross] I know you've played a lot of *D&D*, I know you played a bunch of other stuff. But I'm curious if you've ever played anything in this space.

DARCY: So, no. And that's, like… ‘Cause I'm sitting here thinking about this question because I generally don't have any experience or much experience at all with, like, horror as a genre…?

AUSTIN: Uhum.

DARCY: Because, like, horror movies in particular, like, really fucked me up.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

DARCY: Like, not able to sleep right for like two weeks fucked me up. I blame seeing *The Ring* in movie theaters as a teenager…

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: [cross] I mean, scary as shit!

DARCY: [cross] And then going home and falling asleep and then waking up in the middle of the night with my TV on…

[ALI gasps in shock]

DARCY: …and the snow being on the TV.

[others vocalize aversion]

DARCY: I was like: “well, nope! Fuck this! Nope, nope, nope!”

[JANINE sighs]

DARCY: I think the most recent… I saw the new *Halloween* movie. And that was *okay*.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

DARCY: But I still had, like, a week and a half of, like, about to fall asleep and then my brain would be like: “hey, let's play that music jingle…”

AUSTIN: Nooo…!

[ALI laughs]

DARCY: “…that plays whenever the guy's about to murder somebody!”

AUSTIN: Right.

DARCY: And then you don't sleep. So… [cross] which sucks!

AUSTIN: [cross] You’re a living… You’re a living example of the argument that RPGs should, in fact, like, when a scary thing happens the character should lose [chuckles] some of their ability to do something.

DARCY: [cross, laughs] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Because they're fucking terrified. Yeah. [chuckles]

DARCY: [cross] Because it me.

AUSTIN: Exactly! No. That's interesting.

DARCY: I know… A group of my local friends played… *Music From A Darkened Room*, which I think is, like, a scenario for a Cthulhu-esque game?

AUSTIN: Hm.

DARCY: And I was interested in playing that. I… We couldn't get our times to, like, line up right. But I was interested in doing that because it sounded… you know, *very* different from anything I've played before. For whatever reason… I mean, we haven't ever done, like, true horror but even when we do get into, like, you know, creepy stuff on the show it doesn't bother me as much as, like, seeing it in a movie or…

AUSTIN: Yeah.

DARCY: …you know doing it at a video game, or something like that.

AUSTIN: You know what got close with you, actually? I just realized? Is… you were in *Misspent Youth*, right?

DARCY: Yes.

AUSTIN: Which where we did, like, the… It almost… It always felt to me, like, *Gangs of New York*-adjacent in some ways…? Where there was… the shitty, like… not baron, but, like, rich dude who was trying to buy up all the land, and, like, turn it into blah-blah-blah. And there was a character in that that was basically a slasher movie villain, who was, like, his… his chief enforcer dude?

DARCY: [cross] Yeah. Oh, yeah-yeah!

AUSTIN: [cross] Who was just, like, a big… almost just, like, a big boy? Who just had bad hair and I think he wore, like, really crummy coveralls or overalls? And was just, like, marched through the fire and scared everybody?

DARCY: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And that was… That was an instance where like I think is a good example, like, we were… you were playing those characters being terrified of that dude until you were, like, spitting in his eyes.

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: But as players — like you said — completely in control of that space. You know?

DARCY: Yeah. I think the most I've ever been freaked out by a game was, honestly, listening to everybody in the Twilight Mirage party just hanging out on the theme park full of kids.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: [cross] Really?

DARCY: [cross] Because at that point…

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

DARCY: [cross] Well, that's because at that point I was doing my internship where I did nothing *but* therapy with kids.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

DARCY: And I was like: “oh my God! If I was on this team I would be losing my mind!”

AUSTIN: [chuckling] Aha…!

DARCY: You're too good at playing kids, Austin!

[AUSTIN & DARCY laugh]

AUSTIN: Oh, god! There's some fun ones! We're in… And… Fhuhh. *Dungeon World*'s in the middle of it right now! So…

DARCY: Yeah.

[someone chuckles]

AUSTIN: As always, Darcy, you can let me know for if I'm… if you want to, you know, take a step back on any of that stuff.

DARCY: [hushed] No, we’re good. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Seriously! Last thing I'll add, though, is — like, building on that — is… It's funny. I think about the time we played *Ten Candles* and I think a week before that or maybe at the beginning of that trip because we played *Ten Candles* — Janine and Ali — on the trip to go to Art's wedding. We were in an Airbnb together along with Jack. And while we were there I think I said either on a recording or to y'all, I don't remember when, but somewhere around that period I was like: “I don't think I could ever run a horror game because I don't… because the things that make me really scared aren't things I would want to be doing on a recording or doing, like… I don't want to be the GM of something that really makes me scared. And the tropes of horror that are just played for fun don't really interest me as a storytelling mechanism too much.”

And then, like, smash cut we play *Ten Candles*, double smash cut The Iconoclasts and Volition and a lot of things that I'm genuinely scared of. Right? Around, like, human connectivity. And what comes after the human. And, you know, the double bind of wanting to understand that humans aren't the center of the galaxy but also everything I care and love is a human. [chuckles] You know?

[ALI chuckles]

JANINE: Uhum.

AUSTIN: And… one of the things I would advise doing if you want to go down the path of running a horror game is to actually have an honest conversation with your players of, like: what type of topics do you want to see here; what type do you want off limits — this is a super, super-super important in horror, because there are lots of things that are like “oh yeah, of course I would include this this is a horror game!” This is where you end up with the…

I just finished watching Jack and their partner KB play through *Silent Hill 2*. And that is a game that sometimes is hitting stuff that is… it's always hitting stuff that has the potential to be too intense and often mishandled. Right? Things like mental health, things like fatphobia — all the way through that game. Abuse. It is… That game requires so many content warnings and sometimes it hits the ball of the park and, like, manages… I think its depiction of kind of… post-traumatic stress and its… the way that it communicates a character who has been suffering for a long time can be really really good. I mean, there's a character named Angela who they do very well with by the end of that game, especially. And there are characters who they completely drop the ball on. Like, undoubtedly! I don't have any defense for some of the way that depict other characters.

But by and large that's a game where if I was doing a tabletop game and I was like “I want to do something like *Silent Hill 2*.” I'd wanna start by sitting with my players and saying: “okay, like, what stuff here is off limits?” Because I will always defend the power of games and the ability of games to tackle things like abuse — but if someone at the table doesn't want to do

that it is my role as the GM to accept that and move on and find other things, right? And horror games…

Horror in general can be a really fantastic outlet to explore those things — and also to do it safely you have to be very upfront about what it's going to be. Resist the urge to spring things on people in *that* way! Right? It isn't productive. It isn't. It isn't going to help anyone for the game to suddenly take a turn and suddenly be talking about fatphobia if the people at the table didn't originally say like: "oh, yeah. I would really love there to be something that digs into fatphobia." You know? Etc, etc. So. [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] And having that conversation up front even… even beyond the degree of making sure everyone's prepared to the… You know, more to like… [sighs] I think some of the best horror comes from, like, being really aware of the things that are the… like, discomfort in your life that you've become comfortable with.

AUSTIN: Hmmm…! Uhum!

JANINE: To a degree? Like, a lot of… [chuckles] You know, I've been thinking a lot about body horror lately because…

AUSTIN: [cross] Uh-huh!

JANINE: [cross] Because I've been going through a bunch of doll stuff. Which — how did I describe, Austin, earlier when we were talking about this, and you were like "you know… it's…" You know, we made the Gunpla comparison. I'm like: "Yeah, but it's like plastic flesh instead of plastic metal."

AUSTIN: Yeah. Totally.

DARCY: [cross, vocalizing discomfort] Ewehh…

JANINE: [cross] But, you know, so I've been thinking… [laughs]

AUSTIN: See? That's the response! But, like, my response to that was like: "it's not that much weirder than people who build… models of the planes that dropped the atomic bombs."

JANINE: [cross] No. Yeah. Totally.

AUSTIN: [cross] Which happens constantly. Um. And yet! And yet, one of these things is ostracized…

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: …and vilified. You know?

JANINE: But the thing that I think about a lot… in relation to that stuff is also that, like, I'm a person who has probably never since… for as long as I've been aware of my body I have never been comfortable with it? There has always been something.

Like, when I was little my mom made me very aware of my big ears, because I was born without that piece of cartilage that pinned them back. Because she was also like that and she got cosmetic surgery when she was, like, in her 20s or something to fix it. And, like, from when I was little onward she would say like: “hey, if you want to get that surgery you can! We'll just cover that.”

So it was just, like, one of those things of, like, she meant all the best things in the world by it — like, she just wanted me to be happy and confident. But I also didn't wear my hair in a ponytail until I was in college. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: Because it was just something I was aware of. So, like, I think a lot about why I like the kinds of horror I do. And a lot of it comes from… it's like a way for me to head-on look at these own… these feelings that I have in a different context. And, like, it doesn't change those feelings. It doesn't fix those feelings.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

JANINE: [cross] And also importantly I'm comfortable facing those feelings and it's a thing that I'm willing to bring to the table. Um… But being aware of that stuff and being able to pick it apart is also, I think, how you can get a really richly developed scariness…?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: I guess? If that's a world you want to build.

AUSTIN: Yeah. That makes sense to me. Any other horror feelings before we move on?

[pause]

AUSTIN: Alright this one comes in for Mx Quinn. Who says:

> “I've been GMing a few games lately and I think that maybe I've trusted a little too much that my players know how to improvise and how to share a conversation well. There's been some interruptions, some bossiness, and some outright refusals. Specifically, one of my players has been *undoing* players’ choices when he disagrees with them…”

[Janine sighs in frustration]

AUSTIN: Uh-huh!

[ALI chuckles]

> “There was a situation where he and another character got into an elevator and the other character pressed the button for the top floor where all the monsters are. Instead of rolling with it he does all he can to stop the elevator from going up and then turned it around. There are some other examples where I can't recall them right now. I need to have a conversation with him for sure. But beyond that I'm hoping I can find a way to establish good habits at the start of our sessions and find ways to remind the habits when things start falling apart later. So here's the question: do y’all have any methods for establishing or re-establishing good rules of conversation and improvisation for your games?
> [0:40:24]

AUSTIN: Janine, you sighed.

JANINE: Yeeaahh….

AUSTIN: What's up?

JANINE: Yeeaahh… Uhhh… You know. A bunch of us come from a background that's, like, real, like, role-play heavy?

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: And there is, like, in that scene *nothing* worse than the god mode-er. Like, the person who… decides that their version of the narrative is the final version. And like…

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: …just ignores what the other person is saying. And there is a degree of that where I want to say: “oh, it's an experience!” Because, like, I think when people start out they fall into that really easily — where it's just like: “oh, you said I could do anything, though!” But it, like… [sighs] There is a point where you really have to grow out of it. [chuckles uncomfortably]

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: And that point usually comes after, like, an uncomfortable conversation with someone that you respect and like spending time with. [sighs] Because it is just, like, a thing of you have to respect the story other people are trying to tell as much as the story you want to tell.

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

JANINE: [cross] And, like, you cannot always… They can't always have it their way — that's true. You can't always have it your way. You need to be very charitable in finding that medium…!

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah…

JANINE: [cross] It's a hard thing to get to, though…!

[pause]

AUSTIN: It is… So, there's a couple things here worth unpacking: one is that as the GM it is your… There are two ways to respond to something like this and there are times that I've responded too leniently or too firmly, is what I will say. And so I think that is there's not an exact science, and a lot of it comes from reading a group and from trying to unpack player action. Right? In a case like the one you describe here, Quinn, I think it's super fascinating because…

So, there are cases where I've seen a player character say “no, that isn't what happened,” or say “actually, I'm going to counter that… in a way that makes it so that it had never happened.” Those are the cases where I want to step in and say “wait now, it’s improv! Super-basic number-one improv rule is yes-and, right?” It's “*yes*, the thing that had already… we've already described as having happened on the screen has happened, *and* you can build on it.” Right? In fact, in player-to-player… In a situation like that what I would often encourage is for them to slip from yes-and to yes-but, right? To go from like “yes, and we're in the elevator and blah-blah-blah,” to “yes, but then I do a thing.”

And in this case this seems like this player is doing that thing. And in those cases I often then try to zoom in and say: “okay is this a conflict between the between the characters? What's happening here? Is this a situation where Character A wants to go to the top and Character B doesn't — and if so how do we have that… how do we have that conflict become the heart of the scene?” Because that's way more interesting to me than like: “we're gonna go to the top and fight a bunch of enemies.” Right? Like, that's…

You can get there. You can absolutely get there and that can be fun, too. But there isn't… For me there is, you know, Fero is of our games, right? [chuckles] Fero has — many times! — left the party behind. Or decided to go off and do his own thing while the party is doing this. Like,

that happens in every… in every season that's happened, right? Grand Magnificent decides “I'm going to stay behind at the camp instead of going off on an adventure with people.” [cross] Whatever it is!

DARCY: [cross] You know. The whole finale of Marielda.

AUSTIN: Yeah. A hundred percent! Right? Is about… characters batting against each other. And so… One of the first steps is like: “okay, is this someone who wants to turn back the clock or someone who in the fiction wants to… push back on the thing that is happening?” In a case like the elevator one…

[0:45:00]

AUSTIN: I would suggest, like, pausing the scene and be like: “okay, do you want to get off the elevator? Do you want to hit another button and then get off? Or are you just, like, trying to slow this down indefinitely?” Because if it's that's the case if it's, like, they aren't gonna do anything except slow down the conversation then you can kind of speed past it. And be like: “okay, look, if you're not gonna actually turn this into a conflict then I'm gonna abstract out. I'm gonna say for the next… It takes you longer than you expected because Player B is hitting all the buttons and trying to turn things around but eventually you get there.” And if they really want to have that conflict let them have that conflict. But… what you don't want is for them to step on what's already happened and try to act as if that stuff hasn't happened at all.

Have you all ever felt like you've been in a situation where you want to do the no-but? Or the, like, undo something another player did? And if so how do you resolve that feeling with knowing that you have to let what's already happened on screen happen?

ALI: Yeah. It's tough because I kind of agree with what you went over. Because, like, especially in the situation that's described here it's like… if the disagreement isn't the thing then… what's the thing, right?

AUSTIN: [cross] Right. Right-right-right.

ALI: [cross] Like, then what do you actually want to do? And I definitely, like… I understand… The opposite reaction I would have is to, like, kind of zoom out of play *completely*.

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

ALI: [cross] And be like: “okay… This person decided to do this thing. You didn't interrupt them when they were saying this plan.”

AUSTIN: [cross] Right. Right.

ALI: [cross] “We're doing it. So what's up?!?” Because, like… It should be like an either or in that situation. Because I can understand as a player feeling kind of steamrolled into something, not getting a chance to talk, wanting to be able to express yourself or change the course in some way — but, like, that has to be a compromise. Or a conversation. Or, like, you know… The, like… [chuckles] It has to be ironed out in some way. That's…

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: …clean. And it isn't just like: “well, I wanted to do the thing that I wanted to do.” I… [chuckles]

AUSTIN: And you can even say: “alright fine I'm doing it.” But in character you can see me, like glowering at you. I'm mad at you about it.

ALI: [cross] Right. Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] You know what I mean? That's allowed. Um…

JANINE: That’s what Bonds are for, even!

AUSTIN: [cross] Exactly!

ALI: [cross] Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: One *hundred* percent! Yeah. Totally. Yeah. So, it's like I always want to encourage there to be space for… You know! Never split the party: deuce with the party. Definitely split the party — and you're the GM you can make it so that the party can be split without killing them. That's not the type of game you're playing. You know, you're able to balance that stuff out and find things for both of those part… for both parts of the party to do interesting stuff. But I do… I absolutely get the other side of this — which is like when you've prepped something or when the half the party is doing something really interesting the other half just wants to, like, sit on the bench it can be really hard to activate that person and get them to, like, come back into the scene and, like, *do* something. For sure. Go ahead!

ALI: Yeah. It's tough, ‘cause, like, the specific question within like: “do you all have methods for this? Or establishing good rules of conversation?” I think, like, just asking simply like: “okay, then what is the scene that you wanna do?”

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: “What do you actually want this to look like?” is going to be a big hurdle over that. And, like… I'm guessing [laughs] like, in a situation like this for someone who's being kind of stubborn about it, constantly being like: “okay. Well, then. I'll just put you on the… put the camera on you for a little bit” isn't always going to be your solution.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: But, like, is at least enough of one to sort of, like, just make the, like, the Miss Manners version of this, [laughs] right?!?

[AUSTIN chuckles]

ALI: I… ‘Cause there was… The episode hasn't come out yet so… there's, like, a very specific moment that in the next episode where I'm like: “I as a player don't want to have to [laughs] play out the rest of this engagement. But I know that, like, Hella as a character is not taking the care in the situation that she would to not have things pop off the way that they do.”

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

ALI. [cross] And, like, sometimes you just have to be honest in that way. But I think that, like, Austin, if I had told you like “I do want to do this but I don't want to spend the next 20 minutes doing the rest of this thing.” We could have found a way around that…?

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: [cross] So…

AUSTIN: [cross] Maybe I can give you a condition for the rest of this. Because…

ALI: Yea-yeah.

AUSTIN: You did sloppily, but whatever, right?

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Totally. That… conversation — you know, Riley in the chats says “metagaming is good.” Yeah. Like, actually, pulling out and saying: “okay what is the outcome you want from this sequence — you as the player and you as a character? What does Hella want to happen here…”

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: “…and what do you, Ali, want to happen here?” will help us understand what dice we're rolling.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And when we should be rolling dice to begin with. The other thing there is… when it comes down to, like, particular methods of establishing and reestablishing good rules, as the GM, it is definitely your job to say like: “oh no, that already happened. This is already established this button was pressed. You cannot unpress the button!” And it is in your right to be like: “no there is no amount of Tinker skill that you have that will turn this elevator around given the tools and time that you have.” You can just say that. You're allowed to and and put the… kind of forcibly respect that first character's action there — so long as it feels like it's within the realm of the fiction. So long as, like, you're playing fiction first and it feels like you're able to back that up. Right?

There have been plenty of times when someone, you know, pushes the… ball off the hill or whatever, right? And someone else, like, wants the ball not to hit the ground. And it's like: “okay. Well, can you get to the ball in time?” And… Or… “were you — to get back to what Ali said before — interfering when the ball was being dropped?” Because that was the moment. That was the window. And so, another one there, we should say: “is everyone okay with this? Is anyone trying to stop this?” Like, *frame* the window! Give everyone the opportunity to respond at the moment of action. That's why there are rolls like “Aid and Interfere” in *Dungeon World*. Make sure you're underlying… underlining those moments so that players don't feel cheated out of their opportunity to interfere. And if they try to roll back the clock and say “that didn't happen, this other thing happened instead,” or if they are consistently on trend just trying to constantly erase the successes of other players…

There's nothing wrong with in the middle of the session stopping and saying: “remember we're trying to do… that was established whenever something is established. I cannot — as the GM, I cannot — unestablish that fact. There is a lot of power in framing. There… You can listen to the recording! There are a number of times when I've said like: “Darcy you're on the call now!” Like, thinking about late Twilight Mirage Even Gardner… where we straight up said like: “okay, Even is going to look bad doing this thing. When you do this I'm not going to frame this as heroic. I'm going to frame this as shitty.” [chuckles]

DARCY: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Or at least scary. And saying that to a player can sometimes shake them out of a bad habit. Because… it can pull them out from being the actor and into being the collaborative storyteller. Like: “well, I don't want to look like an asshole.” And that's not always like a capital W Win, you haven't necessarily won the war in terms of bringing them on board with your perspective, but it can salvage a scene so that later you can have that conversation. You know. Without the current moment being… pushed into the ground.

JANINE: Has the episode come out yet where uh I do the thing with the thing at the guy?

[DARCY giggles]

JANINE: And you tried to do that? You try to be like: “are you… Okay! What?!?” [cross] Like, there's a… There was, like, a thing…

AUSTIN: [cross] Do the thing with the thing with the guy? No. No-no-no-no, no.

JANINE: Yeah. Uhm…

AUSTIN: With the… dagger?

JANINE: [chuckles] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. That has not come out yet.

JANINE: [cross] This is what… [unintelligible]

ALI: [cross] Oh! Oh, god! [laughs] Okay!

JANINE: [cross, chuckling] It's fine. It’s fine. I was just thinking of, like, a… So, yeah… Sometimes… that can also have the opposite effect, though.

AUSTIN: Which is?

JANINE: Where… Which is, like… When you reacted that way I was, like… extra gleeful to do it. Even though I was like…

AUSTIN: Sure.

JANINE: “Oh, he might [cross] use some…”

AUSTIN: [cross] But that's fine, too! Like, if someone's extra gleeful…

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: …that means that they're…

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: …they're fine with the framing!

JANINE: Yeah. Yeah.

AUSTIN: At which point the… this, like, the sanctity of the game, so to speak, [cross] the moral throughline…

JANINE: [cross] I wouldn't have felt railroaded at that point. That's true.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right…

JANINE: [cross] Whereas, if you just said… If you just said: “okay…” and then had done something like “and everyone else is… this happens! And it's all bad.”

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

JANINE: [cross] Then I would have maybe felt a little railroaded. But…

AUSTIN: Totally.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Totally.

AUSTIN: People, this will all make more sense…

[JANINE & ALI laugh]

AUSTIN: …when you go to the dagger scene in the next home game [cross] of *Dungeon World*.

JANINE: [cross] “The Dagger Scene.”

AUSTIN: Darcy, you started to bring up Marielda here before, and I'm curious what your thoughts were there with some of this kind of interaction between PCs who have different agendas.

DARCY: [sighing] Eughh… I mean, the whole… Like, I think comparing Marielda to thing like the stuff you brought up with Even is like the perfect, like, point A to point B evolution of how I approach this game. Because the whole time through the Marielda finalnal… uh, finale I was just freaking out, worried that I was being a jerk and ruining everything for everybody else…

[AUSTIN sighs, ALI chuckles]

DARCY: …and that everyone was gonna be mad at me? [laughs]

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: Darcy…

DARCY: Uh… Whereas, like, there were a bunch of times with Even at the end of Twilight Mirage where you're like: “are you sure this is how you want this to look?” And I was like: “Yeah. I think that fits where this character is right now.”

AUSTIN: Right.

[pause]

DARCY: So, yeah. But, you know… I have fucking social anxiety out the ass, so… That's me.

[AUSTIN chuckles]

DARCY: Maybe the… [chuckling] Maybe your player doesn't! I don't know!

[ALI & DARCY laugh]

AUSTIN: [chuckling] Maybe your player is the one who's just like “fuck it, man! This game's all about me! I do whatever I want!” I want to be clear: all the stuff that we've said is on top of the stuff that we always say. Which is: be willing to have that big conversation with the player — “off mic,” so to speak, away from the table — and say: “hey! Like, you've been disruptive lately.” Or, like: “hey, my player… the rest of the players at the table keep having their stuff overwritten! It's not fun for other people… I'm really excited to have you as a part of this game. You've done really cool things. But also, please, like, take this into account! Because…” And those conversations are hard! Like… Those conversations don't happen on the microphone for us. But they have happened in the past, and people have gotten better for it. And, like, the show is better for it. [cross] That is…

DARCY: [cross] And I do…

AUSTIN: Go ahead.

DARCY: I’m sorry.

AUSTIN: [cross] No! No.

DARCY: [cross] I do wonder if this is just a, like… a thing where it's, like, two people just want to play two different games. Like one person wants to play two different games.

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhm. Uhum!

DARCY: [cross] Like, one person wants to take the elevator up…

AUSTIN: Yes!

DARCY: …to, like, fight the monsters because that's what they enjoy out of this game.

AUSTIN: It's *huge*!

DARCY: And the other person, like, wants to, like… You know. Find all the weird, like, lore bits. That are in the other parts of this building, or whatever. Like…

AUSTIN: *Totally*!

DARCY: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] There was… I was looking at a game today called… I'm not gonna fin… It was… It's by Modiphius. It's by the people who make *Mutant: Year Zero*. It is called… I'm looking at it now. I'm looking for it now. Fuck. Am I not gonna find it? I'm not gonna find it in time. Goddamn it. It's a… It's a, like, a sword and sorcery tabletop RPG where the players instead of playing as… kind of heroes or playing bandits and similarly… You know, maybe they do some heroic stuff now and then but that is not their motivation. They are not out here trying to be capital H Heroes. They're out here…

A *Forbidden Lands* is what it's called. *Forbidden Lands*. And I was thinking about that game — I was like: "you know, one day I'd love to run something in that sort of space." Right? Like, it's more *Conan, the Barbarian* than Tolkien. Right? And includes… Like: "oh, okay. What if we were playing in a world that was just shitty?" And so the fact that y'all were playing as… you know, bandits and brigands and pirates more than playing as heroes was somehow a little less… Like, it didn't… It wasn't on your back to make the world a better place? Because the world is already fucking destroyed and ruined. And you're just trying to eat, right? You're just trying to survive at this point. And like: "oh, that'd be a really cool game!"

And then, like, well but what happened to one player decides that they want to be the paladin? Right? What happens when *one* player decides? I've had this happen in just regular *D&D* before. Where you have the party that's all chaotic good or chaotic neutral and then you have the Paladin who is lawful good. And either the Paladin is, like, just pretending that it's that they're chill with all of the lawbreaking happening all around them, [chuckles] or the Paladin is being kind of like a spoilsport in some ways. There is nothing that says that your table needs to welcome all character types. Right? That your story… That it makes… Just because something's in the Playbook or just because something's in like the Player's Handbook doesn't mean that every player at the table should have access to it. Right?

There have been times when, like… So when I used to run games at college, when we used to run — you know a semester-long campaign or whatever — we would basically put together a little pitch for it. And there was a day at the beginning of the school year every year… Every semester where we would post up, like, the 12 games that people wanted to run that semester with sign up sheets. And those sheets had like: "how many players I was looking for; what the system was; degree of familiarity necessary with the system, and with role-playing in general; and then, like, a pitch about what types of… what the story was and what type of characters I wanted. Right?

And so, like, in *D&D* games you would straight up get like: "okay, like, no lawful good allowed in this!" And it can be… That can be, like, a weird thing to say because the players were: "but it's in the Handbook! I could play a character who's lawful good!" But what you can say is like: "Yeah. But, like, what if the *Usual Suspects*, one of those characters was lawful good? That wouldn't work! [chuckling] That's not the story we're telling!" Right? "I'm playing a heist game, none of you are cops! None of the main characters in this game are cops! This is a story about a heist — and is, like, that's what we're focusing on here. Maybe next semester I'll run something that's all about cops. Or that's about a cop who has… who is infiltrated… You know, whatever it is!" Right?

You can have that conversation with your players and say: "hey, what do we want out of this thing?" Because if — as Darcy just said — some of you want to go to the top of the building and fight monsters and some of you want to explore the ground floor and read, you know, diary entries, there's a fundamental disconnect. And that is an okay thing to happen but it's something that you should address instead of just… And sometimes you can address it by finding compromise. And sometimes you can address it by saying: "well, I'll run something else that scratches that itch. But for this one we're going to do action heroes fighting monsters on the top of the building." You know? Anyway. That's… That's my other answer to this.

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: Ahhh… Okay. Next question. From Gavin. Two questions: one short with a probably long answer — I would actually keep this short — and the other is long, [chuckles] also with a long answer. Gavin asks:

> "What does material mean? I Googled material philosophy and all I got is monism which doesn't seem right."
> [0:59:33]

AUSTIN: So the thing to Google here is probably "dialectical materialism," or, like, "materialism Marx" or even like the… Marxist materialism is not that dissimilar from monism or from the sort

of materialism you'll get if you just go to the Wikipedia entry or the Stanford, you know, philosophy of encyclopedia… or *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on what materialism is.

[1:00:03]

AUSTIN: But when I use it what I tend to mean is what Marxist schools of thought did; what things like Raymond Williams does when he talks about cultural materialism; it's that… The world is changed by things in the world and ideas are not things in the world. Ideas can exist in the world by way of physical things but that culture is shaped by the relationships of the people and the institutions and the physical things in the world.

And so… one way of thinking about this is just like: "alright, who owns all the factories? Whoever owns all the factories is going to be able to — this is like a very early 20th century, you know, 19th century answer, right — but whoever owns all of the fact…" Okay. Actually we can do a really modern example, right? How many people use Facebook? How has Facebook — which is a material thing, even though it's a website, the thing that exists in a very physical way on servers throughout the world and physically on our screens and that we interact with our mice and our keyboards — how has that shifted culture…? And elections? And the ways in which we exchange information? And polarization? And how do algorithms change the way that we see news, and the way that we understand our place in the world? That is a material look at… A materialist look at our moment in history. It's interested in how the things in our world create culture. Or kind of lead culture, lead lives. Lead lead us into being a certain way.

An idealist version of… or vision of history might say: "well, what was the prevailing method of thought in this moment?" It would say because we are so polarized; because we're so radicalized in this moment; because we are at extreme odds, because some of us have this belief in that belief — we have shaped the world to reflect those beliefs. I'm not, like, a hardcore orthodox… what you think of as an orthodox Marxist who says that… the base — which is, like, the fundamental "who owns what?" the factories, the kind of — *just* the relationships of production determines *everything*. I do think that what Marx calls, or what Marxist… Marxism calls the superstructure — which is the collection of ideas, and, you know, publications and culture and churches and everything else — absolutely has an effect there. But I do think about that stuff in material ways, too, right?

I think the police helped shape what is… legal just as much as what laws do. Laws are this big weird ideal thing, right? Like, laws are a thing that are put into place by people in the Capitol building. But police, who have guns and badges and who cannot be… who are so rarely punished for their misdeeds [chuckles] are the ones who help make laws actually *have effect* on our daily lives. So that is a very short and quick answer for what I mean when I say my material. Right? It's about how the world is shaped by the very specific *real* relationships between people and things and institutions — versus the idea that like: "oh, all these people believe X, therefore

Y.” It's more like “the… the fact that they believe X, *and* also have access to this, this, this, this and that, that lets them *enforce* X is why Y.” So that's that that's. My quick and dirty material answer. [chuckles] Which…

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: Which is as, like, lecture-y as I could get. Um. Two:

> “I GMed a *Dungeon World* game and I'm the only one who posts touchstones in the group chat. When I do the other players just make fun of them instead of actually contributing. One of the players has straight up told me that, quote: “I'm not a very creative person. I can't ever think of the things you do.” I've included every idea that they've ever come up with and the ideas they come up with are rad as hell! Getting other players to contribute feels like pulling teeth, and at this point it feels like I'm the only person who thinks about the game during the other days of the week. What can I do to get my players to be eager to contribute and stop making fun of the touchstones I post?” [1:03:34]

AUSTIN: Gavin. This is, like…

[ALI sighs]

AUSTIN: …so heartbreaking because you were doing all of the fucking work and it is… just… so, so frustrating!

JANINE: Yeah… I'll just say… I'll just say it. “I'm not a creative person I can't ever think up the things you do” is like a… There's a chance that they mean exactly that — I'm not a mind reader I don't know.

AUSTIN: U-humm.

[ALI laughs]

JANINE: But I can say that whenever I say stuff like that it's usually because I don't wanna…

[DARCY & ALI laugh]

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

JANINE: [cross] Like… Like… It's usually, you know… I… I think I've said this… these things to Austin a few times as like a… And when I say it, it is… like, half self-deprecating, half a way to

be like “man your ideas are really good and I don't want to do things that are on the same, like… I don't want to put something on that platform for comparison.” But the other part of it is just like “I don't really want to… I don't want to talk about this right now.” Like, there's a part of it that is just like “I… The things you do really are really good and it intimidates me.” Or, you know, it's something in that vein of just like: “I don't want to engage with this because it makes me feel bad.”

There's… [sighs] And, like, it could also just be that, like, they just don't want to… they don't want to take things off the table. Like, they want to leave everything on the table. Where you play. They don't want to have it… sort of… you know, like there… [chuckles] There are a lot of players like that. Who just, like, want to… “what happens on the table is there and then you walk away from it and it doesn't matter anymore.” Like, it's not… It's not like a thing that you think about when you're cooking or whatever. The way, like, it is for a lot of us. Or for a lot of people in general who get really invested in the storylines in their games. Uhm…

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah! No, I think that’s hard!

JANINE: [cross] And it’s tough, ‘cause, like how do you… I don't know that you can always convert a player like that, who… I mean, part of it is also: a lot of people are really busy and they don't have time to, like, to… Or at least… [sighs] They would have time if they were already invested but it takes time to get invested in that way. And getting people to do that is a big ask…

AUSTIN: It really is. It is… I mean…

JANINE: Fuck them for making fun of you! Sorry. [cross] But also that. [chuckles] That’s rude as hell!

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. That's a big one. Fuck off for that. Full stop!

JANINE: That sucks!

AUSTIN: Um… It sucks to be that pers… [cross] to have that…

JANINE: [cross] You’r doing it for them, and they’re…! [grumbles]

AUSTIN: Yeah. Totally. A hundred percent. Like, I think that that is *so* frustrating… and is mean. Like, it is mean to do… [cross] to do it that way.

JANINE: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: Right? Like, I… It is so frustrating because there's so much invisible work that already goes into making a game. Or running a game. And part of the thing that's so great about having like “oh, here's our chat where we're gonna put together some touchstones, and blah-blah-blah.”

It's opening up and being like “hey, look! This is… You're gonna help me prep this thing!” Like, in some ways. Like: “we're gonna do this together. We're gonna build a world together.” So.

I think first and foremost: fuck off to the people who are making fun of you there. Not fuck off if they're not interested — because you're allowed to not be interested in games in this way. Again, I think we've said this a lot in the last few episodes: people want different types of games for different types of things. Like you just said Janine: people work hard and often don't have time or energy to put into, like, prep and and sharing touchstones and they're just not… They don't have the time to look around for them.

Here is what I will say as, like, practical suggestions for trying to get more buy-in — and the answer here might be that you've done these already, and that they still aren't bought in. It sounds like you're already integrating their ideas when they suggest them to you which is rad! Keep doing that!

But also try to give them little bits of additional authorship here and there as you play. To get them thinking about stuff in that way more generally. When you arrive at a new… when you arrive at someone's Hometown, have them describe what the architecture is like! Ask them how they… Introduce a new NPC and ask them why that new NPC owes them a favor? What favor did you do for them that they're want to pay back to you now? Constantly give them the opportunity to start thinking about stuff like that.

Another one is: try to figure out what they're interested in in the long term. Give them things to chew over in terms of what they want to do the *second* that you hit start on the next game. Right? The second that you're all at the table and you've all poured out your drinks and you're ready to go. So many times Janine has now messaged me — I mean, Janine, you're like a perfect case for this in some weird ways… [chuckles]

JANINE: [cross] Uhum!

AUSTIN: [cross] Which is… I think I've said this before. But, like, there was almost not a Friends at the Table because there was originally just going to be a game that was you and Ali and me. That was, like, when I first wanted to play *Dungeon World*. And that just didn't come together, partially, because, like, you hadn't done it before and I was, like… absolutely giving too hard of a sell.

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: Very much… [cross] be like…

JANINE: [cross] You had that whole thing, like, figured out before you'd even, like…

ALI: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Well, I…

JANINE: [cross] …confirmed that we were interested. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Well… I thought you were both interested. Because what I got was the…

[JANINE & ALI chuckle]

AUSTIN: “I'm not a creative person, I can't even think of things you do” response.

[ALI laughs]

JANINE: Yeah…

AUSTIN: And I was like: “alright, fine! I'll just think of the things!”

[JANINE laughs]

AUSTIN: “You're the player! You don't need to think up anything. I'm gonna just not… I'm going to *choose* not to read the subtext here and force you to say no!” And so… I mean, what I was really doing was the Hofstra University Gamers’ “here is my… [chuckles] Here is my one page sheet pitch for this session.” Or whatever. Right? But the… But the arc from that to now where it's like: I will get a message at 3 am from you that is like “I have a great thing I want to do the second the next session starts…”

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: …largely comes from, like, figuring out ways to, like, encourage that style of play and leave open spaces — I think, at least — for those sorts of machinations and those sorts of like… Here is what the… Here is where you can be up late thinking “ooh, I can't wait for this thing to happen, or that thing to happen,” is starting by giving them the players space to feel expressive in the first place and not just, like, there is… You know: a monster to fight. There is a mountain to climb. Because, like, they're not going to stay up late thinking about how to climb the mountain. They're just not. Because the way you climb a mountain is you roll a “Climb a Mountain.”

But if you say like: “okay, here is a bigger problem. Here's a… Here's an ideological problem. Here is a… an existential crisis that you're having. Where do you fit into the world? How do you want to… How do you want to, like, maintain control over a settlement that's falling apart that you were in control of? How do you want to do blah-blah-blah?” That stuff gets people's minds turning a little bit more. And it's a lot harder to get to that point, for sure. And it

requires buy-in to begin with. So, again, maybe you're already trying all this stuff and it still isn't coming. But, like, that is my, like, practical craft-suggestion, for sure.

JANINE: The other thing is that we also… have such a wide variety of touchstones.

AUSTIN: [cross] Hmm.

JANINE: [cross] The kind that doesn't work for someone… You know, like, we have… You know, you do playlists for seasons. We also — some of us — have our own personal playlists.

AUSTIN: Yup.

JANINE: We also… You know, we'll share images. We will share, like, quotes. We will share, like, mentions of, like, scenes in movies of like “oh, isn't that cool…? Like, that mood was really…! We should try and tap into that mood!” Or, like… So there's a lot of different things where… You know, not everyone is going to be the pinboard kind of person. Even though that's probably, like, the quickest thing that a lot of people reach for is. Like, just a bunch of images that are, you know, whatever.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: Some people are gonna be… Some people respond more to playlists. Some people will respond more to, like, just text ideas… And, like, everyone's a little different. And that can also be part of figuring stuff out. Is, like… Not everyone's going to be… The closest word I can think of for what I want here is like “evoked” by… the same material.

AUSTIN: Uhum. Yeah. I think, you know, gorbach kosner in the chat says shared worldbuilding games are such a useful thing…

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Happily, multiple ones exist now. Yeah. I think about something like *The Quiet Year* or any sort of like… There's a reason why we don't start at episode 01 for most of our big campaigns — we started episode 00.

JANINE: Uhum.

AUSTIN: And we build a world together. We spend weeks or months tossing images at each other, and quotes, like you said, and essays to read… [cross] and episodes of stuff and AMVs…

JANINE: [cross] You can do that in between, too! It doesn't have to be… It's not just like…

AUSTIN: [cross] I mean… [sighs]

JANINE: I just want to say that like it doesn't… Once the moment of setting up the world has passed you don't have to throw all that stuff out.

AUSTIN: [cross] Totally, totally. I'm saying…

JANINE: [cross] Like, you could still play *Quiet Year*, and set up…

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

JANINE: [cross] You know, I'm doing right in my… In my campaign that I run for a few people is right now we're in the middle of playing *Quiet Year* to set up a… their sort of… the location of their next campaign thing.

AUSTIN: Mmm…

JANINE: Because it's a village that isn't… that doesn't exist in the canon world, so [cross] let's make it.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

JANINE: [cross] Let's make it exist.

AUSTIN: Yes. Yeah. The thing that I was saying… The thing I was going to say was that it does sound like Gavin has continued sending touchstones throughout their campaign — and that that becoming one-sided sucks. But yeah. Doing something that's a collaborative worldbuilding exercise in the middle of your campaign could get them invested into a location. I think about, like, we just did *Cold*… You know, I forget the full name. But *Cold Winter*. Or *Coldest Winter*, whichever it is. Coldest Winter is the Kanye West song, isn't it?

ALI: Uhum.

[DARCY chuckles]

AUSTIN: It is. So *Cold Winter*. And… then we came back and did the bit where it's like: "okay, everybody draw an extra location on this map for this town." And I feel like everyone's a little bit more, like… invested at this point…? *Because* everyone's touched it. Everyone *has* a spot that's theirs. Everyone has a feeling for this place in a way that they wouldn't have if I was just like: "and now you're all here at this university. And I have seven pages of… information about this University."

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: “Have fun!” [chuckles] That's not as interesting in that way, I think. So. Our next question is going to get to something just like that so we'll see.

JANINE: I do also wonder if the fact that everyone is making fun of the things makes people less willing to share their own as well.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] Because I think about some of the… garbage that I've put in the [chuckles] Bluff City Board…

[ALI & DARCY laugh]

JANINE: And I'm… It's garbage I'm very enthusiastic about…! But no one makes fun of it! So I don't feel bad about, like…

[AUSTIN chuckles]

JANINE: …throwing things at the wall to see what sticks.

AUSTIN: Uhum. And the Bluff City one's really interesting, because it's really broad what we put in there.

DARCY: [cross] Oh, god.

AUSTIN: [cross] And also is…

JANINE: [cross] Most of us didn't grow up near Atlantic City.

AUSTIN: Right! That's big! But also it's… a lot of it isn't like “and then we talk about the thing that gets put in there.”

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: It's a lot of, like… Every once in a while I would be like “oh my god, look at this cat! [cross] Everyone look at this cat!”

JANINE: [cross] It’s like a hot pot.

AUSTIN: But it is!

DARCY: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] So everyone just kind of scrolls through and drops in pictures of…

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: …weird products for babies. Or bad recipes. Or strange animals. And then, like…

[1:15:02]

AUSTIN: Most of the time there's no conversation about it. It's just like “Yeah. Damn. I guess you can enable… You can pre-order an Alexa enabled Big Mouth Billy Bass for forty dollars now!”

[ALI & DARCY laugh]

AUSTIN: “Damn, true! Damn, true: 1960s light bulb salesman case. Yeah. Absolutely.” No response between those two — but I promise you we all looked at this Alexa Big Mouth Billy Bass…

[JANINE laughs]

AUSTIN: …and this, like, pool suitcase that a 1960s Christmas light bulb salesman used to walk around with. Or this big cow. Or any of this stuff. Like… It doesn't have to be a conversation at all times in those ways. Like, it can just be like a dumping ground. People are talking about pin boards and stuff. I think that that's also a great… suggestion. It's just always, like… [cross] what you don't want is…

JANINE: [cross] Pinboards are… Pinterest is so gendered that it's really hard to get someone who is internalized the…

AUSTIN: Umm…

JANINE: …the iffiness there, onto Pinterest.

AUSTIN: People suck. Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] Yes.

AUSTIN: [cross] Dudes… Dudes are… Toxic masculinity is a fucking thing!

[ALI sighs]

DARCY: [ironically, from a distance] Ye-eahh!

AUSTIN: Ali, do you have anything here?

ALI: Um… Yeah, I don't know. It's tough because I have been a person who, like… I was, like, 19 and being like: "Justin, here's a picture of a dress that everyone in the scene is wearing" [chuckles]

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

ALI: [cross] "You're gonna have to deal with it." And he did.

[AUSTIN chuckles]

ALI: So I've always had patience around that stuff. I think, specifically for this question… Like, the… In terms of, like, trying to really think and cut… zero in like, what… The ideas that they've come up with that you've incorporated: where have they come from? And, like, what prompted them?

AUSTIN: Hmmm.

ALI: Because I think that there is — like Janine was saying — I think that there is a major disconnect in terms of, like, being able to think about and talk about these things off the table, essentially. Right? So. Yeah. It's tough. I think you talked about it a little bit, but just in terms of being, like, ending a session being like: "okay…" You know. "At the end of the session we're all at this hotel. The next session I want all of you to, like, describe a guest who's here." Or whatever.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

ALI: [cross] Something like that. You know?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Just to… Just kind of, like, it's gonna be homework, [chuckles] and it's gonna feel like giving homework and it's probably not going to feel great for a little bit! But just in terms of that, where it's, like: a very clear, like, start and end point; a very clear thing to think about; um…

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: …and just to kind of get them used to like: "okay, what sort of person would I actually want to see here? What kind of…" You know. You know, "we're going to a big market at the end of the session — what do I really want my character to buy the next time we pick it up or whatever?"

would be, like… Very short, like… I think of how… like, writing prompts are such a big thing? And just, like, something really simple like that — which is like: “okay. Here's a sentence.” [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: “Here's one thing. Just come back with this one thing…”

AUSTIN: Uhum.
ALI: ‘…when you come back. And then we'll just deal with it there.” Instead of having it to be this kind of, like, social chat room… [half-chuckling] “people are being mean to you” kind of thing. Because that sucks! And shouldn't happen.

AUSTIN: It sucks. Darcy, do you have anything here? Do you have any thoughts?

[AUSTIN & ALI laugh]

AUSTIN: Buddy!

DARCY: It's just… I… It's like… Yeah. Like, don't… If you're putting your heart and soul into something and really trying to make something happen… Like, I've been in that place…

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

DARCY: [cross] …where, like, I really want to make something happen.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yup.

DARCY: [cross] And because of that I put up with people being shitty…! Don't! Like, you are worth… And your time and energy is worth so much more than that!

AUSTIN: Yeah. I mean, I think that that's, like, a corollary there is… you could do all the things that we already said: you could have already been doing them; you could set up a rad Pinterest board; you could give everybody light homework that's enjoyable; you could try a bunch of different formats. And, like, a couple of things could happen: one is, they could all work magically. It's unlikely. One is that slowly but surely people start to buy in. You know, the first couple of sessions of any campaign you're not going to get that much buy-in to begin with, especially if you're using a setting that maybe people didn't collaborate with, or if people are just really busy or whatever.

The third thing that could happen is: none of it works. It just doesn't. And I think the most important thing for me is, like, don't take that as evidence that you are bad at this: don't beat yourself up if the rest of the group doesn't buy in the way you buy in; don't beat yourself up

because you're… you know, your players aren't as active as you are with this. That isn't a failing of you.

It might not even be a failing of theirs! Them being rude and mean is a failing of theirs. But them not being interested might not be a failing of anybody. It might just be that they aren't… they haven't had the experiences necessary to become people who enjoy it. And… Who then also are shitty. Don't let them do that. As Darcy has said, it's not worth it.

But most importantly for me is like: don't allow it to feel like a… — there's a word I'm looking for here — a referendum on you as a GM, or you as a person. Sometimes you get a group that just doesn't care. Who just *doesn't* care and you can, like, work your ass off. And what they're going to care about is, like, getting good loot, or about, like… getting the win, and you cannot instantly, by yourself, change the, like, the soul of that group.

And so… be willing to go out and try to find new groups; and be willing to try to play with people online; and take a break, and hand over GM duties! Let somebody else run for a little bit! Because, let me tell you, one of the things that's going to help is… if you're going to be able to be committed to playing and being active in that group, if you give someone else the GM role and they *have* to be that… ideally…?

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: …then you'll have two people who are excited, who aren't making fun of people. Right? It's one of those… And also they'll start to understand what it means to GM and how much prep goes into it and that might help a lot, too. So… But first and foremost just don't beat yourself up over it, because it's a hard thing to do and that's… that's enough suffering already. You know, it's enough work already. Don't drag yourself! One more question! How's that sound? Actually, it's not true, there's two more. This one's gonna be quick though. Actually, this one's… Yeah. Yeah. This one builds off of something in the last one. Zach says:

"I'm currently running two games of Dungeon World set in the same world but several centuries apart. One is a weekly game with housemates and a more infrequent game with my family set further ahead in time. I really like being able to use this to explore the ramifications of one group's actions but I'm struggling to conceptualize how a world lives and changes over long periods of time. How do you make the universe you portray on the show have such a tangible feeling of history to them?"
[1:21:30]

AUSTIN: For me it goes back to the thing we just talked about with materialism. I do my best to think really hard about how… potentially, groups with power and with control over things like the production of goods, or the control of knowledge, or the… who limit those things for others — how those things would shake out in the long run. But they're, again, I don't think there's a

science to this, right? Like, I think there's to some degree what you can end up doing is saying like: “Okay, cool. Like, there's a river here that means that, you know, the party in the past, you know, helped to defend a settlement. Maybe 200 years in the future it's turned from a settlement into a nice town or even a city.” Like, that stuff is pretty straightforward. It's like “oh, it's a port and blah-blah-blah. Right? But I also don't think… Don't let that ever limit your imagination. Especially if this is two different groups who aren't… who probably aren't comparing notes.

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: 200 years is a looong time. I think it doesn't feel like that long of a time for us in 20… you know, in 2018. Because, like, it's like “oh yeah.” Like… You know. Things have obviously changed in the last century… but, like, you know, “New York City has been here for two for a… for hundreds of years. So, you know, whatever!” No! Like, it's changed a *ton*! [chuckles]

And especially if you're playing in a fantasy setting, like, 200 years is enough time for any-ass warlock to do whatever the fuck they want that changes the world in huge ways. So, again, I'm gonna start with like “don't beat yourself up if there's inconsistencies. Explain… Figure out how to explain those inconsistencies. But, like, you don't need this to be, like, a Lego set that fits together perfectly. You know? Is…

Does anyone have any ideas here about this stuff? Like, we've done some time-jumps before. I think every one of our games had *some* sort of a time-jump, but rarely one is as big as this.

[pause]

JANINE: Um… A thing I would say — and this is just because Austin has had to put up with me, like, saying a bunch of, like, random facts about jewels and stuff…

[AUSTIN & ALI chuckle]

JANINE: …because I was reading this book about the history of certain jewels, and I'm a very regurgitate-y person — but I would say, like, a thing that can be really helpful… or has been really helpful for me is reading books about, like, historical marginalia.

AUSTIN: Hmm! Uhum.

JANINE: Because a lot of that stuff blows out in really weird ways. Like, this book that I was reading it's called *Stoned*. It's fine. It's not great. But they…

[ALI chuckles]

JANINE: They talk about like: “okay. Well, here's this necklace that really strongly contributed to the French Revolution. And here's this one individual pearl that is basically the reason why England started, like, paying pirates to do their thing.”

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

JANINE: [cross] “And, like, how that spun out to them having a massive Navy, etc, etc.” There are so many things, so many, like, really small things that are totally within the scope of [half-chuckles] what a lot of tabletop campaigns and stuff would be dealing with — like a very nice Pearl that someone found, and things like that —

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: …that over the course of a hundred to two hundred years can spin out into just this nonsense thing of like: “okay, this tiny Island now has the best Navy in the world.” Or all these, you know, these little things. So, seeing how that's happened in reality can, you know, inspire some interesting ideas, I think. Or can get you thinking in that direction.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] In a way that might be helpful.

AUSTIN: Riley in the chat says “wait FatT hasn't had 200 year time jumps? What about An “Animal Out of Context” to COUNTER/Weight proper to Twilight Mirage and Marielda and Heiron?” I think those are distinct from what's happening here. For a couple of reasons: one is, we… when I think about a time-jump in a game I often think about setting remaining the same. I think about something like *Dragon Age 2* does a number of time-jumps but you're also staying in Kirkwall. Right? Um… We've done that in… right now, in Spring where we've seen The Last University change over about a decade. We did that in Marielda when we go from *The Quiet Year* to *Blades.*

But, like, we didn't see Velas in Marielda, right? We didn't see… we didn't see the planet in “An Animal Out of Context” *ever* again. And so there are time-jumps but the stuff that Zach is talking about feels like what… it feels like they're talking specifically about, like, the same places. Where you would come back to the same spots. Like, we're very clear that we’re never going back to The Golden Branch star system.

And so, in some ways, like, yes there were time… time advances, but when I think about a time-jump being deployed inside of fiction what I tend to mean is like: we see characters change; we see settings change; we see places and, like, familiar factions change. And we haven't really done that at this scale, really. Like, I mean Samot is kind of in that space, Samol kind of is, for sure. But also… to some degree they're very similar people. [chuckles]

I think there's a distinct thing there between that and like: “I can imagine this all happening in one valley.” You know what I mean? I think the closest… you know, the Qui Err System stuff is actually the biggest, in terms of it being like: “oh wow this changed a lot! And also the same NPCs and stuff are here.” You know? So. Darcy or Ali, do you have anything here?

DARCY: I think what you said about it, you know… 200 years is a long time and then in a fantasy universe it's, like, a long enough time for any crazy shit to happen.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

DARCY That, I think, you get to have a lot of artistic license for, like, not everything that your… you know, past party does has to be echoed in the future. But I think that also means that, like, when you do have that echo be present — like, it gets to be like a very cool unique moment. So, like… I feel like if something happens in, like, the past party that you know is, like, super incredible that you want to call forward in the next game, you're gonna know in that moment when it happens.

AUSTIN: Yeah. In the very practical sense it… Keep a journal. Like, keep a doc open that is just like “what are the two things in this session that you could imagine there being fun repercussions for the other party to deal with?” Right? Like, have a notebook, have a Google doc that is just like: “okay. Yeah. They… You know. Defeated this… Bandit Lord… they rescued this dragon… how does that shake out over 200 years?” You know? Just keeping a list of those types of things could be really fun and could help you do that work. Okay this is the last pair. These are the last ones.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: And I actually have a pretty quick answer for this which is… It's funny, because I kind of think these are, like, the opposite of the thing before where I was like “it's a lot of fun to just build a world together… before anybody else shows up! No one wants to show up and there'd be 17 pages of blah-blah-blah…”

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: The *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* stuff is the opposite of that. It is literally the way you prep it is you just have to write it all out. So Tim says:

> “I love the way Heiron murder mystery holiday specials give a different perspective on the narrative and offer a change of pace to normal gameplay. I want to run one for my own game but I'm struggling with how to construct a murder mystery in the Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective style. Does Austin have any tips or tricks for mapping out the case for this style of play? Is it the massive job it seems to be?

AUSTIN: And Nathan says:

> “Thinking about your games with Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective is a starting point, was it difficult to create these mysteries? Did you start at the conclusion and work back or use some other method? Were you still able to leave blank spaces?” [1:29:08]

AUSTIN: You leave way fewer blank spaces doing this — because in the *Sherlock Holmes* style you have to know what happened and everything needs to come out the way it comes out. Looking at something like *Technoir* or… *Inspectres* which allows the play and the players to define the…

[1:30:00]

AUSTIN: …the action and define the mystery and kind of fill in the gaps themselves… Those systems allow you to maintain a lot of blank spaces and if you want to do that I suggest looking at those. I haven't played *Gumshoe* so I'm not actually sure if *Gumshoe* does the same thing or not — but I vaguely remember that *Gumshoe* does that — and kind of lets players kind of unfold the mystery for themselves. So look into some other systems if that's the thing you really want to do — is maintain that blank space.

To Tim's question it is one hundred percent just the massive job it seems to be. There is no… You can't fake it. [chuckles] Like, the way that I did it is I set up a bunch of different zones on each map… The way I did is I figured out what the mystery was. You know, “Person A kills Person B” and it starts there. And the body is found at Place Z, right?

And from there it's like… “what am I trying to communicate… through this crime? How am I trying to communicate a place in the people in it?” And then filling in those gaps. Making sure that like “okay, if this city has X districts, I need to make sure there's something important in each district.” Or at least something that would… you know, coax players there.

“What are the… player flags or the character flags? How do I ensure that, you know, someone like Adaire is going to go talk to someone like Blake Bromley — or have someone to

go talk to? Well, Adaire would probably be interested in going to see Blake." You know? Filling out the map based on who the characters in your party are? Because you're always going to have a place that is bigger and more dense with people than is… representable even if you did three weeks of prep. You know?

It is… It is a lot of work and it's a lot of fun. We are not doing one this year, because I do not have the time. And also we have too many players [chuckles] at this point. It is… That is another tip I will say is, like, doing the Rosemarrow one broke it. One hundred percent. Like, I think maybe if we had known it would go for as long as it was going to go for it would have been better. But it just went so much longer than the Velas one — and was… also way more prep. So it's one of those things where it's like: "I don't even know if I would recommend it at this point." [chuckles] You know. I think with was a smaller team — a smaller group of people — it's probably still a lot of fun.

But it is just, like, write out… The way I do it is, like, I write out the core mystery; then I write out a bunch of zones into a bunch of locations that have a base level of information and then, like, a bonus fact if they get a good roll; and then let them kind of take it from there; and then be willing to kind of give them extra when you know they need it. Or give them new information if they've already kind of duplicated that information from some other location — and that's the other big one is: you have to make sure that there are places for key information to be duplicated so that if they don't hit the magic spot they'll still actually get the information. You know?

And then lastly, you need a clock. We have the clock in Rosemarrow of being the… executions happening; and in Velas we had the Golden Lance was going to, like, say there… like, was going to draw judgment at a certain point in time. You need a clock otherwise people will just go forever, and there's no sense of tension at that point. Because we've done that with regular *Sherlock Holmes*. Where it's like [cross] "no, fuck it! Imma take 52 turns!

ALI [cross, whispering] Oh my god.

AUSTIN: "We're gonna go everywhere!" And at the end you still don't know what's up with those lions. Or the graffiti, or whatever. So… [chuckles]

ALI: [chuckling] Just write a better mystery than that broken *Sherlock Holmes* one!

AUSTIN: Yeah. It's hard!

ALI: [cross] Yeah. No…

AUSTIN: [cross] It's hard to write a better… It's… I'm not a mystery writer. Uh… Maybe someone who has this, like, very natural…

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: …relationship with those stories would actually do a better job. But, like, it's… it's just a lot. They're very hard to plan. Yeah.

ALI: I guess the only thing… ‘cause I love *Sherlock Holmes* and the only thing that I have to… put in it’s, like, the player side is like *the* most exciting part of playing a Sherlock's home game is that feeling of turning the page…

AUSTIN: Hmm!

ALI: …and, like, seeing if [chuckles] you've gone to a good place or a bad place.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: And, like, being able to recapture that, if that's the one thing that you do you've done this successfully.

AUSTIN: Do you want to explain what that means? When you say [cross] turning the page and…?

ALI: [cross] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So. [chuckles] In traditional *Sherlock Holmes* — and the way that it works with us as well — it's a map of a bunch of different locations and then you kind of select where you want to go. And with *Sherlock Holmes* there's always this moment of, like, turning the page and either it is a full page of information that you can get, or it's like one paragraph of like “you went to talk to this guy and he was cleaning a chicken and then he said he didn't know anything.”

[AUSTIN laughs]

ALI: [laughing] Like, it’s always something like that. And just like… the, like, stakes of being able to track, like… The trick of being like “okay, I'm gonna go to the butcher. And then the butcher tells me to go to this place. And then, like, I've… I know that I can go to the second place because I went to the first place and I feel good that I'm going to the second place” is always really fun.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

ALI: [cross] And then just the like… “I figured it out.” And there is like… It feels like literally getting clued. When you're like “oh yes! There's a bunch of information right here [chuckles] for me! I'm a good detective”

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: So. Yeah.

AUSTIN: A lot of that is just your delivery as a GM — is being like [exhales] “okay, here we go!”

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: And like: “hell yeah. I got that good shit! Like, shit's really gonna come together now!”

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: “Be willing to get exci…” You know, that's one of those like be… “Be fans of the characters” means hyping them up when something cool is about to happen. You know? So, like, when they go to Arrell's place, it's like: “Okay. Here we go! Pull up a chair. Some shit is about to go down.” And that'll get… the hype hype up. As people who played in these, Darcy and Janine, do you have any thoughts on what works when these are working versus not working?

DARCY: [sighs] I… When I was packing to move I found my notebook that had all of the notes from… [laughs] Our two mysteries.

AUSTIN: Oh, nice.

DARCY: Yeah. That was fun. [cross] Yeah. I…

AUSTIN: [cross] So, like, yeah. Encourage notetaking is actually a pretty good note, honestly.

DARCY: Yeah. Especially… I mean, you know, like you said, it went so long. If I didn't have notes I would not remember…. [cross] anything.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

DARCY: I don't know if I have anything to say besides like… Looking back on that that's one of those things where I'm just like “holy shit! That's a thing we did!”

AUSTIN: Um.

DARCY: And especially Austin did. [laughs]

AUSTIN: No, y'all did it, too. We recorded for about as long as I prepped. You know what I mean?

DARCY: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Like, you all had to do the same… you all have to do a lot of heavy lifting, also. Um. Two things there, though: one is, a shared note-taking apparatus is really fun. Everyone having, like, a document that they're sharing, whether that is a physical, like, notebook or is an online Google doc to be like… “alright. Here is the list of suspects that we're checking out — you know, crossing things out, and bolding things and etc.” is fun. [cross] Uh-huh?

ALI: [cross, giggling] That's such a specific good one! Because I remember in the Rosemarrow one there was a specific moment [chuckles] where we were like “who wrote that this guy seems suspicious” on here?!?

[ALI & DARCY laugh]

ALI: And we had no idea! But it was also just good to everyone be on the same page, be like “Yeah. Austin did have a weird tone when he said that.” [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yes! Yes. Totally. The other side of that is: ephemera. So the thing I didn't get to do for… Did I? I don't think I did for Rosemarrow… Well, I kind of cheated it at Rosemarrow. In Velas y'all also got like a flier from the church that gave a schedule of events for the day.

One of my favorite things about *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* is you get newspapers. You get a newspaper for every… for the day that the crime happened — or the day that like you start the investigation — and you also in *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* get a little get a… to look at all of the newspapers that have previous published dates on them from previous cases you've done, because there's Clues scattered throughout all of them.

You know, you're looking for the Diamond Thief and so, like, it turns out if you look back to the fifth previous newspaper that diamond came in from such and such a place… you know, such and such a… shipping company. And so suddenly, like: “oh shit, I can go to that shipping company and ask!” Blah-blah-blah. And so giving them stuff like that is really fun.

It's all… I don't expect anyone listening to this to ever write their own multiple, you know, newspaper editions…! But, you know, doing something like a newsletter or a flyer with information on it or in Rosemarow at the very least what I did was I gave you a suspect list that… the Golden Lance’d put together that included Dr Gloria Lake’s notes — where she would like be shit-talking someone…

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: …or, like, a place… Like, “I don't want to ever go here again.” That helps communicate that, like: “oh, this is a real thing in the world. My character is looking at this thing. My character has opinions about the stuff on this paper.” I think that's… one of those things that not only

works in *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective*, but would especially work in tabletop role-playing game format — because it encourages your players to, like, be in character.

There's nothing like… I wish I could make full newspapers and do this whole thing, because it would be so fun to do that! Where, like: “alright, everybody! Print out these PDFs and get looking!” I want to… I want to imagine Throndir looking over this broadsheet! You know? And being, like: “alright, well… [chuckles] On the back on page of the… you know, December 3rd edition it says blah-blah-blah…” So, make more of that stuff.

It's one of those things where I wish I had more time, because, like, things like notes that people could find would be really fun… Sketches. All that stuff and stuff that I wish I had the time to do. And if I ever do one of these again that's like… the reason I would do it is because I would suddenly have the time [chuckles] to really go all in and fucking do it for real. Alright, any other thoughts here before we wrap?

JANINE: Uh. I was just gonna say: I think it's… one of the most important things with this is also to, like… make sure everyone's on the same page about how the game works…?

AUSTIN: Hm! Uh-hum!

JANINE: Because if you're going from one system into another… it can be a little weird to know… Like, I feel like a lot of the — just in general, not relating to the holiday specials, but in general — a lot of my biggest, like, tabletop regrets as a player have come from not knowing what I was allowed to do in a situation.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: And it's not a thing that I think is an issue for us as much as it could be for others because we do tend to have a more like “what do you want to do? Let's figure out how to make it work” philosophy. But there is still sometimes… sometimes you don't know where you can push.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] Nevermind *how* you can push. So making sure that that stuff is really clear, especially if you're shifting around systems for different things is going to probably be very important to make sure that your players actually enjoy the experience.

AUSTIN: Last thing you want is for them to feel cheated or like…

JANINE: [cross] Yeah. Or like they got… boxed in. Yes. Totally.

AUSTIN: [cross] … “if I had known that's how that worked I would have done this completely different thing.” You know.

JANINE: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: So. And that's also just a general good rule! Right? Like…

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um… I was just talking to y’all about this the other day that was, like, the — both in fiction and in play — it's like: make sure that all the rules are solid, because… And also all the fictional… The fiction is clear about stuff. Be willing to ask questions where it's like: “okay, wait, wait, wait! What's happening in this city right now?” That, like… “Wait, should I… is this place flooding or is this place dry?” Like, what is the what is the state of things. If I’ve any confusion about it I should be able to ask for it. You know?

As a player, you should be able to say like: “okay, wait. I want to make sure we're all on the same page.” Again, both mechanically and fictionally. Because otherwise you can hit a point where it's like: “well, fuck! I would have not done *any* of that stuff…! Now I look and feel like a fool! Because I was betting on XYZ thing.” It's always better to just ask that question up front and to produce an atmosphere that allows that, you know? Okay! I think that's going to do it for us this time. We'll be back in January with another Tips at the Table, because we have just caught up with our Tips backlog. Now onto our remaining Lives…

[others chuckle]

AUSTIN: …and a bunch of other stuff for the rest of the month. As always, you can send in questions and please do! Because, you know, we still have a bunch in the backlog. But I like to keep them fresh, because the thing that ends up happening often is, like, we basically answer a question that answers, like, six versions of that question…? You know?

Which is good, because it means that our… Hopefully, we're being useful for people, because a bunch of people end up having similar questions. But it's bad because it means that we end up with like: “okay, we have a bunch of old questions we've kind of already answered… but not… Maybe that exact one but I don't just want to say the same thing I said on the last episode again.”

So if you have questions *please* send them in to tipsatthetable@gmail.com. Tipsatthetable is all one word. You can see it on the screen if you're watching. As always, you can find us over on Twitter at twitter.com/ friends_table; you can listen to episodes at friendsofthetable.net; and you can support us at friendsatthetable.cash. You can find me on Twitter @austin_walker. Where can people find you, Darcy?

DARCY: You can find me on Twitter at [username removed].

AUSTIN: Janine?

JANINE: You can find me on Twitter @bleatingheart.

AUSTIN: And Ali?

ALI: Hi! You can find me on Twitter @ali_west on Twitter. Just really quickly before we wrap — just a few things —

AUSTIN: Uhum.

ALI: …we might be having a Live at the Table tomorrow…? Depending on how Jack feels? So, look out for that. Second thing is if you supported us at the $25 level any time between March and now and you didn't get an email from Friends at the Table, you should email friendsatthetable@gmail.com.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

ALI: Just to figure out address stuff. That list should be comprehensive, but just checking… And beyond that I think we're good!

AUSTIN: Awesome! Let's do time.is!

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Maybe 45?

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Everyone good 45? Okay.

[pause, then the sound of claps]

ALI: [chuckling] I didn't do it at the right time! But that's fine. We're good.

[JANINE laughs]

AUSTIN: Okay.

DARCY: [cross] Okay.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: [cross] If you say so. Thanks for joining us, everybody! We'll see you soon! Peace!