

It Is Complicated Episode 31 transcript

(intro music)

Josephine: Hello and welcome once again to It Is Complicated, the podcast where we answer every single question with It Is Complicated, including the title of the podcast which is It /s Complicated. Hello Dr J.

Dr J: Hello Josephine, how are you? (Josephine laughing) We're in lockdown, can you tell? So, yes, hi. Do you want me to go first because I usually do? (Josephine laughing)

Josephine: Don't know.

Dr J: Hey, I'm Dr J. I use they as a pronoun. I gave myself the job title, Harbinger of Change, because I work at ThoughtWorks, which is a bespoke software consultancy that employs people like me to go into corporates and tell them, "hey, you can do things differently." It's great fun. I got to give myself the gender, transgressive nonbinary genderqueer, thanks to the New Zealand government that is my official gender. And what else? I'm a troublemaker and a #queernuisance because... branding. Josephine, who, when, why and how are you?

Josephine: Trying to establish that. And more of um... general existential way but in a more specific way for this podcast (Josephine laughing) I was still trying to figure out what exactly I'm going to introduce myself as. So, we'll give it a go and see what happens, shall we?

Dr J: Yes.

Josephine: Alright... hi, my name is Josephine Baird. I'm an... fuck. What am I going with here, J? Um... I'm a scholar, activist, artist... um, okay, hi. Let me get back to my introduction (Josephine laughing). Hi, my name is Josephine Baird (Both laughing). Hi. My name is Josephine Baird, I am a scholar, activist and artist. I used to like to make a spectacle of myself upon the stage and now I like to draw pictures of queer people and put them on the Internet. I also like to think of myself as a queer without portfolio, but I can't any more.

Dr J: You're still not yet comfortable talking about being an actual academic now, an actual scholar. Somebody who is not just studying but also teaching.

Josephine: That's true.

Dr J: Why?

Josephine: It still feels kind of uncertain even though it's not. You know what I mean?

Dr J: See, but that to me is your fear grinding in on you. And I understand why. But it's also being confident because you are teaching game design. You did that last term. This is not your first time teaching, this is not your first time lecturing.

Josephine: (sigh) yeah. It's interesting... maybe just sort of goes into a different topic but it's also something to do with um... sharing private information. Weirdly enough, even though I do a podcast, you know, with you every week J, and we have been extremely vulnerable and shared a lot of information... I've been considering this today – about how much I should share online that is actual private, dox-able information. And things like that – it sounds a bit weird maybe but I've been a bit nervous... and maybe we are going to talk about visibility after all, because this was one of the topics we were talking about earlier... I'm nervous about being visible – I was considering about whether or not I should make a chunk of my social media private recently. And in part because I don't want to have certain conversations about certain British authors. And also, I don't feel like putting myself in a position where those people could find me, because I'm about to write an article for a journal in which I have a particularly direct go at this group of people in a scholarly way. And I've written about them before, in public forums and I've been published on the subject matter before. I have spoken in front of institutions about them before and I am terrified of the things I have seen them do to other people.

Dr J: I can so understand.

Josephine: And it's difficult because for all of my queer life, I've been very visible and I admire tremendously the visibility of others – queer others who I looked up to, the people who I was able to learn from because they were visible. People who were demonstrating the problems with society and challenging those things that were just wrong, by being visible. Simply by being out. And I am in a position now where I am considering how... again... well, I have always been in this position. I'm not... this is nothing new. I always consider at some point how visible I am doing the things that I'm doing. I came to the conclusion, forever ago, that just being open about pretty much everything is the shield that I like to use. So, it's not a secret that I'm trans, it's not a secret that I'm queer. This does not shock-horror news. But at the same time, I have seen the viciousness that has been brought down on friends and people who I admire – and the impact it's had on them. And it seems to have gotten so, so much worse recently, and I wonder if that's just anecdotal or if it's just me seeing things differently, but I really don't think so. I think there's many more avenues for attack.

Dr J: I agree and you might notice – anyone who's paid attention – that for the first couple of episodes, I didn't mention where I worked. I was a little more reluctant to talk about working at Thoughtworks. I was a little more reluctant to talk about where I worked, because I've got a very findable name. Although, my first name fails most search engines because they demand two letters but I've got a very finable job title – and I thought about it and one of the reasons that I feel confident is that I know ThoughtWorks backs me, because they have multiple times. Every time I've come under attack online, I've literally had ThoughtWorkers lining up and asking me how they should respond. And I actually had to build a little ten-point thing which is pinned on my Twitter. Which basically says, "here's how to respond to hatred. Here's how to be a good ally to me online." And I posted that around, every time stuff's gone under attack because it's telling

people the best ways to support me. But it's only that I'm working at this company, that I feel that confident in being that visible and that out. There's been times in the past where I've led two very separate social-media lives. I've had the work stuff, where they get cat pictures and the occasional small things. And I'm obviously LGBT but I'm not queer, I'm not activist, I'm not in your face. And then there's the activist, in you face, queer as fuck, all the queer friends, all the activist friends –type person. And it's only now at ThoughtWorks – and we're talking nearly five years later – that I'm even starting to blend those two worlds. Yeah, I worry about coming under attack. But I also don't because I know that nothing anyone can say, can impact my friends, my family, my partners, my housing, my employment, nothing is attackable and I feel very safe in that. But that level of visibility is a huge privilege and there are so many trans people who do not have the ability to be that visible. There are so many queer people who do not even have the ability to be that visible, which makes them vulnerable on one of those points. If you're not able to be visible and your friends could react badly if they found out your queerness, or your transness – if your friends were pushed, do you trust them to back you? If your family was pushed, do you trust to change their stance? Now, I'm saying change their stance because I'm not going to discuss my family. But because I'm out to my family, there's nothing that can be said that would make it worse. Because I'm out at my employer, there's nothing that could be said. You know, my employer knows that I'm queer, knows that I'm trans and they celebrate my nonbinariness. What are they going to say? "J is nonbinary!" And work tend to go, "uh huh." My housing officer – I had to challenge them over the way that my name was written because they were putting me down as Ms and I was, "it's actually either Dr or Mx," and explained nonbinary to them. So, none of these places, am I vulnerable. But I still worry and I agree with Josephine, I still worry that by being visible there is a chink there somewhere, there is a corner in the armour that somebody could get under. There would be a day when my mental health won't be so good, and there will just be a deluge of stuff that makes us feel vulnerable. It's like holding your partner's hand in the street. Not that that's something we have been able to do for a year but just holding somebody's hand can be a massive visibility moment and makes you very, very vulnerable. It makes your queerness and your different-ness very visible. Does this answer Josephine's thing of, "should she be visible about where she works?" No, it doesn't. I know these people know you and like you and have employed you and all of those things, but there's still that nervousness of: will they still want that if they get a vast horrible social media deluge come upon them. Because you always have that worry in the back of your mind – it's much easier not to have me, than to have me there, because having me there means that your social media team are going to have the occasional transphobic comment made. You know? I post stuff about pronouns. They are the only pages that I believe ThoughtWorks have had to remove comments from. Literally I wrote about putting pronouns in things. I honestly don't know. Visibility is complicated. For me, I see it as a privilege.

Josephine: I am concerned about the scary people who, I guess will find you no matter what. I suppose it doesn't really matter... if I'm visible or not. But it's (ugh) that's the thing, it's the um, the threat of violence that's so terrifying. It's the implication of violence that is so scary. It is the threat of being doxed that's so scary, it's the threat of visibility. That's the thing... you don't have to have experienced it to fear it. And the fear, as we're very fully aware of, is real. I have experienced some of this. So, I do know what it's like. And it's scary every single time. But the

reality of it, weirdly enough, hasn't been as terrifying as the fear of it. So, when I am making my decisions of what, say where, and when... there's always a calculation. I took this job and when I applied for it, sent them a long CV and so they know pretty much everything about me. My co-workers know me in many environments and spheres, so they know. They know that I've been a performer, they know that I am a visual artist, they know what kind of visual art I do, they know that I do a podcast, they know how outspoken I am, they know my particular sense of humour. They know what comics I like (Josephine laughing) ... we've had these conversations. They know all this. And they knew it before they hired me. So, that makes that part of the visibility easier. And yet, I'm still worried that some day they'll find out some element of me. But why do I fear that? Because it's happened. And it's happened to friends of mine. And because it's happened to me and because it's happened to friends of mine, I'm frightened of it still. I still, every single time, make this quick mental calculation – how visible am I being right now? What information am I sharing? To whom? What can they do against me with it? And it's really exhausting and upsetting and should not be necessary and yet it clearly is. Because the thing is, as soon as I thought about, "well, yeah but that's good online etiquette and good online policy generally, one should consider what one is showing online." Isn't that fucking tragic? Isn't that... I'm just sharing with you, dear listener, in real time, my consideration of these issues. I've not considered verbally very much in this way. But this idea that we have to deal with this and that's okay and normal is just messed up. I mean, *fuck...me*.

Dr J: Yeah. It is completely messed up. Being visible is making myself vulnerable. But it is a calculation every single time. It is a calculation. Every move that I've made has been a calculation, every single move outwards to be vulnerable has been a calculation. Some of us have the privilege to be visible. And by being visible we get space made in the world. And by getting space made in the world, there's space for more difference being made in the world. Because if we are not visible, if we are not able to be visible, then we can't ask for what every other person in the world has. Which is the ability to be themselves. The ability to have space to be them. If you don't make space for people to be visibly themselves – if you don't make space for people to be that vulnerable – what are you doing? What's your diversity about? What is your inclusion about? You aren't allowing people to bring themselves to work. You're saying to people, "I'll have most of you, but not this bit. Or if you tell me about this bit, you're going to feel super vulnerable and unsupported." Whereas for me it's about making people feel that they can bring themselves to work and talk about the fact that they're having a hard year – well, everyone's having a hard fucking year – their mental health has suffered. And your employee needs to understand these things, needs to have the space there for you to be vulnerable enough to say to somebody, in a way that feels comfortable, "hey, this happened." And have that person go around and go, "how can I support you?" Not, "what does this mean?" It's "how can I support you? Here's different things that we can offer, how else can I support you? What else do you think you need at the moment? And just let me know if there is anything you need beyond what you say now, this isn't a one-off conversation?" You know, that to me is the only way to do this sort of thing but a lot of people, a lot of places, don't. It's thinking about why I feel safe being this vulnerable and what has happened to allow me to be this open... in a way that Josephine might not feel so comfortable doing so.

Josephine: Which is the weirdest thing because I've never been in that situation (Josephine laughing). I've always been unerringly open.

Dr J: I think it's because this is finally what you want, and you're so scared of losing it.

Josephine: No, that's a very good point. I spent a great deal of my time doing things, believing that it might be the last time I did something. In fact, I used to think of that as a plus. I would do a show as if it was the last time, I was going to do a show. Because I felt like that somehow improved the quality of the performance or... kept me aware of the privilege of being asked to perform or being given a platform or a stage to perform on. Those things are true. However, the other reason is because I didn't necessarily have a presumption of a future – or a hopeful one. I know that sounds extremely dramatic, weirdly enough it was mundane to some degree (Josephine laughing). It wasn't actually so dramatic. It was more like, yeah, that is kind of where I'm at. My future is very unstable, I'm a trans person in a not positive environment, I have no illusions of what that means. To be in a situation, I think I said in many of the previous recordings that we put out that I consider myself tremendously lucky, being in the place that I'm in, being in a place I could not quite imagine being – and that includes the job that I recently got. In fact, so much so, that I could not have imagined it 6 to 8 months ago let alone 6 to 8 years ago or 16 years ago. This would not have ever crossed my mind. Now J hits upon a point. I used to do this other thing as well. Because I thought I wasn't going to have these things, I never worried about getting them. I felt like that was a really dangerous path to go down, that I could become incredibly sad believing in or worrying about the things that I could not have. So, I did these mental gymnastics of just not worrying about it. I was like, well I am just not going to have it, so why stress about it. Now, of course, any psychologist would immediately jump up and down on that (both laughing) and say, "mmmm." (Josephine laughing) And do a stroke-y, Freud-ey, beardy, thing and say, "aaah, mmmm, well, avoidance, mmmm." And a long word for "obvious queer existence" issue, that I think a lot of us can relate to. However, my life is different now. I have things in my life that yeah, I do care about tremendously. Positions that I've never had before. Fear of losing that is real. But I don't want it to (sigh) fuck... I don't know J... I don't know.

Dr J: No, I totally understand. It's (heavy sigh)...

Josephine: This fear of losing something. This fear of suddenly having something that you could lose. Is so frightening. I don't even know what I'm saying anymore.

Dr J: I so understand that fear and it drives me and it makes me angry and it makes me difficult and it makes me problematic. And it makes me somebody that has extra challenges at work. It makes somebody that is seen as challenging. Seen as a challenging person to manage. Seen as a challenging person to do things with because there are times when my anger at being made frightened, my anger at being frightened of losing this opportunity, of losing this chance, at losing this job, can make it very, very difficult at times to calm me down. There are times when people have gone, "J, you're so over-the-top for what has happened." And I'll be like, and I can't even explain to them why I am so frightened and why I'm so angry. And I'm angry at being frightened. I'm angry at being made to worry. Because why should I be? Why should I be

frightened? I feel lucky – not just privileged but *lucky* – that I've had people who have taken that patience. But I can understand that fear because I've been in jobs where one of the things that people liked about me was my difference until I went to work for them and then they didn't like my difference. Because my difference meant that I thought differently. And my difference meant that I challenged them. And my difference meant that I suggested doing things in a different way. And my difference meant that that was a year of hell. Because I was different. They hired me for my brain, and I wanted use my brain, but you realise sometimes – and this is not going to reassure Josephine – that even if people hire you for your brain, and they want you for your brain, when you walk in and you use your brain, they go, “mmm, that wasn't quite the brain we thought we were going to get.”

Josephine: Actually, no, you've turned me around entirely just with (J laughing) ... No, seriously, you have. Because I want to express tremendous pride in being associated with some of the people that I have met at the department where I have been hired. And I can't do that without saying where I am. So, I will say where I am because I want to say two or three things – and I want to attribute them to people who are there fairly, because they have made a very specific difference. I won't say their names specifically because they haven't agreed to me sharing their names specifically, but I will say they are faculty members of the University of Uppsala Game Design Institute where I am a lecturer. One of the things that have happened that told me how good it was to be there, was attending a research seminar in which I was presenting some work that I was involved with and the comment that we got back after presenting the work was from one very senior member, who said, “I want you to be bolder. I want you to share those things that you allude to but do not say. I want you to speak them out, I want you to be bold.” And I was absolutely thrilled and I said, “do you really mean that? Do you really mean for me to say all the quiet things out loud?” And she said, “yes, I actually think this is the only way we can do this.” And we went on to have a very long conversation about what it was that really meant anything in doing this kind of work. And just today I got a request from another faculty member, who has been incredibly supportive to me, so much so that I believe that they have directly led to me being in some of the positions I am in now – offering to do some research with me that's exciting, that's bold. And could put us into a position of some critique (Josephine laughing) because we're going to say things that people might not like. And just the other day I wrote about Eddie Izzard and all the crap that made me sad about all that – and one of the faculty members, who I barely know, just came on and replied to that and said that they empathised and how crap it was. I don't know this person very well. I've met them two or three times on Zoom and made friends on Facebook and that's it. That's where I work (Josephine crying) and I'm incredibly pleased. I am crying because it moves me to the core to be feeling safe and secure in that environment and feeling able to be bold and taking the opportunity to be visible. But I'm so scared. And it's going to take a while, to get used to the idea that it's okay. That it's not dangerous. In fact, they're asking very kindly (Josephine laughing) directly, which I also really like because I'm autistic so, (Dr J laughing) directly asking me to be bold. And to say what I mean. And to speak plainly and not limit myself, not mask myself. And I'm not sure if I will be able to explain to them what that means.

Dr J: I think they will listen to this and they will look at you (Josephine crying). No, because I can see what it means to you now, And I know what it's meant to me. I know literally what it's

meant to me to have people listen and people respond positively, in a way that you don't expect, and support you in a way that you don't expect. And it just means so much. And I know that your colleagues will – most of them listen to this because we know that (both laughing) ...

Josephine: Yes, they do.

Dr J: And I know that my colleagues – that there are people that I work with who listen to this. And I also have the same look that Josephine has on her face now. That I cannot express how much it means to have people who make you feel safe being yourself at work. And who say, “no, don't hold back, go the full hog, take that on, talk about this, push that boundary, go up and tell the CEO that there's more than two genders.” Which is what I did. And I felt listened to because he listened to me make that comment and took it seriously. We then took a little while figuring out how to represent in an international company more than two genders – and how to talk about what we now call under-represented gender minorities. But I felt supported and I felt that was okay. I can't think of any other company where I could walk up to the CEO and have that conversation and be taken seriously. And Xiao, I just want to say thank you. Because you took me seriously, you didn't dismiss it. But I also know that all ThoughtWorkers are taken seriously when they raise issues like that. And that's the difference in the company. It's not just acceptance, it's celebration. They're not just accepting you, Josephine, they're celebrating you being different. They're celebrating the different voice that you have. They're saying, “this is Josephine, and she has a different voice and we want to make it as loud as possible because we want to hear the difference – we don't want to hear the same notes over and over and over and over. We want that difference.” And that is the thing, that when you get it, you literally don't know what to do because you never had it before in your life. So, I got it at 45/46 with ThoughtWorks, you're getting it a couple years earlier. I want people who are in their first job to feel that same safety and to feel that same thing. Is it going to happen over-night? Fuck, no. Will it happen, fuck, yeah. Because it is going to happen faster and faster and faster. Because people like myself and Josephine, we are made visible, and by being made visible. And by being made visible, our voices get heard and people see that difference and they see what difference brings and they're like, “I want some of that.” So, they go hunting for that difference because they want that voice. Because they value that different voice, that different... ideas. And they realise that you and I have differences because... have different ideas... because trans people and nonbinary people are not the same.

Josephine: (muffled) thanks for this J. I... I wasn't sure what kind of episode we were going to do today. We genuinely (Josephine laughing) started with like, let's talk about fun. Which is kind of... I kind of should have known immediately that that was not (Dr J laughing) going to be the conversation we were going to have. Because you can't say, “let's have the topic, *fun!*” (Dr J laughing)

Dr J: Well, I was going to say... I was going to talk about being... I was going to talk about fun as complicated and how it's different and all of those things. So, just to sign off...

Josephine: Yeah. (pause)

Dr J: I'm privileged to be visible and I agree that if I'm not visible I can't demand that world make space for me. But what I'm demanding is not just space, I'm demanding safety, I'm demanding inclusion and I'm demanding feeling like it's okay to be vulnerable. And to be me.

Josephine: I... I add to that that I'm tremendously grateful for the people who have chosen to be – or have been – visible for me. On those times when, I had to step back. Jamison Green talks about this, and I had the privilege of meeting him at a trans arts festival in London – he-'s a trans man, a activist, he wrote a book called *Becoming a Visible Man*, which is a combination of autobiography and I guess sort of philosophical statement(?) And one of the things that he talks about was that he said that – because he's read as a cis-man, he often finds that he has to *choose* to be visible as a trans person and that he chooses to break that reading of him. And he talks about how complicated it is. He acknowledged that it's difficult to be visible, he acknowledged that there were times where one can use the privilege of invisibility to survive. That that's a very real reason to be invisible, that people who are frightened are frightened for a reason. And Jamison talks about. And he talks about the choice of being visible anyway. And I have tremendous admiration for that. I can do that. In certain moments. I can do that right now. Here with J. I have taken the opportunity for this podcast to talk about something very personal again today. Whether I do that every single day on social media, that's a decision I will make for myself. Today I can be visible. Today I choose to. Tomorrow, I'm not so sure yet. But that's okay. And yeah... that's... that's it. Because I'm going to cry again so... let's stop there.

Dr J: So...

Josephine: Talk about something else (Josephine laughing)

Dr J: Well, no, because apart from talking about the dreadful lockdown, B*ris J*hnson's latest haircut which looks like I've grabbed the scissors and just hacked at his hair... I was going to say, one of the reasons that we're frightened of being visibly ourselves on this...

Josephine: Yeah.

Dr J: ... should we discuss an author... and her *statements* which are apparently award-winning or award nominating (Josephine laughing)? But should we... should we discuss this person?

Josephine: (incredulous) no. (Josephine laughing)

Dr J: Perfect! (Josephine laughing) I'd rather not!

(outro music)