

Liberté – Guillotine – S1E6

SUZANNE ZINSLI: You're listening to Immersed. I'm Suzanne Zinsli.

CHRIS ZINSLI: And I'm Chris Zinsli.

SUZANNE: Every episode, we take you deep inside the world of a game. This time, we're going to try and not lose our heads as we look at the game Guillotine.

CHRIS: OK, let's get this out of the way right up front. Guillotine is a game about the French Revolution, but playing it is about as far as you can possibly get from simulating a violent insurrection. It's a silly, goofy card game, with exaggerated, cartoony artwork.

PAUL PETERSON: So I think pretty much from the get-go it was always going to be silly and ridiculous.

SUZANNE: That's the designer of Guillotine, Paul Peterson. We spoke with him at the Origins 2018 convention.

PAUL: I mean, as soon as we settled on the theme, I wanted to make sure it's a ridiculous game. So I didn't I didn't care too much that it was, you know, down the line, 100% accurate.

SUZANNE: Guillotine has more in common with movies like History of the World, by Mel Brooks, than with actual historical events. But it's still being played, more than 20 years after it was released.

PAUL: There was a review of our game in a French magazine after it came out that was translated to me as, "We love your game about this horrible thing that happened in our history."

SUZANNE: Guillotine is so cartoonish and over-the-top that it's really hard to take it seriously.

CHRIS: But that doesn't mean we can't try...

SUZANNE: Despite the silliness of Guillotine, there's some seriously interesting history behind it.

CHRIS: Liberté, égalité, fraternité.

SUZANNE: The ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity are what animated the French Revolution. All people are equal before the law. Freedom of religion and speech. The right to own property.

DR. JENNIFER J. POPIEL: A lot of categories that we think about and kind of take for granted today, like the idea that all men are created equal or that privilege, that that has a negative connotation, that our society shouldn't be hierarchical, that the place you're born into shouldn't be by definition, be the place you have to end up. All of those things are premises that change in the revolutionary era.

SUZANNE: That's Dr. Jennifer J. Popiel. She's an associate professor of history at St. Louis University, and she writes and teaches about the French Revolution.

CHRIS: Those revolutionary ideas challenged the power of traditional institutions like the monarchy and the Catholic Church.

SUZANNE: The king of France, Louis XVI, came under more and more pressure to allow reforms.

POPIEL: And the king, who sees himself as a defender of both privilege and tradition and a defender of the church, has been really reluctant to publicly support reforms.

SUZANNE: The revolutionary fervor grew, until, in June 1791, the king tried to flee the country.

POPIEL: Louis disguises himself and his family. He flees with his family to the northeast. He gets caught right at the border. And though the government makes a cover story about how the king was kidnapped, it's clear from almost any venue that the royal family is a set of traitors.

SUZANNE: International intrigue played a key role in the revolution. Louis had a close relationship with the Austrians even though France and Austria had a long history of fighting against each other. His wife, Marie Antoinette, came from Austrian royalty. More about her later.

POPIEL: One of the things that politicians discover is a big trunk of letters that demonstrate quite explicitly that Louis is a traitor and he has been writing letters to Austria. He's been asking for help. He is writing to his in-laws. So there's clear evidence that Louis is a traitor.

SUZANNE: The royal family was captured and put in prison. Louis was taken before the National Convention, the revolution's first government.

POPIEL: The convention puts the king on trial like, "Are we gonna execute him? Are we gonna just imprison him? Are we going to exile him?" And they very narrowly vote to execute him.

SUZANNE: Louis was found guilty of treason and executed by the guillotine on January 21, 1793. A few months later, on October 16, Marie Antoinette met the same fate.

MEGAN CUMMINGS: I'm going to play "Fled to England," and I get to discard any noble in line...

CHRIS: You're listening to a game of Guillotine. In the game, players set up a line of cards that represents the enemies of the revolution waiting to get beheaded. On your turn, you can play an action card to manipulate the line. Hopefully that lets you claim a more valuable head for yourself.

SUZANNE: You just heard Megan Cummings ending the first round of the game. She's competing with two other players, James Griffin and Eddie Rodriguez. In the next round, Marie Antoinette showed up in line. James pounced on the opportunity.

JAMES GRIFFIN: I play "Let them Eat Cake" Yeah, he said the thing!

SUZANNE: Marie Antoinette didn't actually say that. But this is still a big turn for James.

JAMES: That moves Marie to the front of the line. Then I collect Marie Antoinette. Then because I have "Foreign Support," I draw an extra action card, then I draw my regular action card, and it's Megan's turn.

SUZANNE: The card that James played shifted Marie's place in line so he could collect her. And he got to draw an extra action card because he previously played a card called "Foreign Support." Which, given the history, is kind of perfect.

JAMES: That felt good.

SUZANNE: Paul Peterson, the game's designer, said he wanted Guillotine to create just these sorts of moments that make players feel clever.

PAUL: I think you feel really smart when you get one of your combos to work or when you look at your cards and you figure out how to use, like, find the best card and use it in the best way and get the best noble. Like you, you know, see somebody, and especially if you can plot it for like two turns from now what are you going to do. It makes people feel really smart, and that doesn't happen as much in gaming as I think people would like.

SUZANNE: Marie Antoinette is one of the most valuable cards in Guillotine. And in real life, she was one of the most interesting and important figures of the revolution. She was born as the daughter of the Austrian empress, and she was married into the royal family of France at age 14. The marriage was part of a diplomatic truce between France and Austria, which had been enemies for ages.

POPIEL: This made France and Austria into allies.

SUZANNE: Dr. Popiel again.

POPIEL: But people's vision of the world was not so easily changed.

SUZANNE: Much of the French public was always suspicious of Marie Antoinette, who became queen at age 18. Even before the revolution, political pamphlets would depict her as an enemy of France, often in extremely crude ways.

POPIEL: So you get a sense that even before the revolution, people are saying, "Yeah, she is evil. She is a villain. She's leading the king astray." So in that context, it probably didn't matter how much Marie Antoinette actually opposed the revolution—though she did—but she was already deeply unpopular.

SUZANNE: On the first day of her trial before the National Convention, prosecutors accused her, falsely, of committing incest with her son.

POPIEL: So that also tells you something about her, right? She's a political woman. "She is corrupting the nation." It also offers you a hint that maybe women aren't gonna have a really great political experience, post-revolution, that there's not really easily a place for them, that this is a revolution, definitely a fraternity of brotherhood, not a place for women.

SUZANNE: The idea of women staying away from politics had been challenged quite forcefully a few years before Marie Antoinette's execution, before even the attempt to flee the country. It was an event that became known as the Women's March. On October 5, 1789, a large group of women in a marketplace in Paris began a protest. They grabbed weapons and walked for hours to the royal residence at the Palace of Versailles.

POPIEL: They walk all the way from Paris to Versailles in terrible, rainy weather.

CHRIS: Along the way, the crowd grew to thousands. They arrived at Versailles, and they were given the chance to make their demands to the king. Louis tried to appease them. But it wasn't enough.

POPIEL: And early in the morning of October 6th, a group of women attacks the queen, attacks the queen's apartments, and they actually kill two of her royal bodyguards, stick their heads on pikes, march around with them.

CHRIS: Marie Antoinette narrowly escaped with her life. After things calmed down, the mob insisted that the royal family come to Paris, where they can keep an eye on them.

POPIEL: And so this group of women doesn't just bring back the royal family. They don't just ask the king to hear their pleas. They make sure that Paris becomes the seat of government so that the Parisian people can be heard and can assert their rights.

SUZANNE: The Women's March was the beginning of the end for the monarchy in France. It was all downhill for Louis and Marie Antoinette from then until they were executed by the guillotine in 1793.

CHRIS: Back at the table... Eddie is about to change Marie Antoinette's fate, with an action card called "Missed."

EDDIE: Alright. So after all of that, I'm literally just gonna time travel and erase everything James just did the last turn and play "Missed." "Choose a player. That player must place the last noble he or she collected"—which would be Marie Antoinette—"at the end of the line." And now I'm gonna collect King Louis XVI and get my action card and end the turn.

SUZANNE: James's moment of glory turned out to only be fleeting. Paul Peterson, the designer, told us that in addition to making players feel smart, he also wanted to include what he calls "oh no" moments.

PAUL: So if you can get people to feel smart every time they play cards while still having moments where they're just like "Oh no!" or, yeah, that's it. There's a combination of "oh no" moments when somebody else played something that screwed you up, or you played something that made you collect the right nobles.

SUZANNE: In the game, Marie Antoinette was saved and Louis was executed instead.

CHRIS: "Oh no" for James, but a smart move for Eddie.

EDDIE: That was gorgeous.

MEGAN: Wow, her head was glued back on. [laughter]

SUZANNE: In 1793, in between the executions of Louis and Marie Antoinette, the revolutionary government formed a group called the Committee of Public Safety. This committee would be responsible for much of what we now call the Reign of Terror.

CHRIS: The Terror is the part of the French Revolution that is satirized in the game Guillotine.

POPIEL: The Committee of Public Safety is really closely tied to the government of Paris, which itself is incredibly radical and very insurrectionary. And so more and more extreme views predominate in the capital. And this Committee of Public Safety, as it becomes radicalized, expels by June of 1793 the party of compromise, the Girondins, they execute them as treasonous. And because they've expelled the more moderate, compromising deputies, they have much more power to carry out the radical program. This is the moment, June of 1793, when Robespierre is elected to the Committee of Public Safety.

SUZANNE: Maximilien Robespierre was a lawyer and a politician who would become a central figure in The Terror.

POPIEL: Because he wants to control political and even social activity, Robespierre could use the emergency powers of the Committee of Public Safety to conduct the Reign of Terror.

SUZANNE: Under Robespierre, the committee stifled dissent. They executed members of any rival faction that advocated for a conservative approach, or even just moderation. And it restricted religious practices, seizing church property for the public.

CHRIS: All in the name of liberty.

POPIEL: Also, some people start to say, "Wait a second, you guaranteed us freedom of religion." And so both Protestants, Catholics say, "it's written into our law that I should have freedom of religion, but now you're taking that away." And so there's more and more hostility as they institute these changes. This hostility becomes even more strong when they institute a national draft, right? "We need more people to support the revolution. We need people to go to the front to overwhelm enemy forces."

CHRIS: This is all happening at the same time that France is at war with its neighbors in Europe.

SUZANNE: In addition, the country's colonies are in revolt against slavery, and the nation is going through a financial crisis. Next, members of political factions whose views didn't align perfectly with Robespierre's were brought up on charges.

POPIEL: So now we move not just to the moderates that they had already expelled in 1793, but a year later, he puts on trial a number of people that we would call ultra-revolutionaries, including one of his good friends, formerly good friends, Danton.

SUZANNE: This led to the famous saying that, "The revolution devours its own children."

CHRIS: Laws were changed to ensure swift convictions.

POPIEL: The law reduces the number of jurors necessary for conviction. They make acquittal or death the only options. Political crimes are written into the law that include things like slandering patriotism, seeking to inspire discouragement. Paris executions go from five a day to 26 a day.

SUZANNE: All of this is actually a complete turnaround for Robespierre. He used to oppose capital punishment.

CHRIS: But now he argued that “terror” is necessary—like, literal terror, using the word terror—to enact the goals of the revolution and save France from its enemies, both internal and external.

POPIEL: He says, “You know, virtue’s enough in a time of peace; we can count on people just to behave properly. But in a time of revolution, virtue and terror are both necessary.” So Robespierre says, “Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice. It’s an emanation of virtue.”

SUZANNE: About 17,000 people were executed during The Terror. Thousands more died in prison or without trial.

POPIEL: And basically, he has both ramped up revolutionary fervor so much and limited the scope of what is truly proper revolutionary behavior, that nobody feels safe and that is ultimately what leads to his downfall.

SUZANNE: Eventually, Robespierre’s allies turned on him, he lost his grip on power, and he too was sent to the guillotine, on July 28, 1794.

CHRIS: In the game, Robespierre is one of the heads that you can collect.

SUZANNE: His card has a special effect. Once you take it, the round ends immediately. That’s great for the player who’s leading, but not so good if you need more time to catch up.

CHRIS: At the table, Eddie wanted more time.

EDDIE: I’m going to play “Clothing Swap,” which I can choose any noble in line and discard it.

CHRIS: He played an action card, “Clothing Swap,” that let him remove Robespierre from the line.

EDDIE: Goodbye, Robespierre.

CHRIS: And allow the heads to keep rolling.

EDDIE: And replace him with the top noble of the noble deck.

CHRIS: The way Robespierre’s card works, by cutting short the string of executions, comes from history.

SUZANNE: After the death of Robespierre, new limits were placed on the power of the Committee of Public Safety. His execution marked the end of The Terror. Robespierre was only

in power for about a year, but he remains one of the most important, and controversial, figures in the revolution.

CHRIS: For most modern observers, The Terror looks like complete insanity. What happens in Guillotine is nothing by comparison.

SUZANNE: But if you consider all of the historical context, it gets a little easier to see how so much bloodshed could come from even very commendable goals.

POPIEL: So I think if you change the criteria for trials such that it's acquitted or death, then people start to get executed for reasons that are maybe not entirely so clear.

SUZANNE: France did face real threats, but few people nowadays believe that everyone who was executed during The Terror deserved it. For many, the guillotine has become the singular symbol of the French Revolution. It's often the first image that comes to mind when people think about the period.

CHRIS: Some historians get a little touchy about it.

SUZANNE: We reached out to a few of them over email to get their views. Some of them flat-out objected to the idea...

HISTORIAN 1: That the guillotine was used to put nobles to death and the implication that this was a major goal of the French Revolution...

HISTORIAN 2: I don't feel totally comfortable reducing the French Revolution to the guillotine. Frankly, I am not all that keen on promoting the guillotine as the main way to remember the French Revolution.

HISTORIAN 1: It's a terribly jaundiced, incorrect view that is being presented and I shouldn't lend my approval to it.

CHRIS: Fair enough. Let's set some things straight about the guillotine. There were some earlier execution devices that were similar to it, but the guillotine was introduced in France by a doctor who was actually opposed to capital punishment.

SUZANNE: He argued that the guillotine would allow for quick and relatively painless executions. It used to be that wealthy prisoners could pay to be executed humanely, but the poor would face various methods that amounted to torture. The guillotine was the great equalizer. Of course, not everyone that we reached out to had a problem with using the guillotine as a symbol of the revolution. One even said that...

HISTORIAN 3: Any French Revolution historian worth their salt has played Guillotine before.

SUZANNE: And in fact, our guide, Dr. Popiel, has an illustration of an execution, complete with heads on pikes and everything, on the cover of a textbook that she wrote.

POPIEL: The guillotine, which makes execution quick and efficient and will get your head off so that you don't suffer, is something that makes all citizens equal before the law. So in that sense, absolutely, it's about egalitarianism. Also, it offers people the chance to see revolutionary justice enacted. And actually I think in some ways that because of those two things, right—humanity, egalitarianism and violence—it actually encapsulates the problem of the revolution in one symbol.

SUZANNE: Dr. Popiel told us the revolution and The Terror had a deep effect on the people of France.

POPIEL: The Terror overwhelms what had been kind of an optimistic approach to the world. So if the first phase the revolution is, “Oh, we're going to get more rights, we're going to reform society, we're going to make things egalitarian. We're all gonna have natural equality and kinship.” That's a really inspiring view, but it's kind of hard to see that view as continuing to inspire eight years later when what you're experiencing is deprivation and warfare and fear. And so, culturally, I think one of the things that comes out of this both in the Napoleonic era and in the early 19th century is a resignation to a sense that, you know, in some ways we might be familiar with today, that government maybe isn't going to fix the problem and that there are really terrible things going on, and there's not much you could do about it

CHRIS: Still, the revolution might offer some inspiration for us today.

POPIEL: The revolution is a massive cultural event, so the energy of the people of Paris, their resulting radicalism, changed how politics was understood. Now we see the whole population getting engaged and energized.

CHRIS: It also offers a warning about how some undeniably good beliefs can be used to justify some horribly undemocratic deeds.

POPIEL: If you convince yourself that you have the right vision of the world and the only way for your vision to survive is to get rid of anyone who opposes your vision, then you move from an optimistic worldview to a really defensive and reactionary one. And so the lesson, I think, is not just about engaging in democracy and engaging in political activism or voting, but also about how we think about the world and how we think about our relationships to other people in ways that are dehumanizing or that are influenced by a radicalism to the rhetoric that encourages us to jump to see people as enemies first rather than sharing a commonality.

SUZANNE: After the break, we'll be back with more from Paul Peterson. How Guillotine began, and the one thing that he regrets about it. Coming up.

Second segment:

SUZANNE: Guillotine was first published in 1998 by Wizards of the Coast, where Paul Peterson was working at the time.

PAUL: And we were having lunch and we were talking. We had ridiculous conversations at lunch, and one time we were talking about, like, jobs that it would be ridiculous to be competitive at, to be like, "I'm the best garbage man in the town." And somehow out of that, we fell around to headsman at the Bastille, like being competitive about that. And we thought it was all funny, but like almost immediately my gears started turning about like: How would you make a game about being competitive with headsman at the guillotine, basically.

SUZANNE: The idea would turn out to be Paul's first original game design to get published.

PAUL: And the game didn't take that long. The basic concepts then didn't take that long to fall out once I knew kind of what I wanted to do. And obviously there would have to be, you'd have to have a line and you'd have to be trying to get the best nobles into your baskets and things like that.

SUZANNE: From there, Paul stepped away from the game's silly theme and looked at what was needed for it to work mechanically.

PAUL: I mean, the mechanics are somewhat obvious when you're like: What do you want to do? You want to move a noble somewhere in the line, either forward or back, to make sure that the one at the front is the one you want. And so a lot of those cards just sort of design themselves, like moving forward one space, move one forward, backward two spaces. Those kinds of things.

SUZANNE: After that, he needed a name for each of the cards. The right names would help tell the story of what's happening in the game when a card is played. He went back to the theme.

PAUL: And then the names just kind of, a lot of them came naturally. But then there was definitely a pass at the end where we made it, we were like, "Well, is this funny enough? Is this good enough?" or these things. So the mechanics probably came first, but most of the names probably followed quickly after.

SUZANNE: Not every card has withstood the test of time.

PAUL: I can tell what my least favorite action is, which is the "Callous Guards," which is like the biggest game design mistake I ever made, is the "Callous Guards."

SUZANNE: The Callous Guards card locks the order of the line and prevents players from shifting the places of the cards.

CHRIS: The fun of Guillotine comes from manipulating the line of cards. But the Callous Guards card stops players from manipulating the line of cards!

PAUL: And that was just, it was just a horrible decision on my part. [laughs] Oh, I hate that card. In fact, I recommend people take it out of the game entirely when they play.

SUZANNE: This is one of the pillars of modern game design. It's why you don't see certain things in newer games very much, like players getting eliminated before the game ends, or cards that make you lose a turn. It's something that seems obvious in retrospect: Let players play the game.

SUZANNE: Immersed is produced by Cardboard Edison. Find out more about the show, and all of our other projects related to board game design, at cardboardedison.com. Special thanks this episode go to our guests, Dr. Jennifer J. Popiel and Paul Peterson; Eddie Rodriguez, Megan Cummings, and James Griffin; and Jen and Jim Paccioretti.

CHRIS: Editing assistance by Eric Booth. Music credits are available in the show notes.

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CHRIS: And I'm Chris Zinsli.

SUZANNE: And join us next time as we become immersed in another game.