<u>Tips at the Table: You'd Hate My Bard</u>
Transcriber: Audrey

Apologies to any question-askers or chat members whose names I've incorrectly transcribed, not having a way to verify those.

AUSTIN: Welcome to Tips at the Table, an RPG podcast focused on critical questions, hopefully smart answers, and fun interactions between good friends. I'm your host, Austin Walker. Joining me today, Art Martinez-Tebbel.

ART: Hey, hi. You can find me on Twitter at @atebbel, and harangue us into doing One Song Only at @onesongpod.

AUSTIN: [laughs] We— I feel like we can do it, I feel like we can do it this coming month. This month, the month that we are in, Art, I think we can get an episode recorded.

ART: February? The month of February?

AUSTIN: The month of February, 'cause I have a bunch of time off in, in front of me theoretically—

ART: [overlapping] Wow.

AUSTIN: —and that means my schedule's a little more flexible.

ART: All right, there's probably some other stuff you should be working on with that time though.

AUSTIN: Yeah, we know that, agreed.

ART: All right.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] But what if some of that was One Song Only, what if— we'll talk after this. Also joining me, Jack de Quidt.

JACK: Hi! You can find me on Twitter at @notquitereal, or buy any of the music featured on the show at notquitereal.bandcamp.com. When are you getting back to that Kanye podcast?

AUSTIN: February, maybe.

JACK: That's what I heard.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] I'm not gonna tell you which February, but—

JACK: [laughs] Yeah, there's gonna be many more, hopefully.

AUSTIN: A Feb— yeah, I [exhales]— we better hope so. Uh, as always, you can follow the show at twitter.com/friends_table, or friendsatthetable.net, or you can continue to support us, and thank you for supporting us, right here at friendsatthetable.cash. We're gonna jump right into it, 'cause we have a couple questions here. This one's in from Bea, who signed their name all caps, and then with four or five exclamation points, so—

JACK: [overlapping] Incredible.

AUSTIN: —I included that.

> Dearest and most esteemed friends, this may be a different shade
> of question than you've had before, but how do you get the voice
> of a character? I can tell that Austin can do distinct characters
> without doing wacky voices 100% of the time. I have trouble taking
> enough notes to have different character voices when I GM
> despite being in choir for over half my life. Maybe I'm just nervous,
> lol. And players, do you ever feel like the way you speak naturally
> doesn't fit your character, or do you embrace it?

Thoughts from y'all, because I— y'know, I think compared to many actual play podcasts, we do way less voices than most shows.

JACK: [overlapping] Mmm.

ART: Mmm. Um, I have a really scummy Hollywood name-droppy answer to this question.

AUSTIN: Oh, boy!

JACK: [overlapping] Oh my god, here we go, wow!

AUSTIN: Now I'm excited.

ART: Yeah. Uh, I was, like, really excited. I was forming this answer while I was walking Mabel. This is gonna be— honestly, I might just leave after this.

[AUSTIN laughs]

ART: Um, so I took a lot of— I did a lot of improv training in Hollywood, which is honestly a terrible thing to do, don't do it. Um, I had a great time, I made a lot of good friends, but like, you spend a lot of money to, um— you're basically buying your friends, in a very big way?
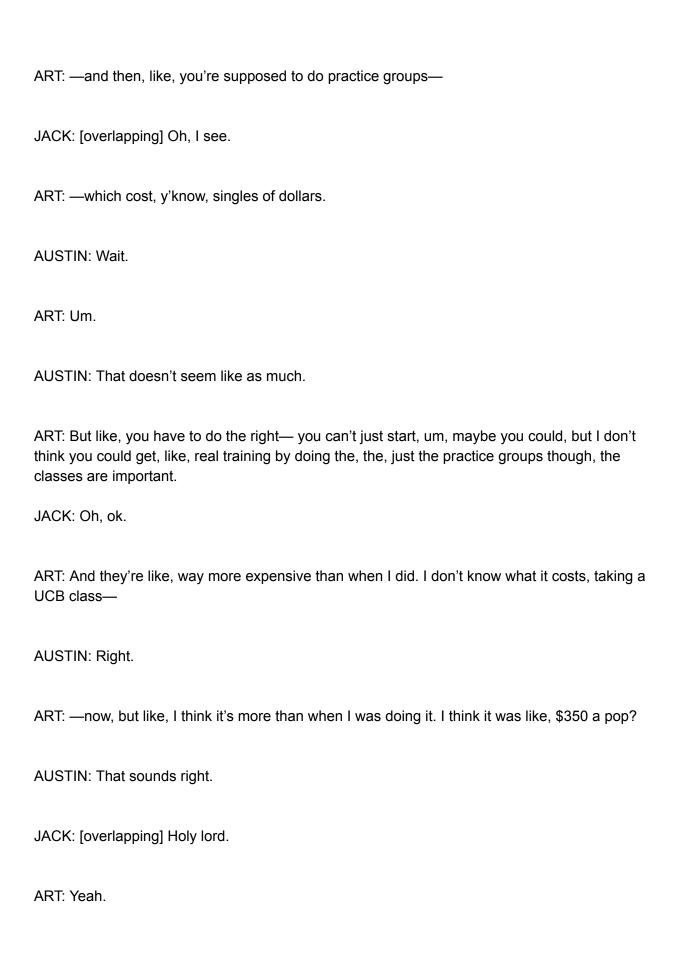
AUSTIN: Excuse me?

JACK: Wait, wait.

ART: Well, 'cause these improv classes cost hundreds of dollars—

AUSTIN: Mm, I see.

JACK: [overlapping] Ok.

ART: —and then, like, you're supposed to do practice groups—

JACK: [overlapping] Oh, I see.

ART: —which cost, y'know, singles of dollars.

AUSTIN: Wait.

ART: Um.

AUSTIN: That doesn't seem like as much.

ART: But like, you have to do the right— you can't just start, um, maybe you could, but I don't think you could get, like, real training by doing the, the, just the practice groups though, the classes are important.

JACK: Oh, ok.

ART: And they're like, way more expensive than when I did. I don't know what it costs, taking a UCB class—

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: —now, but like, I think it's more than when I was doing it. I think it was like, $350 a pop?

AUSTIN: That sounds right.

JACK: [overlapping] Holy lord.

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: That sounds like a lot of money.

ART: It's for 8 classes, so it's not, like, terrible, but like—

AUSTIN: Oh, $350 not per session.

ART: Not per session, no, that's, that's—

JACK: Ok, that's, that's still a lot of money—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —but it's less a lot of money than I thought it was gonna be.

ART: Um—

AUSTIN: Yeah, that's, what is that? Let me get a calculator on screen. 350 divided by 8, 43 bucks. That's, y'know, that's like a fancy dinner, or like a nice, a nice night out. Y'know?

ART: And it was like, a 3-hour class with someone who was genuinely good at what they were doing.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Sure! Sure.

ART: Um, anyway, I always, like, felt bad in those classes, because I'm not like an *actor* actor, right? 'Cause, um, I don't know if you know this, but there's a lot of actors in Los Angeles.

JACK: Mmm.

AUSTIN: Yes.

ART: And, like a lot of—

JACK: [overlapping] One or two.

ART: —want-to-be good actors, and ended up, like, not making it, but are still outlandishly talented, right?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: Um, anyway, the, the shitty name-drop I'm about to do was, I was in a practice group with, uh, the future star of *The Walking Dead*, Lauren Cohan, and, uh, she was another person, she was, like, just way better than me at this, and our, like, coach could tell, 1. that I was not good at this skill, and 2.—

JACK: [overlapping] Mmm.

ART: —that I was really mad about not being good at this skill.

AUSTIN: Oooh, interesting.

ART: And the coach gave me the note, which is like— and at the time, they gave me the note of like, it's not about, like, doing a good voice, or like, having some accent, or like, instantly having all of your characters sound completely different. It's really just about embracing the point of view of the character, and trying to embody that in whatever way you can?

AUSTIN: Mmm.

ART: And then through that, you will find yourself playing unique and distinct characters, even if you don't have this range that other people do. And at the time, I was like, "That's stupid, I'm

terrible, I can't do this—"

[JACK laughs]

ART: —because that's what I do when anyone says anything to me that isn't, "Great job, Art, you nailed it."

[AUSTIN and JACK laugh]

ART: Um, but like, that— in time, that has proven all the way true. That like—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Right.

ART: —you just need the smallest thing for it to be like, "This is what this character thinks and believes, and this is how that means they relate to the world, in this way," and it will make your character distinct, sort of whether you like it or not. And I still don't like, have a great vocal range, I still don't do any accents, except like, that Northeast-y accent, like the—

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: [in a New York accent]: Oh! Fuhgeddaboutit!

ART: Like, that's—

AUSTIN: [in a New York accent] Ey! Oh!

ART: [in the same accent]: Oh, ey, oh!

AUSTIN: Yeah, uh huh.

JACK: And also Jake the Jackal.

ART: Yeah. Um, that's— yeah.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Right, but that's— yeah, yeah. Well, you do the— that's, that's a voice. You do a voice there. I think here's a funny thing for me as a GM for both of you, is neither of you do voices for your main— ok. I need to define what I mean as voices here. What I mean is a different accent, because you both change cadence based on character? AuDy's cadence and the Hitchcocks' cadence and Lem's cadence are all different, but they're all using your voice basically, Jack.

JACK: Right.

AUSTIN: Um, neither of you do accents for your main campaign characters, but you both do voices for Bluff characters, for one-shot— for live characters, or when I say, "Hey, can you play this NPC for me?" Like, Jack, you do that a lot in Twilight Mirage.

JACK: [overlapping] Some things are so much lower!

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally! 'Cause you don't have to do it for 50 episodes.

ART: [overlapping] Uh huh.

JACK: And, and, y'know, it's not just that— it's kind of, for me, a distillation of what Art was talking about, in terms of embodying that character—

AUSTIN: Mmm.

JACK: —where, if I know I'm going to be playing this character for two and a half minutes, I can do the, the—

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: I can do the, um— I can do the extremely intensified version of that role, right?

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Mmm. Yeah.

JACK: Like, I can play every card that I'm holding here, because I'm not gonna be coming back to this. Um—

ART: Uh huh.

JACK: And there's a kind of real glee in that. And the reason that I don't do character voices is because I'm not good at them over 50 hours. Um—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Oh, same.

JACK: That's just not the kind of player I am, but given the opportunity to just be like, "Do you wanna be a weirdo for a minute and a half, who then might show up again an episode later?", I'm like, "Yeah! Absolutely!"

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: "I'll be that weirdo!"

AUSTIN: Totally. Y'know, it's funny, 'cause like, I mostly don't do these voices, I mostly play with cadence tricks, which will get you most of the way there, Bea. Um, that like, y'know, I have a handful of characters that have true different voices, I think about like, Red Jack is probably the most obvious one, right?

JACK: Primo.

AUSTIN: Primo had one, for sure. Um, Samot has one, right? Like—

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: But Samot doesn't have like, a different accent from me? It's just like, it's like if Hieron had a, um, like a Midatlantic accent, it would be Samot, y'know? Like, "I'm gonna sound sexy and smart. Um, this is what that sounds like." Yeah, Waltz, Waltz Tango (Cache) had a real one, for sure. [laughs]

JACK: Oh, what's Waltz's accent? I can't even remember how Waltz talked.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Uh, Christian Slater doing, uh, Jack Nicholson?

JACK: Oh, god, ok.

ART: [overlapping] Yeah, that is Waltz, yeah. Uh huh.

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: He's award-winning, did you know that?

AUSTIN: He's— he's won awards. Um, but, but like, when you look at a scene where— we've had this a lot in Hieron recently, where I have to communicate Sunder Havelton, um, uh, Gloria Lake, um— or sorry, I did it again, uh, uh, Victoria Solomon, and Corsica Neue, where all like, "Oh, these are just some bad bitches." Like, these are just 3 tough women, and— but also, they're not tough in the same way, right?

JACK: [overlapping] Right.

AUSTIN: And so how do I communicate Corsica differently from Sunder, despite the fact that they are both people who have some magical training, and also are both people who have lived long and— long and complicated and successful lives in which they've gained a lot of power? Um, and it gets tough, because, because you're moving between those voices pretty quickly, and often these are characters who are talking in proximity to each other, um, or even to each

other. And what I have found is like, not to overplay the hand, and like, 1. y'know, as the GM, if you're doing this as a GM, Bea, it is totally chill to be like, "And that's what Corsica says," or like, "Corsica says, 'Blah'." And 2. just to find very small things that you restrain for use with only for certain characters, because then you've created a sort of like— and again, Art, you did this a lot with Grand, you have lots of like, short, biting cadence with Grand—

ART: [overlapping] Mmm.

AUSTIN: —where you're, you're like, very dismissive in your cadence, as if, as if, as if like, you're not willing to speak long sentences. Grand is too busy on other shit. Um, and if you, if that was a GM character, if that was a character I was playing, I would make sure like, "Ok, that has to be a calling sign for Grand Magnificent, and I should save that for him, and not just like, use that regularly with other characters." Um, any other things here?

JACK: [overlapping] I think—

ART: Yeah.

JACK: I think also there's real value in not saying— not saying anything?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Umm, a lot of— so, when I started playing AuDy, coming off Lem, I really struggled— so, originally, I didn't want AuDy to talk at all.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Um, and like, we threw that out as fast as we came up with that idea, because it's one of those ideas that you come up with, and you're like, "Man, that's cool as hell," though it doesn't work in any way.

[ART laughs in background]

AUSTIN: Especially not in an audio story.

JACK: Especially not on a radio play!

AUSTIN: In a comic it might work. Right?

JACK: Totally. Um, but the idea of AuDy as a character who talks so little that they— that, y'know, they might as well be not talking at all was something that was always really fun and interesting to me playing COUNTER/weight.

AUSTIN: [in background] Mmhm.

JACK: And so, in the early part of that season, and with more confidence toward the end, um, a lot of AuDy's voice came through their physicality. Um, and came through a lot of how I would describe them behaving. You have scenes where AuDy switches themselves off—

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: —AuDy will walk out of conversations they don't want to be in, or start shooting or make a gesture, or like—

AUSTIN: [laughs] Will do stuff.

JACK: Yeah, absolutely.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: [overlapping] AuDy will open and close doors. There's a scene where they turn all the lights off in a room?

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: Um, and it's just like, that is— that is part of the character's voice, because we— because what we're doing is not a visual medium, we, we can't play as much with physicality as we could—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —but if we think about how we would embody these characters if we were playing them live on a set—

AUSTIN :Yeah.

JACK: —we would be letting our physicality do a lot of heavy lifting. Um, and I think that's always interesting to think about with— the Hitchcocks are always running places, or—

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: —or scrambling for things. Y'know, how do you physically embody these characters through your narration, and how does that bring out their voice?

AUSTIN: Janine just did this really good, really well, in her, uh, Armour Astir: Advent, uh, live game character, um—

ART: Mmm.

AUSTIN: —whose name I am forgetting. Fuck.

JACK: That was great

ART: [overlapping] Oh, it was, um, Teasel Mode.

AUSTIN: Teasel, yeah, who is like— who taps buttons and sends signals to do that, but also is so clearly holding back her, her interiority from vocalization, right? She does not, she is not— it's not even the Grand Mag thing, where Grand Mag cuts himself off, or only responds in this kind of like, you can hear Art like, finishing the sentence as soon as it starts. Um, Teasel will not even respond at all, or will, like, y'know, Janine will describe an action Teasel did in a similar way to AuDy, right? Um, but yet— a distinct way, not a mechanical way. A sort of almost playful, or dis— not disinterested from the situation, but almost like, wanting to be more a spectator in this very playful, um, almost sadistic way [laughs].

JACK: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, which was good. Um, and the other thing is— the other thing there is just like, there are things to play with that are neither cadence nor accent, and that is, is just, uh, systems of— this goes back to what Art was saying, when, when he was talking about, um, finding something that's true for the character. So like, how often does your character ask questions? How, how often does your character describe color, or detail? Um, how often do they use adverbs? Um, those things will end up char— giving your character a lot of breadth, and a lot of specificity in, in the way you play them. If you're just like, "I'm gonna use adverbs constantly," uh, it will come through as being a particular thing for your character, and it won't even be a thing you necessarily set out to do, uh, or, or won't even be a thing someone will put their finger on and be like, "Ah, yes, Bea's character is constantly using adverbs." But it will come across in the play, um—

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah.

AUSTIN: —and I don't just mean that for the, for other players, I mean it'll come across in the play for you as you begin to do improv speech with that stuff. So, yeah. Any other final thoughts on, on character voices, before we continue?

ART: I just wanna just re-emphasize that I once knew a famous person.

JACK: Great!

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Once? Only once? Ok.

ART: Maybe a— maybe a couple.

AUSTIN: All right. Uh, if it comes up again this session, it would be fucking fantastic.

ART: [laughs] Ok, I'm gonna be looking for it.

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: Ok. This one—

ART: [overlapping] I know two more famous people and I'm ready.

AUSTIN: All right, good. This one comes—

ART: [overlapping] And Austin Walker.

AUSTIN: That's— I'm not famous. You're on the podcast with— [goes into the next question]

I'm curious, says Rhye, to hear some of your thoughts on the notion of character progression in RPGs, especially narrative-heavy games like those in the show. Games like D&D have a very familiar video game-y notion of improvement— level up, get better weapons and abilities, fight stronger enemies— and give GMs easy-to-use tools like monster challenge ratings, or skill check difficulty classes, to put together appropriately difficult encounters and let players feel like their higher numbers are meaningful. In Powered by the Apocalypse or Forged in the Dark games, players still level up, get cool skills, and see their numbers go up, but it feels much more difficult to construct appropriate challenges that feel proportional to players' power levels, due to the focus on storytelling and interpersonal struggles over strict combat, and the coarseness of a 2d6 roll or an 8-tick clock when compared against d20s and hit points in the hundreds. I've always

been impressed with FatT's storytelling, but especially with your ability to make satisfying and meaningful arcs with conclusions that feel both narratively and mechanically appropriate. At Austin, what are some of your strategies for developing challenges that fit the narrative and scale well with PCs' new skills and improved capabilities? Players, what are some of your favorite encounters in narrative-heavy games on or off the show, where you felt challenged and able to use your characters' strengths to their fullest? Thanks so much! Love the show, always excited to hear more.

AUSTIN: Thank you, Rhye! Um, I wanna talk to y'all first, because as players, you are the people who have character abilities and stats and sheets, and I'm curious if it feels like someone like Lem is stronger in this way than they were at the start of the game, or looking at past campaigns, especially I'd say COUNTER/weight, which was the one where we went the longest, and you kind of got— I mean, I guess you get pretty deep in on Scum & Villainy too, but not quite the same way as with the Sprawl. So I'm curious, does it feel like you are leveling up in this traditional game-y way?

JACK: Not— not really to me. Um—

AUSTIN: Mm.

JACK: It feels like I have more sometimes, as in I have more tools at my disposal. Um, but I think in part because we play so slowly—

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: —and because the systems are so, um, what's the word— broad, uh, I don't necessarily feel it in the same way that I do in a sort of video game sense. But I also kinda have a bit— [sighs] I feel like the ways I probably feel it in a video game sense are to do with other things sometimes than the numbers going up. Like, narrative context of how, like, my power is being deployed in a level or something?

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Sure, sure.

JACK: Like, often the level up systems in games that feel least like I'm progressing to me are ones in which I make numbers go up small amounts?

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: [overlapping] If the numbers go up very large amounts, I'm thinking of, like, the difference between Crackdown's agility 1 and Crackdown's agility 5—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Yeah.

JACK: —feels tremendous, but the difference between level 15 and level 21 in Fallout 3 doesn't necessarily feel like that much. Um, and so I think—

AUSTIN: Unless you've gotten like, the one perk that brings your build together, right?

JACK: Well, so this is the thing. I think the way in which I feel leveling up the most in the games we play is through a system of keys and locks.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Um, and sometimes I don't know what those locks when I get the keys, and neither do you, but we have keys, um, in our character sheets.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah.

JACK: Sometimes they're things like, Lem has the power to make people believe they're seeing things that aren't there. That's a key. And then we find the lock when we use that in a way that makes me feel, "Oh, Lem is a different— Lem is a different character—"

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Right.

JACK: "—through the discovery of this." And sometimes they're very literal keys and locks. I— I feel—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] So I've brought up, briefly, your character sheet, Lem's character sheet, on the, on the right, which, hey, this is a hot Mapmaker bonus for people who aren't at the Mapmaker level—

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah. Let me pull up the thing.

AUSTIN: —and look at the thing here. Um, and I think that it's, it's worth, like, looking at this in a very specific sense, because there are things here that I can so clearly imagine you using in like, Winter, not so much Spring quite yet, but, but in, in Winter almost immediately—

JACK: Oh, the, the sheet doesn't seem to be on the stream, actually.

AUSTIN: Oh, it's not, because I'm not sharing my, my— y'know what, it's not because I'm sharing my— one second. Let me— good catch, good catch. Um, I made it like, capture—

JACK: [overlapping] I was like, "I want to see my character sheet!" I can see my character sheet whenever I want, but I wanna see it now.

AUSTIN: But you wanna see it now.

ART: You wanna see it on the screen, it's important.

JACK: [laughing] Yeah, exactly.

AUSTIN: Uh, and then, let's watch— well, check this out, get ready. [makes a noise like if a robot was saying "waaahhhh"] There, I brought it over. Um, so it should be there now. Let me— yeah. Let me not— y'know what, it's gonna cover some of this question, that's ok.

JACK: Oh, there we go! [laughs]

AUSTIN: Um, so, uh, the thing about something like Wolf in White Van, which is the renamed thing that, uh, allows you to make an ally attack— or a target attack one of their allies, or that makes you draw their ire also— um, and like, so— one of the first things Lem does in Winter is that, and it's so indicative of where Lem is at as a, uh, as a, uh, a semotician and as a, y'know, pattern magician that, that he does this, and doesn't think about what the consequences actually look like—

JACK: Right.

AUSTIN: —and we get that very strong sequence where that slowly is revealed to him, or he kind of washes over his face, right? Uh, and likewise we get you doing Metal Hurlant throughout that season, um, where you're like, "Oh, I'm going to be directly causing damage—"

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah.

AUSTIN: But we when think about those things, they're not like, "Aha, I had—" The lock isn't an enemy with a lot of HP, it's—

JACK: [overlapping] No.

AUSTIN: —it's a fictional moment that has a different opportun— a different outcome available to it, because it, um, because of this ability being at hand, right?

JACK: Yeah! And because of, um— [pauses] because of having a map, or because of having a communications box, or because of having—

AUSTIN: Mmm, right, right.

JACK: The, the ability for Lem, y'know, regardless of whether or not it worked, uh, the ability for Lem to put the communications box down on the table, the, the cop's table—

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: —and say, "Here is a thing," embodies a change in my character. Um, and it's kind of in those, kind of in those ways that I think I feel my characters growing the most. We saw this with Fourteen's gun in, um, in, in Twilight Mirage—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Twilight Mirage, yeah.

JACK: —uh, just hanging out in a drawer in Fourteen's house at the midway point of that season. Um, yeah.

AUSTIN: Totally.

JACK: And I think it's telling that like, Lem's barely done any pattern magic in Spring so far.

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: Uh, I think just 'cause he's like, "Oh, oh god!"

[AUSTIN and ART laugh]

AUSTIN: Uh, Ha— I almost said Hadrian. Art, um, I was looking at Hadrian's sheet—

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN: —is the thing that was happening. And the thing I was— the other thing that was happening was I was thinking— I was looking at the sheet and thinking, "Oh! You don't have any negatives anymore." And you're close to having positives in all but one stat. If you get one more point of Dex and one more point of Wisdom, you will end up with +1 or more in everything except Intelligence, which is only 0. Uh—

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: [overlapping, laughs] Only a 9—

JACK: [laughs] Only.

AUSTIN: [still laughing] —which is a +0. Um, and in that way, like, that is the other thing that happens in these games, is— it is not, um, it is not that you, uh— when your stats go up, it's not like, "Oh, I'm gonna do another 30 points of HP damage," 'cause it isn't D&D. But what it is is, "I am going to more often not get a mixed success, and I will more often, y'know, succeed." And I think that that is—

ART: [overlapping] Or just more often get a mixed success.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Than a failure, fair. Totally. Um, so I'm curious for you, if it feels different, uh, over time. Uh, either with Hadrian, or with Cass, or anybody else.

ART: Uh, Cass is tricky because Cass's best move was the first one. Uh, the Plan Comes Together was, was just better than—

AUSTIN: Uh huh.

ART: And I think that that—

JACK: [overlapping] They just found that, they were like, "We got it. This is perfect!"

[AUSTIN laughs]

ART: Yeah, there was no—

JACK: "I don't need any more moves!"

ART: That was just like, "I will use this move to be all moves."

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: [laughs] God, I Love It When a Plan Comes Together is my favorite tabletop move I have ever seen.

AUSTIN: It's so fucking good. It's so just—

ART: [overlapping] Yeah, that's like the saddest thing about our No More Chime policy, is that I can't use that move anymore.

AUSTIN: Multiple of the games we're looking at for the next season have that move.

[JACK laughs]

ART: Well, dibs. Um—

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: Wow. Wow.

[AUSTIN groans]

ART: But no, I don't— I don't know, 'cause we don't do the— I think this is, this is a more obvious feeling when it's like, "Last week I was fighting goblins, this week I'm fighting kobolds, next week I'm gonna fight a—" What's between a—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] A hobgoblin, or an orc?

ART: Yeah. Then we're gonna fight a troll, then we're gonna fight a dragon.

JACK: [in background] Dinosaur.

AUSTIN: Yep.

ART: And then we're gonna fight a lich king and then we're gonna start over.

JACK: [overlapping] What's above— how high does it go?

AUSTIN: Tarrasque.

JACK: Uh, sorry?

AUSTIN: A tarrasque? Do you not know what a tarrasque is?

JACK: No.

ART: Is that the— is that the—

AUSTIN: [whispering] Oh man.

ART: I'm not gonna say.

AUSTIN: Um, all right—

JACK: [overlapping] Am I about to find a new fantasy monster, age 26?

AUSTIN: I'm gonna show you like the— this is the 3.5 tarrasque, uh, here, that I—

ART: Where are you showing us this?

AUSTIN: Uh, it'll be just on the stream, 'cause I'm just doing a Google search, which means: hey everybody, be careful. I don't know what the fuck's gonna happen on my screen, 'cause I'm gonna search— 'cause I'm gonna D&D wiki, and look up this tarrasque.

JACK: Oh.

AUSTIN: [reading from https://dnd-wiki.org/wiki/Tarrasque_(3.5e_Monster)] "Although no one present has likely ever seen it before, this hulking monstrosity is instantly recognizable to anyone who has ever heard the stories of its legendary wrath. There's only one beast that casts its shadow over entire cities, only one creature capable of striking such intense fear into all who gaze upon it. After all, there is [*sic*] only one tarrasque."

JACK: Oh, wow.

AUSTIN: Uh, "it is supposed to be—" this is from dnd-wiki.org— "the most terrifying land-based creature in D&D, on a similar level to Godzilla—" [laughs]

JACK: How—

AUSTIN: "It's supposed to be a creature created by the gods to strike fear into even the greatest of champions," et cetera. Um, let's see, let's see, what's its— it has a— [laughing] its attack roll is a— has a bite, which is 16d10 + 26. Um—

JACK: [laughs] Oh my god!

AUSTIN: It also has two horns, two claws, a tail slap. It, uh, has a bunch of fuckin' feats, its strength is 50, which is high—

JACK: It sounds like it has a bunch of fuckin' feats. This—

[AUSTIN, and then ART, laughs]

AUSTIN: Love it. It does have some good abilities here, things like "Fury of Ages Past", um, which— what's that mean? [quoting dnd-wiki.org again] Uh, "a +6 enchantment"— or "enhancement"— "to all attack rolls, damage rolls, saving rolls [*sic*], and Armor Class." This is why I don't— this is it, we don't— it's not good radio for me to be like, "This beast has the Fury of Ages Past!" and you go, "What's that mean?", and I go, "+6 enhancement bonus to all attack rolls, damage rolls, saving throws, and Armor Class."

JACK: [overlapping, laughs] What—

AUSTIN: But that's a lot! It is a lot. That +6 is not— it's not— it's fine.

JACK: I'm gonna look up a picture of it.

ART: [overlapping] I mean, it's not much when you're rolling how many d10s + 26? +6 is not that much.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] That's true. No. Uh, ok, well, I actually skipped—

JACK: Oh, it's a dinosaur!

AUSTIN: It's, it's— ok, listen. One thing at a time. I will note I skipped over the part that makes Fury of Ages Past dope, which is, [reading from dnd-wiki.org again] "All of its natural attacks ignore hardness and damage reduction of any kind, and it can attack incorporeal or ethereal creatures normally with no miss chance."

JACK: Oh, wow.

AUSTIN: "When it moves or attacks, the tarrasque automatically destroys any obstacle in its path regardless of hardness or structure, including magical effects such as force effects. It is also immune to any effect that would be negated by a freedom spell."

[JACK laughs in background]

AUSTIN: Uh, it can critically attack anything, tarrasques are a lot. So yeah, that would be— if I made y'all fight a tarrasque, that would be fun. It's like a dinosaur, I've seen it look a little more like, uh, furry than a dinosaur before, y'know?

JACK: [overlapping] Ok.

AUSTIN: Um—

ART: Like a fuzz dino?

AUSTIN: Like a fuzzy dino, yeah. Um, they're neat, y'know. So yeah, that's what's after a dragon. [laughs] Um, or a lich king, or whatever.

JACK: Ok.

AUSTIN: Um, so here's the funny thing though. From my side, I actually try to work really hard at balancing stuff like combat. Like, I don't know if you're gonna fight Arrell this season, uh, but if you did, it would be fun, because you're at the point where that fight is a fight and not necessarily—

JACK: Mmm.

AUSTIN: —a, a squash, y'know? Um, wrestling is maybe actually— "squash" is a wrestling term. Obviously, squash is a real term that we use all the time, but squash is also a specific wrestling term, in which a, a, uh, heroic character— or, I guess it doesn't have to be a face, right, but like, a, one, one wrestler just crushes the other wrestler. It's really quick, it is just about putting over the successful, the winning wrestler, and showing how tough they are and how

strong they are. And squashes have value inside of, inside of games like this. I think to a degree that a lot of DMs don't necessarily take advantage of. Um, the— that initial fight against the bandits, um, uh, or the Hella throwing the bottle and killing the bird recently?

JACK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, squash. Like, "Oh yeah, Hella is like that," right? Um, I wasn't gonna make you get into a big long, long drawn-out against those bird cops, or against those bandits, because they— neither of them were like— that's not what their purpose is in the story, right? The purpose is to kind of, like, make y'all seem tough. Um, but, especially with Dungeon World where I do end up having a lot of tools to check your keys against, right, like I can introduce a lot of interesting locks, and certain character types do have cool abilities that you don't necessarily have the right keys from, right? Um, there was a fight recently against two kind of monstrous games in the boat party game— I'm doing my best not to involve major spoilers here— um, and, and that fight— your solution ended up being a good one, but there were lots of other solutions you could've used, many of which would've meant like— I mean, even what you did use needed to like, reach into your bag of tricks quite a bit, y'know? Um, we got, we ended up getting Fero casting a spell that we'd never seen him use before to find a solution, which was really cool. And a lot of it is just like, on my side, on the prep side is, "How do I put enough pressure on them to force to have to dig deep and look at their sheets?" And sometimes that means introducing a thing that has a very clear solution if they look at their sheets, um, and other times it is— it is about finding things where I know it will break bad if it's done by— if you try to do it with brute force. Scum and Villainy ended up being, um, Scum and Villainy ended up being, uh, a good example of this, where, um, we got to the siege of the Lineage Brighton, and that whole thing ends up breaking bad in such a way— or, or honestly, the two of you on the call right now— [laughs]

JACK: Mmhm.

AUSTIN: Uh, we got to the Restitution of All Things, and that was a moment where it was like, "I know what these characters are on their character sheets, and they're both tough as shit." And they were built to be tough as shit, because we had already established them as fictionally very strong characters, uh, you know in opposition. Um, I'm talking here about the final encounter, uh, that, that had specific abilities that were built to either hard counter your own, or else anticipate and to negate— or maybe not negate, but minimize what the damage you could do if it turned into an all-out brawl, whereas an earlier fight in that segment, uh, that happened in a long hallway, you may recall— there was like, a tram or a car of some kind involved— was designed specifically so that, uh— there was a couple things you both had recently gotten access to, in terms of your moves— would have allowed you to do some really cool, powerful

shit. Um, and so, this is exactly one of those examples of when it works well, it doesn't even look like I've done anything. You know what I mean? Um, so to Rhye—

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah.

AUSTIN: —the thing that I'll say is, stop thinking about hit points in the hundreds, and stop thinking about what a d20's, um, thing looks like— uh, a d20's, um—

JACK: Curve? Um—

AUSTIN: —curve looks like, and start looking at flags, both fictional and mechanical, inside of your players' character sheets, and for opportunities for which the, the players can use those things both where they can use them and use them successfully, and where you can be like, "Ah ah ah, no. This doesn't work anymore." If I, if I think back to most of, like, the coolest COUNTER/weight stuff, um, a lot of those moments ended up being about where either I was enabling cool activity, or where I was directly challenging it. Um, I think maybe the best single— one of the best fights in that game was the stuff with Territory Jazz, who, uh— think about the way Aria and Cass interacted with Territory Jazz. Territory Jazz was built specifically to challenge Aria's speed, uh, and, uh, uh, Cass's ability to like, stand still and take shots at long distance, and it was like, "Well, one of these two things, they have to succeed at, but it's going to be tough to do either of them." Uh, and the way that shook out was a really fun one. So yeah, it's just, it really is for me like, there is still a science to this, there is still, uh, a degree of like, you need to do the work of looking at character sheets. There is not a D&D-style challenge rating that you can kind of default to— though there is in Dungeon World to some degree. There's, " How much armor does this creature have, and can it break through armor?" Um, because y'all will get fucked up if it has a lot of armor and you can't bust through it, uh, so keep that in mind as y'all continue. In fact, here we go— thank you to Nick in the chat, Nick Marigos [*apologies, best guess at spelling— Audrey*], who notes that the tarrasque is, in fact, in Dungeon World.

JACK: Uh oh.

AUSTIN: I will read you this character.

JACK: [overlapping] This— this is be— this is the equivalent of it being translated from Fahrenheit into Celsius—

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: —for me, where I'm like, "Ohhhh, I see."

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally. Let me, let me bring it up really quick here.

ART: It's 12!

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: [laughs] 12, yep! That's it. Uh, here we go, bring that over. Um, [reading from Dungeon World's description of the tarrasque, which can be found at https://roll20.net/compendium/dw/The%20Tarrasque#content] "The Tarrasque. Legendary—" uh, so, "Solitary, Huge, Planar. Special qualities: Impervious. The Tarrasque. Legendary unstoppable juggernaut—eater of cities and swallower of ships, horses, and knights. A creature unseen in an age but about whom all kinds of stories are told. One thread of truth weaves through these stories. It cannot be killed. No blade can pierce its stony shell, nor shell [*sic*]— nor spell penetrate the Shield it somehow bears. Stories say, though, that the will of one pure soul can send it to slumber, though what that means and, by the gods, where such a thing might be found, pray we do not ever need to learn. It slumbers. Somewhere in the periphery of the planar edge, it sleeps for now. *Instinct:* To consume." And then its two abilities: "Swallow a person, group, or place whole", and "Release a remnant of a long-eaten place from its gullet". Good moves.

ART: Let's do this!

AUSTIN: Yeah, that sounds great!

ART: Let's have one of these. I think I heard Arrell is a tarrasque.

JACK: We can—

AUSTIN: I can tell you what Arrell—

JACK: [overlapping] —we can maybe get one—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Have you not seen Arrell in this book yet?

ART: I don't read the monster list in the book we're playing in, what kind of—

[JACK laughs]

ART: —reading the end of the novel is that?

AUSTIN: It's good, you better start figuring out how to get through 5 Armor.

JACK: Oh, wow.

ART: No, I'm just gonna teach him ignorance.

AUSTIN: Oh, no, that was a different— that's not—

[JACK laughs]

ART: No, no, it's gonna— it works for everything.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Oh, lord. Ok. Great. Love it.

JACK: Um, my favorite thing about the tarrasque in Dungeon World is the word, uh, impervious?

AUSTIN: Yes. Well, as again, as Nick in the chat notes, no— there's no HP listed, there's no armor listed, there's no damage die listed, because—

JACK: It's great.

AUSTIN: —it doesn't— that's not how it works, right?

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Like, dragons I believe are the same way here. Um, or maybe dragons do— dragons do damage, they actually do, they are 16 HP, 5 Armor. Um, but they, uh— here's one, here's one I just stumbled into, which is really funny: tarrasques don't have stat lines? Neither do peasants. Um—

JACK: Oh! Ok.

AUSTIN: Fiction first gaming, y'know? Fiction first.

JACK: [overlapping] Fiction first! It's like how we don't know exactly how hot the sun is—

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: —and we don't need to. It's like, uh, it'll burn you. Be careful.

AUSTIN: It'll burn you! That's it. Um, any other thoughts here before we continue? Do y'all, do y'all ever feel like you want more of this stuff?

JACK: No.

AUSTIN: No?

ART: Not right now, maybe ever.

JACK: No. I feel like— I feel like— [pauses] It takes a lot for me to feel good about those kind of systems. Um—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —in kind of whatever I play. And that's like, a personal taste thing? Um, there's lots of different kinds of, of ways power can be expressed on a curve, I feel like, in games? And for whatever reason, the one where numbers go up—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —I find to be kind of— [pauses] I like *Diablo* a lot, and I like *Torchlight* a lot.

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: But those are the kinds of games in which 43 and 45 isn't important, because I'm gonna get up to like, 6000%—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Right, right.

JACK: —in an hour and a half.

AUSTIN: This is one I'm thinking about a lot right now with Season 6 coming, because power is the kind of watchword in some ways.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, I'm thinking about it across every possible axis, right, like across literal character sheet stats, across the power of symbols and the power of aesthetics, and about, like, the ways in which being powerful are, should be attractive? Um, I want to figure out how to wield the both character and player desire for power as, as a, uh, as bait, honestly. Um, so—

JACK: Right.

AUSTIN: —and I guess it needs to feel powerful. It needs to feel— you need to understand why someone might want to side with empire, um, and so that'll be a fun one to figure out.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And that's something I'm thinking about when it comes to looking at these different games, right? Um, the, the— god, I keep— now I'm afraid I'm saying backwards, if it's Armour Astir, or Astir Armour, uh, the game we just finished playing, and I feel bad about this. Um—

JACK: Armour Astir, I think?

AUSTIN: I think that that might be right. Yes. Armour Astir. Um, or at least that's what Google just said. Armour Astir, yeah. Um, I thought was a really— had a really cool thing with the tier system, and the enemy, like, ranking system, because it was really straightforward with like, "I know why I would want a tier 5 gun. I know now why I would—"

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: "—because there are things I cannot touch otherwise." And that's a really simple, like, mechanization of something inside of a game that still had largely has story as its focus. Um, all right, I'm gonna keep going, because otherwise we could talk about this all day.

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: This one comes in from Britt, and they say:

Hi Friends, I am leading a game of Misspent Youth with an established tabletop group I've been part of for a year or so. The group has grown pretty large, and we do most of our sessions over voice chat because we live in various cities. Currently there are seven of us, and— [laughing] man, seven is so many people!— and Misspent Youth calls for six players, including the GM. I imagine that's for a good, well-tested reason, but I'd rather not exclude anyone from our game. Do you have any tips for handling larger groups of players, especially virtually, in games not built for it?

Thanks.

JACK: This is great. My favorite thing to do with games is pile too many players into them like a clown car, or pull players out of them like clowns getting out of a clown car.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Uh huh.

JACK: Just like, "Wow! This has nobody in it, or it has way too many people in it."

AUSTIN: Way too many people in it! I guess there's two ways to answer this question, and the first is like, a chiding, uh— well, the first is— the first is underscoring why it's important to listen to those rules, and you should split up the group, and maybe run two different Misspent Youth games, like it could be cool to do two, y'know, a three group and a four group or something like that, or, or, y'know, two three groups the way that we did Scum & Villainy, where like, you're, you're two groups of people working toward similar ends. That could be fun. Like— and I think that's a good line of, of—

JACK: Yeah! That's a fair answer.

AUSTIN: Uh, uh, a fair answer. I think that that's a fair answer, and I wanna advocate for it. That is the answer I would do, for me, it's why we're not doing a Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective game this year. It's too much, it's too many people. [Pauses & sighs] There's also the answer that actually answers your question, which is "Do you have any tips for handling..." You're already doing it. "I'm already in a runaway train, you tell me how to best use this runaway train."

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: Um, I— probably can get some answers for that, what do y'all think [laughs]?

JACK: Ah, jeez.

AUSTIN: Art, you and I were in a billion of these groups when we were in college.

ART: Yeah, which is why I also wanna add the chiding advice—

[AUSTIN laughs]

ART: —of just, like, see if someone wants to like, swap out, like, y'know— I have no— I don't know anyone who has, like, a good "There were eight people at the table" story—

[JACK laughs]

ART: —whereas, like, I don't know anyone who has a "There weren't enough of us" story.

AUSTIN: All our finales are eight people at the table

ART: Yeah, but like—

[AUSTIN laughs]

ART: Regardless of how good the content is, do you ever, like, walk away from a finale recording being like, "That was an unqualified fun experience, I feel refreshed."

[AUSTIN and JACK laugh]

AUSTIN: [groans] It's work, we do work. It's work.

JACK: [laughing] Oh, jeez.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] You're right, no, again, you're right, but—

JACK: I think the runaway train metaphor is really good, Austin, because I think when you're in the, the [pauses] cockpit? What do you call the—

AUSTIN: The cockpit. We're calling it the cockpit now! The train cockpit. Mmhm.

JACK: When you're in the cockpit of a runaway train, the number one thing you're not thinking about is, "Wow, I sure this train goes very precisely and calmly."

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: Um, and especially in a game like Misspent Youth—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —which is about— [pauses] something's gonna give in this game.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Mmmm, you know what? Yeah.

JACK: Something is gonna give. And I think you have the opportunity—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] It might be the game.

JACK: —to decide what gives. Um, are scenes gonna run sloppily? And the answer is, might be yes, and that's fine. Um, you might not be able to hit— you might not be able to tell the story you want to tell, uh, the story might go careening off the rails, because there are so many people. Um, conversations might, uh, uh, go sprawling off in directions you don't anticipate, or alternatively, they might not happen as often, 'cause players might be worried about talking over each other. Um, I think identify the ways— identify what you want out of a game of Misspent Youth, and then ask yourself, "Are we gonna lose this by playing it with seven people?"

AUSTIN: Yeah. Yeah.

JACK: And the answer might be, "No, I think we can do it!" In which case, fucking go with god. [laughs]

AUSTIN: [laughing] I have—

ART: [overlapping] Yeah, I think that's true, right? Like, that is, you have to— you have to get everyone comfortable throwing the ball around, like everyone has to be happy with the amount of time they have the ball, and when it's thrown to them, and when they don't want it, and that's like a thing you can do. I mean, hell, you could probably come up with a system of figuring out who wants to talk and how badly. But like, you really have to like— it's, it's— the game becomes like a people management game more than anything else, it becomes about like, personalities more than anything in the book.

AUSTIN: So, a couple things here. One is, I think there's a limit to the train metaphor, which is, I bet very few people on the runaway train are bored.

JACK: Oh yeah!

ART: Mmm.

AUSTIN: And I have been in so many big role-playing games where either I or someone else is exhausted—

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: —and bored, or distracted and stops paying attention. And especially in an online game, that is a big risk with a big game like this. Um, and so, again, the chiding thing, see if you can break it up. The other, the other chiding thing I just realized is Misspent Youth may literally not work with that many player characters, because of how the, the scene resolution stuff works, um—

JACK: [overlapping] Ohh, yes.

AUSTIN: I don't know if you remember this, but like there is the—

JACK: [overlapping] The numbers might just not—

AUSTIN: —the numbers straight up might not function the right way. Um—

JACK: [overlapping] Hmmm.

AUSTIN:— that is like, a big, real thing, like, that you should look into. I bet you someone online has run with that, or you can do what Jack and I did with, um, Futura Free at the end of Twilight Mirage, which is like run an internal test before you try to run it, and see what having six player characters will do to the number board—

JACK: Yep.

AUSTIN: —inside of Misspent Youth, to see if it's actually feasible to make sure that people—

JACK: [overlapping] Like, does the maths work?

AUSTIN: Right, do the— exactly. Now—

JACK: [overlapping] Um, I think— oh, sorry, no, please, go ahead.

AUSTIN: No, I just— really quickly, which is like, if one of the problems is— the actual answer here for like, "Do you have tips on handling it?" is to identify these problems and start thinking about potential solutions. Because like, if one of them is being bored, that means, like, you as the GM should keep track, physically keep track of who is getting attention. Who is being put in the spotlight, who has the opportunity to speak, um, that stuff— you will think, "Oh, I've played other games that aren't meant for, and it works", but on a game-to-game basis, that will change, because the ways in which a game like Misspent Youth and a game like Dungeon World and a game like Blades handles player, and like, turn order differently? And so you should really look for solutions to like, keep every player involved, um, and then do that for every other problem you can anticipate. [laughs]

JACK: Mm. Mm! And, I just would always— I wanna underscore what you said about player energy, Austin?

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: And, and how the more players you have, the more of a multiplier there is going to be on the players' energy drain.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Um, in a, in a game with, with this many people, people are gonna get tired faster, and there is nothing worse than, than tired or bored or disconnected players at a table. Um, and if anything that might be the reason I would say try and go for two groups. Not because of chaos, but because of the opposite—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Mmhm.

JACK: —of players— of players going drifting off. Um—

AUSTIN: Right, it's not a game of Fluxx or something, where like, "Ah, another player, just a weird thing is happening!" Like what it—

JACK: [overlapping] There are even tabletop games where I think another, adding more and more players, it would— it wouldn't fall apart as much?

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: Um, but like— [pauses] Yeah, don't let your players get just like, constantly exhausted by looking for space and looking for light, uh, and looking for room to go.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Which they might not have when there's seven people.

AUSTIN: Um, the other one— and this is again is like, if you're gonna do it, it is about breaking people up into groups inside of that larger group. Doing a group of two and three and a four or something like, or a four and a three? Whatever it is, two, two, three like— keeping people in their smaller groups will, one, let the dice play out— the dice game play out a little bit better. But also will give them— I mean, I'm thinking a lot right about a D&D game Art and I were part of in college, where— and this is the other thing is like, hold on loosely— Art and I would straight up spend 30 minutes talking about what we wanted to do, um, before we get the chance to work, to do something, right?

[JACK laughs]

ART: Mmm.

AUSTIN: Um, and thankfully, our characters ended up being in a position where that was feasible fictionally, um, but if we didn't have the chance to do that, that game would have been the worst. Um, and, uh, like being able to do some of that stuff will help. Taking breaks will help, um, but only once you know everyone's gotten a chance to do something significant. Um, I'm trying to think of genuine other tips for if you're going to be on this runaway train, y'know?

ART: I mean, on the other hand, that terrible, sprawling D&D game where we had that much downtime was a formidable moment in our friendship, so—

AUSTIN: Absolutely.

ART: —you can really, uh—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Yeah.

ART: —get some use— yeah.

AUSTIN: Sometimes you have to have a terrible experience to forge good, good, lifelong friendships. Other people in that game, y'know, a couple of them I still talk to.

ART: Uh huh.

AUSTIN: How many people were in that game. Can we name them? [pauses] Matt.

ART: Bismat.

AUSTIN: Audra.

ART: Rose.

AUSTIN: Oh, Rose was there! Fuck, Rose was there. Brian.

ART: How would I know the continuing adventures of that ferret? Who's Brian, 'cause I have another—

AUSTIN: Football Brian?

ART: What?

AUSTIN: Football Brian. Was that not his name?

ART: [overlapping] Football Brian, yeah.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: I don't know. Sure, Brian. Um, Phil? Was there— there was a Phil, right?

AUSTIN: There was a Phil! There was a Phil. Phil that no one on this call knows, not the Phil you're thinking of. Fuck that Phil. Um, [makes thinking sounds like "too to tooooo" but quietly]

ART: Yeah, no, not that one. The one that ended up going to Plattsburgh.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] You're forgetting— right. Uh, oh, you're forgetting like, a bunch—

ART: [overlapping] Or, not Plattsburgh, uh, whatever, yeah.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Me and you. Me and you, that's eight. Uh, Frank the GM is nine.

ART: Mmhm.

AUSTIN: And I feel like there's still three more people. Oh! Oh! Uh, Bob.

ART: Oh yeah, Bob.

AUSTIN: That's ten.

[pause]

ART: Is that it though? Who else, I can't even—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] No, there had to be more. There were—

ART: [overlapping] I can't picture any more faces.

AUSTIN: Fuck, there were at least two more people. Anthony wasn't in that game, right?

ART: Neither was Alex.

AUSTIN: Neither was Alex. Ok. [pauses] That's how I should figure this out. Who else was in like, the L5R game, y'know? Arriane wasn't around yet, right?

ART: [overlapping] Sure.

AUSTIN: That was pre-Arianne?

ART: No, she was in, she was in a different Living Earth game.

AUSTIN: Oh my god. Wait, the next year, right?

ART: Yeah, we're just a year early on her.

AUSTIN: So maybe it was ten. Too many people!

ART: Was Joe Carallo from Gamers' Club in that game?

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Joe Corallo. Eleven. Yeah, yeah, Joe Corallo was absolutely in that game. [laughing] We shouldn't use his whole name, Art.

ART: Uhhm, whoops.

AUSTIN: [still laughing] It's fine, it's fine. Don't dox him, he's good, he works in the comics— he does some comics stuff, he's done some politics stuff, shoutouts to Joe.

ART: Yeah, go follow him on Twitter if you want that in your life.

AUSTIN: The funny— ok, here's the funny— the reason you use Joe Corallo is because Joe Corallo— here's a fun college story. Joe Corallo once— Joe Corallo got a boyfriend and was like, really into his relationship for six months once, and just stopped hanging out with everybody, but we didn't forget who Joe Corallo was. And so one day, Joe called multiple people and left messages that began, "Hey. This Joe. Joe Corallo? From Gamer Club?" [laughs] And that's all. And for years he became Joe Corallo from Gamers' Club. Um, god, is that it?

JACK: Twelve people is too many.

ART: It was.

AUSTIN: It was too many people.

JACK: I don't think I know twelve people.

AUSTIN: Well—

ART: I didn't know those people.

AUSTIN: [breathes in] Oh my god.

[JACK laughs]

ART: I mean, I knew those people, but I didn't know those people, y'know?

AUSTIN: Yeah, I gotcha. I remember. [laughs]

ART: Ah, I think there was one more person!

AUSTIN: Fuck!

ART: Was there another— was there another woman? Like, she had like, blondish hair?

[AUSTIN laughs]

ART: [laughing] That's all I have.

AUSTIN: [laughing] Great, Art. Good job.

ART: And then I think she, she fell off.

[pause]

AUSTIN: I think everybody fell off eventually. Well, no, 'cause the thing that happened next year is that Bismat started running his game, which had a different set of 12-15 people in it. Oh!

ART: Yeah.

JACK: [overlapping] To 15?

AUSTIN: Was Kelly not in that game? No, Kelly was also in Arianne's year.

ART: Yeah, we're a year, we're a year before those two.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Right. Right.

ART: Would both eventually be in—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Sean? Was Sean not in? Sean was never in Living Earth.

ART: No, Sean correctly identified that as a garbage waste of time.

AUSTIN: [sighs] Fuck.

ART: I mean, not a waste of time, it was kind of fun.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Again, foundational and fun. D&D is a fun thing.

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: I did some cool stuff, I was a bard. You would've hated me, Jack. Jack, you would've hated my bard.

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: My bard was the worst. [laughs]

JACK: Did they say, "Fiddle-dee-dee"?

AUSTIN: No, no, no, no. No. No, they weren't like that. I guess that's true, they weren't like that. They were hot. He was a hot half, half-elven bard. It was good.

JACK: I'm not— I have no objections so far?

AUSTIN: All right. Um, working through some stuff with that bard. I think that's it. I think we're gonna move on to another question, but—

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: —but we could do this all night. [pauses] This is gonna kill me, there was at least two other characters. I'm gonna keep going. This one comes in from Gaia— I, he did not have a lute, he had a fiddle. Thank you, Matthew, in the chat. Uh, I play— in fact, he had, he had the fiddle of— that was secretly of the elvish god.

> I play Pathfinder with a group of around five people plus, plus GM and our camp— our campaign has been going along for quite a bit. At first, I used to feel like everyone was equally present at the table, but lately I've come to realize my friend and I are the only two who seem to stay focused and engaged through a whole session. As a result of that, and because I play a very extroverted, impulsive character, I often kind of lead the action and the party's decisions by myself, monopolizing the scene. I feel really bad about it and I've tried to get the others more proactive and act their scenes more, but sometimes it feels like pulling teeth, as they often answer, "I don't know, I'm not good at this." Uh, any advice on what I should do to advocate my action-adventure role, or action-advancer role, and get more reluctant people to play— to pay more attention and make their voices heard.

[pause, AUSTIN makes the noise where you blow air through your lips so it sounds like a horse]

ART: My impulse is just to be like, "Let them do what they wanna do." Like, if you've been playing for a bit and they're still coming back, they're having fun.

AUSTIN: Mmm.

ART: And if they don't want to have that role, they, like, let 'em chill, and roll to hit, y'know?

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah. I guess the thing it that feels like it might be the case is that Gaia isn't having as much fun as they want here?

JACK: Mmm.

AUSTIN: Like, but maybe they are, in which case, yeah, sometimes group dynamics are like that. Um, I, uh, I will say the— the thing that I do is question-asking. When I'm in this situation, I will say, "Oh, Art, what's character think about this?", right? Again, thinking back to when Art and I were in games together for other GM— with other GMs. Um, or when I'm doing like, a Roll20 game, like, guest game on Twitch or something. Um, it's like, being secondary GM when it comes to like, let me, let me do the work of saying, y'know, in character or out, what is the other character thinking, what do they look like, what are they doing?

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, Jack, you noted this about COUNTER/weight recently, right? Or, to me?

JACK: Yeah, so I was checking something in— I was checking something in a transcript— shoutout to the Friends at the Table transcript project—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Yes.

JACK: —um, on Twitter at, uh, I think—

ART: It's like, @fatttranscripts? Is that right?

JACK: [overlapping] @fatt_transcripts

AUSTIN: I think that that's right, let me—

JACK: @transcripts_fatt! Um, just an incredible resource because transcripts are cool, and also an incredible resource for me, 'cause I can be like, "Wait, what did I say?"

AUSTIN: Uh huh.

JACK: Um, I was checking something out and I noticed how, a lot in COUNTER/weight, our characters would be asking questions about other characters. Um, we'd say, "Well, what does Cass think about this?", or, "What's Mako gonna do now?" Um, y'know, more or less in character. Um, and that's hard to get yourself into a habit of doing, but it just opens so many doors. It is, uh, it is always going to be rewarding. Um, because, because if they say something you expect, that's great, um, because, y'know, you're like, "Ah, yeah, I thought you were going to say that." Uh, and if they completely blindside you with something, you know have something interesting to build on with them and they have something interesting to build on with you.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Mmhm.

JACK: But most importantly it just instantly puts a link between you and another player character. Um, and that's a two-way street, um, because that's something you can both call on in the future. And it's something I really, really want to get back to doing more of in our show, um, I really miss doing that quite as much as we used to.

AUSTIN: Totally. I think part of that too— one of the reasons that I think that that ended up working in COUNTER/weight so well was a, um, consistency of session and a familiarity with each other's characters to where—

JACK: [overlapping] Mmhm.

AUSTIN: —the questions arose naturally. And so one of the things I'll say, Gaia, is you might wanna talk about with your GM is whether or not— and this can be a weird conversation to have, but it's certainly, for me, a question of diagnostics— is, "Hey, are there enough hooks for those other characters?", right? Um, sometimes you'll have a player— and it sounds like you're one of these players, Gaia, and I think Jack and Art, you're both players who do this too, um, and I think, in our group, Keith is another person who does this— is like, "I can be the actor in

any given situation, whether or not my character has stakes, because I know the game needs an engine." Um—

JACK: Mmm.

AUSTIN: —and at this point I think everybody does it, but like, when I think about, when I think about going back to the beginning of, of Twilight Mirage, um, that was like a big thing. Was just like, again, this is not a drag on anybody, but it was like, "All right, if I my— if I as the GM have fucked up by not giving people things to care about, I can trust this set of a handful of players to like, do something anyway and find a story, because I fucked up."

JACK: Do something!

AUSTIN: Right. Um, and so, Gaia it sounds like you're one of those players. But, the GM should be producing hooks for the other players in the group such that they want to do stuff, they want to have opinions, they want to be drawn forward into action, they wanna lead action. Um, and if that's not happening, that suggests that their flags aren't being hit, that like, the GM is not necessarily setting up encounters around what those characters' interests are. Maybe the players aren't doing a great job of letting the GM know what those are, necessarily, but to me, some of that is about out-of-character conversation and about like, the degree to which sessions should be built towards the players at the table, and not just kind of like, "Here is a big story I wanna tell." Y'know? Art, do you have any thoughts on this? As someone who has like, explicitly, and you've mentioned this, gone from being this type of player to being a more reactive player?

ART: Yeah, um, but I don't know much about going the other way. Like, I—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Mmhm.

ART: I am just always fighting my impulse to be like, "And now we're all gonna do what I wanna do."

[AUSTIN laughs]

ART: Um, and like I guess that is the way, that is the thing I did to try to make other people do it more, is I just stopped, y'know? If—

AUSTIN: Yeah. Yeah. There's nothing wrong with that.

ART: [overlapping] If there's— if you get in a situation where like, I guess all four of you are just staring at each other, [laughing] you may need a different system, but like, you just trust that naturally, it will correct itself. It should.

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: 'Cause—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] And it probably will, right?

ART: If what you're really gonna find out is those other players just like, don't give a shit, and are just showing up to like, hang out, like, eh, we can hang out doing something else.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Go see a movie, play some video games. Like—

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: That stuff's good too. I'm, I am a big fan of tabletop role-playing games, but I don't think this is the only way you need to socialize or anything like that, y'know? Um, but also I get to play a lot of these games all the time, and so that need is being met for me, so I recognize that I am speaking from a very particular position. Um, all right.

ART: [overlapping] Absolutely, yeah.

AUSTIN: Y'all wanna keep moving?

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: All right, this one comes in from Tim H., who says:

> In my opinion, one of the most significant improvements from
> season 1 to 2, uh, or season 1 and 2, is that y'all started framing
> scenes as if you were directing a TV show/movie. Was this
> something you had done in non-recorded tabletop games and it
> just hadn't shown up as much in season 1? Cheers, Tim.

Um, I did it in non-recorded games, um, but I think the move into 2, the move into
COUNTER/weight, was something that encouraged that style of play because we started a—
me specifically as the GM was thinking about it as an anime from the jump, right? I immediately
was not thinking about it as a, me just kind of narrating events, and was immediately trying to
capture specific influences. Like, going back to— I mean, I think the very beginning of
COUNTER/weight, um, uh— I am now gonna check the transcripts. Shoutouts to the transcript
team, again.

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah! COUNTER/weight starts with a very specific camera shot, right?
Like, literally starts with a—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] That's what I'm— I'm pretty sure it does. And I think I know where— I,
I— it's stolen. [laughs] Uh, or it's at least like, shouting out a very specific— the, the transcripts
aren't working.

JACK: I mean, it's very rare for you to see a brand new camera move, and when you do you're
like, "Holy shit. What is that director of photography doing?"

AUSTIN: [overlapping] No, no, no, totally. That means— [laughs]

[ART laughs]

AUSTIN: Right, yeah, that's— and I am not that. Like, [laughs] that is not what I am.

JACK: [overlapping] No. That is Roger Deakins.

AUSTIN: [laughing] Right, exactly. Right, exactly. Um, is this not episode 1? What episode, when is— when does stuff happen in COUNTER/weight? I guess it can't be episode 1.

JACK: [overlapping] Oh, who the hell knows?

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: I— it's "I Would Like a Bribe" is number 1, right? Yes. Yes. Um—

JACK: I dunno.

AUSTIN: Uh, I'm— y'all, y'all answer this question while I start looking at stuff, 'cause I wanna show a very specific thing.

JACK: Um, it's shorthand for character.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Mmhm, mmhm.

JACK: Moving a camera around, framing scenes. Uh, it's also shorthand for taking opportunities to tell stories about spaces.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: Um, we— we can have a character come on and say, "The lizard-person kingdom fell many years ago when the water breached the so-and-so." And it's like, "OK, cool. We met the lizard-person boss." But we can just as easily have a, y'know, have a camera move as come through a broken wall, and we show, y'know, water pouring— I, I don't know why the lizards are afraid of water in this context—

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: —they're lizards. They'll be, they'll be fine.

[ART laughs]

AUSTIN: Well, wait, Jack, you know that lizards aren't fish, right?

JACK: Lizards? Lizards, they, um, they're like— they got fins, they got a big fin at the back, they go under the water, um—

ART: Lizards, or land fish, are—

[JACK and AUSTIN laugh]

JACK: Uh, I think, I think moving the camera lets us— also it lets us talk about relationships between characters—

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: —in interesting ways. Um, I'm thinking about scenes in Bluff City, where we're seeing Maggie Darcy, way out in her car, doing a stakeout, uh, as Finnegan and— was it Doyle? What's, what's Finnegan's friend called?

AUSTIN: Where? Oh, Doyle McKaye, yeah.

JACK: Yeah, uh, are fighting the bird.

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: And I think these are tricks that we, that we— I say tricks as though, as though it's a complicated, sneaky maneuver— I think these are aspects of storytelling that we got to because we like films, and we like watching films—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Yes. Yes.

JACK: —and we like playing games, we like reading books. Um, and all of these demonstrate storytellers who are interested in positioning either a physical camera, or, or a virtual camera, in interesting spaces in their stories—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —and we wanted to pick up from that.

AUSTIN: The— so, the opening of COUNTER/weight, after the character creation episode, and after our intro crosstalk, like, our con— our Clapcast intro, which is actually the very beginning of COUNTER/weight 01, is just us talking about other shit, like old radios— I dunno, we're weird— is me— the first words of it are, "The camera opens on..." Uh, so like,immediately, I was trying to describe something. And so the scene that is happening, the beginning of COUNTER/weight is like, I'm describing a planet, I'm describing, um, the, like, a, a set of Rigs, uh, of Riggers— wow, I guess I said "Rigs" in this. Weird. Uh, [laughs] "a set of Riggers with booster packs that are kind of all, like, checking their gear, y'know"—

JACK: [overlapping] Mmm.

AUSTIN: "The group takes a moment to check their gear and then shoots across the sky in wide arcs, slamming into the Blue Sky Dome with tactical precision, and then explosions, and then sirens. Uh, and the camera zooms in just a little bit closer to the dome, and the blue skies, and the clouds, and the glow of life. It flickers and fades, replaced by the pulsing red of emergency klaxons." That is the intro to that. And that is— I'm just gonna pull this over— it's not exactly this, but it's fucking close enough. Um, absolutely the opening to *Gundam 0079*, episode 1, and multiple other mecha anime, which is like, a group of no-name mechs like—

JACK: [overlapping] Sure.

AUSTIN: —you get a wide shot of a situation, and then you get a group of no-name mechs kind of like, floating towards the, the center of action, and they're going through like, some very basic stuff. And I knew I wanted to capture this specific— is this being captured on stream? Yes, it is.

JACK: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

AUSTIN: This very specific feeling of action about to happen, of like, "Oh, this is bad." No one— I don't need a narrator saying, "This is bad," necessarily, I just need to describe that in a way that feels, that has the cinematic power of—

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: —of looking at a big robot turning a dial, [laughing] so it can hop into a space colony. Um—

JACK: God, these Gundam [*sic*], uh, dropping onto the, the colony are just like, "Blonk!" They— there's no—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] God, it's so fucking good. They just—

JACK: They're ready to go.

AUSTIN: They just hit that big thing, look at— the eye lights up! Welcome to my brand new podcast, I'm Just Gonna Watch This Gundam Episode, um—

JACK: There's also, um—

ART: We're gonna get YouTube strikes. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Y'know, I'm gonna stop now. It's fine.

JACK: Um, uh, Winter [in Hieron] begins with an arrow hitting a tree—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Yes. Yes.

JACK: —which is just a very specific— I mean, what we're really talking about now is right, like, how do you edit scenes?

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: Uh, like, what does editing tell us about the scene?

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: Um, and, and opening on an arrow striking a tree tells us something very specific, um, about what is about to happen in this scene, and about the tone of what it is that we're about to do. Um, it gives us a leg up that we wouldn't otherwise have in radio.

AUSTIN: Totally. And it's not new, right? Like, people have been telling radio stories for a long time, and while they may not have used the phrase, "The camera does blank," they still use prose to describe situations, and to evoke visuals in the listener's ear, right?

JACK: [overlapping] Right! Yeah, yeah, yeah. But that said we could always do this better.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: We could always be framing— uh, was it Fraser [Simons] in Winter, who was like—

AUSTIN: It was— no, it was Hamish. It was Hamish Cameron.

JACK: We talk about this a lot—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —because it meant a lot to us, was, uh, Hamish went, "Uh, you're not describing scenes anymore. You're not like, describing visuals. Why?"

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah.

JACK: And we were just like, "Ah, shit, no, we're not."

AUSTIN: No, we're not.

JACK: Uh, so we started—

AUSTIN: And the answer for me is—

ART: [overlapping] We were sad.

AUSTIN: Yeah, right, we were sad.

JACK: Yep! Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Like, "Aw, Hamish. We wanna impress you. You made a good game that we like." Um—

JACK: We were also not describing scenes 'cause we were sad.

AUSTIN: That is also probably what it was.

JACK: [overlapping] Winter was a very difficult season to make.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Yeah. Yeah, it was. Well, and I think we were not describing scenes 'cause we were— because a move like I Love It When a Plan Comes Together requires me to go, "What the fuck does that look like?"

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Whereas a move like I Am the Law— not really, especially by the seventh time you've used it. I know what Hadrian's I Am the Law looks like, y'know? Which isn't a dig at Dungeon World, except in that Dungeon World is trying to evoke D&D. Like, it is trying to be a little more story-focused for sure, but like, it is a game with HP and with attack rolls in a, in a— and with damage rolls. Um, it is a game in which 7 HP means something in a way that just doesn't exist in the Sprawl, y'know? Um, and, uh— by which I mean, there is a sense of abstraction in Dungeon World, which requires us to do a little more heavy lifting. We don't have the, the leverage of a system that's already asking us to describe something, y'know? Um, and so— it's again something we need to be really conscious of? And I know I slip into it a lot, because like, we have very plot-heavy shows, and it's very easy to want to start to summarize and focus on, uh, broad picture stuff instead of detail. Um, and that's also OK. It's also OK to do that sometimes. Y'know, there are times when it is important to work in montage, and, and— but even then I wanna work in montage and not Wikipedia summary, y'know? Um, I think about the end of godspeed, glory [*sic*] in Twilight Mirage, where you score that really great segment, um— or you did that really great piece of scoring that's like nothing else on the Twilight Mirage soundtrack, Jack.

JACK: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, and that whole bit was this like, "I need to give a montage that feels like we're building up to something and I need to describe everyone in their place." Um, and that was so much better than like, me trying to just be like, "OK, and then, like, everyone's getting ready. Everyone's ready to go do a big thing." And instead it was like, built into a series of shots of people.

JACK: Mmm.

AUSTIN: And so, yeah. And I guess to Tim's other question, yes, it was something I used to do, but it was also not something I did as a player so much as I did as a GM. Like, maybe Art,

again, think about college age, college games with us. I think like, L5R had some shot-type stuff in it, right?

ART: Yeah, it's maybe it's, it's—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Or maybe I'm remember, remembering weird.

ART: I don't think as much, certainly, but it's, it's just sort of the way that, that we communicate kind of?

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

ART: Like, that's just the, the specific kind of nerds we are, that like, thinking about something in terms of, uh, of a shot from a movie or a TV show is like—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Right.

ART: —appealing to us, but we've certainly dialed it way up. Like, we were at, we were at a one and now we're at an eleven, y'know?

AUSTIN: Right. Yeah. You and I both come from families that care a lot about visual media. Right, I've talked about my dad, um, having me write up movie reviews on little yellow legal pads as a kid, or like, watching TV shows with my mom and my step-dad, and y'know, in both of those cases, there was a lot of like, "Whoa, that looks really cool!" Y'know, like, "What's going on there? What was your favorite shot in that movie?" or like, y'know, my mom shouting about the symbolism in a, in a shot from *Six Feet*, *Six Feet Under* or something, y'know? Like, that is the background we have, or I have, certainly, and I think everybody else maybe has their own different, distinct history with it, um, though we had— I had a really— [sighs] I'll wait until Ali and Keith are on, but we had a conversation recently that like, really befuddles me and is not a— we had a conversation about whether or not, whether or not it's possible to [laughs] imagine things?

JACK: Mmm.

AUSTIN: Uh, to imagine visual things, to imagine— to picture things, to specifically—

ART: [overlapping] Oh, that was— that was such a weird conversation.

AUSTIN: To specifically close your eyes and picture a red door with a brass handle and imagine it opening. And for me, that is a thing I can do so cleanly and don't what I— who I would be if I couldn't do it. Um, but apparently, that is not a universal ability, which is super interesting to think about, and it's so, it's so interesting that I don't even— like, it's not a, it's not a common conversational point to talk about whether or not you can do that thing. Um, and I am— have no idea why I can do it, but it is so much of any of the success of this show creating interesting visuals comes from my ability to do that specific thing for which I think I thank my parents, for constantly bombarding me with visual media, and making me think and talk about visual media as a kid. Um, anything else here? All right, I think we have two more. Nope! One more. This is it!

JACK: We made it!

AUSTIN: We made it! This one's from Morgan, and I don't have to talk at all, except to read this question, because it says, uh, Morgan says:

> This question is for Jack and Jack only, only Jack.

JACK: Oh, Jesus!

AUSTIN: [continuing the question]

> The music in Friends at the Table is some of my favorite podcast
> music, and I draw a lot of inspiration from it in the music I write,
> 'cause I'm also a composer. Aside from the stylistic influences that
> are tailored for each season, who are you biggest
> musical/compositional influences on the soundtrack of Friends at
> the Table, and what inspires the musical forms you use besides
> matching the spoken dialogue of the episode?

JACK: Um, I think my inspirations vary season, season on season. Um, Hieron— when we started Hieron, um, I knew that we wanted just this very sparse sort of autumnal, um, acoustic sound.

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: And, and I just took the instruments that I had available to me at that time, and was like, "Oh, it's this one and that one. There's a piano over there, and we have a guitar here." Um, and then as we started to do more Hieron, uh, and as I started to write more in it, I started looking at musicians like Owen Pallett, um, people who arrange live instruments in really interesting ways. Um, COUNTER/weight was, um— we talked a lot about trying to make a sci-fi soundtrack without leaning too heavily on synths, um—

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: —and, and I think we came close to work by people like Clint Mansell, um, who does incredible sci-fi soundtracks. Uh, he worked on some of the *Mass Effect* games, uh, he did the soundtrack for Duncan Jones's *Moon*, he uses piano in a really great way. Uh, and then Twilight Mirage is all synth-pop. You've got Tove Lo, and Carly Rae Jepsen—

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: —and Charli XCX, and, um, Sylvan Esso, who are—

AUSTIN: But you're basically not making pop songs, right, like what you're— is it a palette you're pulling from more of?

JACK: I mean, I'm thinking about— I wanted— I want, I want you to be able to dance to most of the stuff in the Twilight Mirage?

AUSTIN: Sure.

JACK: Um, and I think if I'm not getting that feel across, the tracks aren't working.

AUSTIN: Mmm.

JACK: But I'm not— I'm not following the same, um, 130 beats per minute—

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: —three and a half minute, like, pop song length stuff.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Mmhm.

JACK: Um, production in pop songs is so tight, and so well thought out, and, and I can't do that. In part because the length that we have to go in the tracks is so variable. Sometimes I'll be composing for a minute and a half, sometimes I'll be composing for five. Um, but I, I think if— in terms of just general influences as a composer, there is a Danish pianist called Niels Frahm, um, who is, uh, pretty inspirational all the time in terms of how I think about melody. Um, the piano that I use all the time is a digital version of a piano he built, um—

AUSTIN: It's like a specific piano, right?

JACK: Yeah! It's called an Una Corda, it's, uh— which means "one string"—

AUSTIN: Mmm.

JACK: It's a piano— so, generally in the piano, uh, each note is produced by a hammer hitting three strings. Uh, the Una Corda builds its hammers out of bamboo, so they're very light, and, uh, they only strike one string, which gives it this incredibly delicate, incredibly light sound. Um, but the action, so the, the, um— the physicality of the piano is balanced in such a way so that you don't have to really strive to get notes out? It's balanced really nicely.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Right. Huh.

JACK: I can play really loudly on it. Um, but if I want to I can, um— it has a very gentle sort of velocity curve, in terms of how much I need to put into it to get sounds out. Um, [pauses] Niels

Frahm. I think also just, um, I'm sure I've talked about this in the past, but I grew up playing carols and hymns, um, because there would always be a carol book, or hymn book on my piano? My mum plays the organ in a church, uh, just like the village church, plays the organ. And so I learned a lot about like, tone and harmony through listening to and playing carols—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Hmm.

JACK: —and hymns, these nice, simple melodies. But I think finally it's just, um, you work with the limitations you have, right? I don't have a lot of time to make this music.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah, that's true. You do a lot with very little time almost all the time.

JACK: [overlapping] And— [laughs] and, and I'm, uh, working with a limited palette of instruments, and I'm also working to episode audio, I'm trying to match the rhythm of how you're talking, Austin, or, or how player characters are talking. Uh, and so, I think a lot of the way I write music is because I'm having to write music for a podcast.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Uh, I'm having to work very quickly. I don't know if that's a super helpful answer in terms of sort of what inspires me? It's, it's more of a practical one, in that like, I look at how long I have to compose for, and I think about how I'm gonna do it.

AUSTIN: This seemed like less of a question for like, a tip in the, "How do you build a bridge?" sense, and more of a tip as in like, "Do you want a tip on the, on the, about like, a secret?", you know what I mean? Like a—

JACK: Yeah, yeah, like, do you wanna, do you wanna know a, do you wanna know a cool thing?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: What I'll say is, um, I cheat all the time?

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: I'm constantly cheating, I don't play any of the instruments as well as they sound. I just have to play them right once.

AUSTIN: Yep.

JACK: Um, I'll take— I'll do 60 or 70 takes on some live, kind of moments? Also, I'll cheat with Austin's audio, constantly!

AUSTIN: Oh, yeah!

JACK: The, the audio that you hear during music scenes has been messed about with so much. Um, starting from the simple, y'know, I, I add gaps, and I truncate other gaps, to the big, where we go, "Can you record this slightly different, Austin?"

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Um, so it's— you're very rarely hearing like, basic episode audio, uh, during those composed sequences.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Those— uh, Art, you and I were just talking about this while I was out there in LA, but there is definitely some like, "Actual play podcasts aren't really actual play," discourse in the, in the wind right now?

JACK: [overlapping Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, and this is the one place where I think that that's— yeah, uh huh. Totally. Like, of course. Like, we record— Jack is an amazing composer who records music and who messes around with the audio of my talk so that— or, of my, of my speech— so that it sounds better. Like, yeah, in that way it is not actual play. Um, though I will say, it is— we have never like, changed the outcome of a sequence—

JACK: No.

AUSTIN: —or anything like that?

JACK: We've done pick-ups, um—

AUSTIN: We've done pick-ups, but those pick-ups are like, "Oh boy, that speech I gave was wrong."

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, or like, was not up to, up to snuff. And most of the time, it's even, "This is the same speech but I've delivered it better." Or it's, um, "I've misgendered someone and I wanna fix that in post," uh, or it's, um, y'know, uh, I— "We've been recording for five hours, and it's, y'know, either I can do this in post—"

JACK: [overlapping, laughs] No one can do this.

AUSTIN: Yeah, no one can do this, right? Uh, though there are lots of exceptions to that. So like, I think all of the Twilight Mirage finale stuff, I don't know that we had many, if any, pick-ups there besides intros. Right? So like, [clears throat] any time it was like, one of the big debates, or the big final speech, like, none of that was, was pick-up. And that's why it's like, one of the things with the music, the thing that I love about what you do with it, is you're doing your best to emphasize what's already in an actual play sequence. It's rare— but not, but not, um— it's not altogether absent that the scene doesn't work without the music at the play level?

JACK: [overlapping] Oh, yeah.

AUSTIN: There are some key exceptions, where like, I wanna say one of my favorite bits, one of Ibex's speeches in COUNTER/weight, I was like— I needed you and Ali to convince me it was OK for it to not have music underneath it—

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah.

AUSTIN: —because I felt, I felt my ass all the way out there. Which is like, "If this speech is bad, but there's good music under it, it will be sold as OK—

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah.

AUSTIN: "—and if it's not, I will feel naked and stupid, and like my writing isn't good, and my delivery is bad." Um, but, we ended up pulling the audio out from under it— or you just like, you composed elsewhere instead, and it was much stronger for that.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, but there definitely have been moments where I'm like, "I think this just needs music, Jack. I don't think we have it yet," y'know? Um—

JACK: Well, I'll take notes while we're playing—

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: —of just like, "I need this scene. Please!"

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: Um, yeah. I'm trying to think if there's anything, there's anything else. Um, oh! Like, for a specific example, I very nearly messaged you for the most recent Bluff intro, Austin—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —to say, "Can you add three sentences to this?"

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: Um, because part of the way that Schubert track works, uh, I—

AUSTIN: You should explain what this is, because no one knows what you did for this, by the way.

JACK: Oh, OK, so—

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: —the track in the newest Bluff City is a sampled version of one of my favorite pieces of classical music. It is, uh, by Franz Schubert, it's composed in the late 19th century, uh, and it is his "Piano Trio in E-flat Major"— um, or it's one of the movements in his "Piano Trio in E-flat Major". And I've wanted to put this, I've wanted to get this, this incredible theme in a, in a, a thing I've worked on forever, and I finally found, uh, a recording of it, uh, by the European Archive, that we were able to use. But my favorite thing about this recording is it's kind of bad. It's been transferred from vinyl, kind of sloppily? Um, but even beyond that, the cellist who plays this incredible melody kind of screws up a couple of measures.

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: Um, not noticeably. Like, they, they just don't hit a note as hard as they should, or they don't, they don't make a differentiation in a great way. And as soon as I heard this track, I was like, [snaps] "This is perfect for Bluff. This is excellent."

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah.

JACK: So I mixed, uh, I mixed, uh, uh, a really, um— I took a dial tone and I screwed the dial tone up really spectacularly, and I threw some, uh, extra audio effects on it, to, to—y'know, to break it slightly further. But characteristic of Franz Schubert is that he doesn't like to pause with

his melodies. He'll, he'll work through a melody and then go seamlessly into another, which is beautiful, but I hate that—

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: —'cause it means I can't make a specific nice cut where I can go, "Right. Here we go." Um, so I very nearly contacted you, Austin, and was like—

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: "Can I just have— I'm gonna cut this to where I want the music to end, and I'm gonna send it to you and say, 'The monologue looks great. I love the monologue, Austin. Could it just be like, 15 seconds longer?'" Um, but in the end, I was a little more aggressive with cutting up your speech than I would usually be—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: —and I managed to spread it out. I think what I ended up doing actually, was I let the music play for slightly longer—

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: —before bringing you in. Um—

AUSTIN: Which works super well, and actually is a great aid to me, because I'm now doing the next one of those today, and it's like, "Ah, I have a little bit more wiggle room, with, with—"

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: Like, I don't— if I go a little longer, it's OK, and if I don't—

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah.

AUSTIN: —and, and also I don't need to go as long. The hardest thing I've ever had to write for, Jack, is the Twilight Mirage intro. Um—

JACK: Oh, god! Yeah.

AUSTIN: Specific— I think specifically Scum & Villainy, second half, because it was so— it's so long, um, and there are places where I could eject, but the places felt too early, whereas like, the Marielda intro is so tight that it's like, "Ah."

JACK: [overlapping] Right.

AUSTIN: And it could, and you could loop that one bar as many times as I needed to, but—

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: —y'know, I had a guide, a guide there that worked. And I think we go back and forth on this stuff every time, like, I will give too long of an intro, and you'll have to write to, or too long of a monologue, and you'll have to write for it, or vice versa. You will give me an intro and I'm like, "Fuck, how do I…" The, the hardest one ever is the A— I wanna say the Action Movie— no, what was before Action Movie World?

JACK: Oh, Jesus.

AUSTIN: The one that Blake Blossom does the intros for. Whichever one that was was the single hardest thing I've had to write an intro for. It was just like, it's such a beautiful piece of music, and I could not find the words to, to fit into the movements. But it's just like, I— it's still a joy, it's just a fun, creative challenge, it just really can be, y'know—

JACK: [overlapping] Yeah, and I think we've gotten to a place now where— and I'm so thankful for this— specifically you, Ali, and me working on production, where we are confident enough largely to make decisions and, and go like, "Yeah, this'll probably work."

AUSTIN: Yep! Totally.

JACK: Um, and that's super valuable, and I'm very grateful for that, and it lets us— it means that in these situations where we are stretched thinner, or where there is more difficulty in making these things work, it feels like it pays off really well—

AUSTIN: Mmhm.

JACK: — because we're like, "Ah! OK, we had to really pull together to get that one done, and we did it."

AUSTIN: And we did it. Yep! I brought my notes for *Anthem* the video game up on the screen again, and I think that is a signal that we should stop recording, and end this Tips cast. Uh, as always you can send your questions to tipsatthetable, uh, @gmail.com, tipsatthetable@gmail.com. Really appreciate when you do that, and ask us things large and small, we have a bunch of questions to still get through, obviously— I've done it again, bringing my notes from *Anthem* up— y'know what, let me just bring these up really quick.

JACK: Why are you doing this, Austin?

AUSTIN: 'Cause it's complicated. I'm gonna move them over here so they don't pop up anymore. I needed the browser, so I could go bring a thing up, over here, to myself, but, uh, oh— it doesn't matter.

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: What I was gonna say, while we have a lot of questions, it's always nice to get more, and it's always nice to get more that are like— it's a good, we— what I'll say we have a lot about group dynamics, we have a lot still about like, personal player stuff. I always like to get ones that are about particular games, or about particular moves, or about particular narrative set-ups or questions about that stuff, because those are just really fun to answer [laughs], that's a very selfish question.

JACK: [overlapping] Mmm.

AUSTIN: Um, uh, and we just don't have many of those. Uh, so if you have things around that, that's always great. Um, again, that doesn't mean we're not gonna continue answering those other questions, I'm just saying we have a bunch of those other questions to get through, and so, uh, just a note on that. I'm trying to think, anything else? Um, we're gonna try to do a live sometime this week, if we can find the time for it. Um, Jack do you have anything else?

JACK: I've been possessed by the ghost of Art Martinez-Tebbel.

AUSTIN: Oh! Hi, Art.

JACK: Who is, who is, uh— hello, Austin!

AUSTIN: Hi.

JACK: Uh, I'm alive and well in Los Angeles, but I had to dash early. You can find me on Twitter at @atebbel. Um, and you can listen to a podcast that I do sometimes. It's coming back in February, and it's about Kanye West.

AUSTIN: [overlapping] OK, wait, now, Art—

JACK: It's called One Song Only.

AUSTIN: We said we might record one in February.

JACK: It's coming— it's— sorry, I'm sorry. Look, it's difficult to possess someone across an ocean and get them to say the right thing at the same time.

AUSTIN: Which ocean did you choose?

JACK: Pacific! I went the other way.

AUSTIN: OK, OK, y'know.

JACK: Always wanted to see Russia.

AUSTIN: Nice. You see things when you're possessed? Have you ever been a ghost? [laughs]

JACK: Yeah, absolutely. [laughs] Have you ever been a ghost?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: I'm gonna relinquish control now. I'm Jack de Quidt, you can find me on Twitter at @notquitereal, buy any of the music featured on the show at notquitereal.bandcamp.com.

AUSTIN: Uh, I'm Austin Walker, you can find me on Twitter at @austin_walker, and I have a question for people watching. Do you see at the top of the screen where is says "Tips at the Table February 19 Google Slides Google Chrome"? I can't point to it because if I move my mouse, it will disappear. Why is it doing that? I got a new computer—

JACK: [overlapping] It's been there the whole time!

AUSTIN: It comes in and out depending on if my mouse is on that side of the screen. How do I get rid of it? How do I make it not do that without moving my mouse over there? Because I—

JACK: [overlapping] I like how it's kind of got that kind of old Windows style on the buttons.

AUSTIN: Yeah, I don't know why. I don't know what it is, I've been checking the entire stream where to get rid of— KB says I can't get rid of it. [pauses] F11. Let's go over there and hit F11.

JACK: F11!

AUSTIN: That's— that's not— one second. No, 'cause I want it to be full screen. I want— normally, I hit "present" and then it's just like this, and it's fine. And now it's doing this other thing. I don't know. Anyway, as always, you can also support us at friendsatthetable.cash, uh, we appreciate your support—

JACK: [overlapping] Oh, it's gone now!

AUSTIN: That's 'cause I moved my mouse over there. The second I move my mouse over there, it disappears. It's as if to remind me, "Oh, that's a window over there." [laughs]

JACK: [laughs] You found a window.

AUSTIN: I found one. So, if you're watching this, or listening to this later— well, if you're listening to this, this should just be cut. Don't put this in, Ali. Jack, we should time.is.

JACK: Let's do it. Um, OK. Gonna go to time.is.

AUSTIN: You wanna do, uh, 30?

JACK: Uh, half past?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Uh, half past by the second hand?

AUSTIN: Yep, my favorite character.

[JACK and AUSTIN clap]

JACK: Ok!

AUSTIN: Nice one.

JACK: Rad.

AUSTIN: Sounds good. Thanks as always for joining us, everybody—

JACK: Thank you!

AUSTIN: Uh, we'll be back later this week with some more fun stuff.

JACK: Bye!