

## Tips at the Table November 2021

Transcriber: anachilles#0191

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Austin: Welcome to Tips at the Table, an RPG podcast focused on critical questions, hopefully smart answers, and fun interaction between good friends. I'm your host, Austin Walker. Joining me today, Ali Acampora.

Ali: Hi. I'm Ali. You can find me over at @ali\_west on Twitter.com.

Austin: Jack de Quidt.

Jack: Hi, I'm jack. You can find me on Twitter at @notquitereal, and buy any of the music featured on the show at notquitereal.bandcamp.com.

Austin: And Janine Hawkins.

Janine: Hi, I'm Janine. You can find me at @bleatingheart on Twitter.

Austin: As always, you can find the show at friendsatthetable.cash — sorry, at friendsatthetable.net, and support us at friendsatthetable.cash. You know that already if you're here for Tips at the Table. Uh, as a reminder, or for people who maybe didn't see the tweet or read the description, we are so close to the end of Sangfielle now that I feel like doing a drawing maps episode about one of the final arcs feels redundant, when we are going to get questions about some of the big content therein for the post-mortem, is my hope and guess. And so, instead of, you know, taking those questions for drawing maps and locking them away here, it made more sense to me to do a Tips at the Table. It seemed like it made sense to everybody else, and so we decided to go back to Tips at the Table, which is just kind of the same show at this point as drawing maps in terms of Patreon bonuses. You may have noticed I said November 2021. We're getting there. We're catching up. We basically caught up on Lives, or we're nearly caught up on Lives, and we have a few Lives in the can. I'm probably going to say what the next Live at the Table is during this episode because of one of the questions that we got, which if you wrote that particular question, you now know what the next Live at the Table is. Uh, and we'll get there, I guess. So let's just jump into it. Uh, Janine, would you like to read this one from Rhys [Ris] or Rhys [Reese], I'm sorry, I don't know the pronunciation.

0:01:54.4 I've known people who spell their name that way and pronounce it either way. So, yeah, do you want to read this one?

Janine: Yeah. Hello, table friends. I keep accidentally playing the same character, despite different systems, backgrounds, worlds, and classes where applicable. More concerning, all my converging characters tend to be very accommodating, easy-going, and low on social/narrative conflicts, even when I try to hook them into the world and get them into trouble. They just seem to slide that way, and pretty fast. I think I'd have more fun playing if I got to play the messier versions characters that I try to set up. I'm sure parts of this — or, sorry — I'm sure part of this is my own personality and conflict avoidance IRL; working on it. But, any tips on keeping my characters distinct, letting them stir up trouble, and getting them tangled up with other characters? How do you all keep yourselves from slipping into habit, or how do you make that work for you? Anything, suggestions for starting a convo about this at my own tables? Many thanks.

Austin: Good question. I mostly GM these days, so I'm curious for y'all.

Jack: Yeah.

Ali: I feel like I —

Janine: I know you didn't —

Ali: Go ahead.

Janine: I was going to say, I know you didn't ask me to read this with any point...

Austin: No.

Janine: Is a thing that I feel.

Austin: Oh.

Janine: Like I, uh... I think it's just because, like, part of it is like, when you are up close to a character, you're really able to see all that stuff.

Austin: Mm-hm.

Janine: Uh, Ali, what were you going to say?

Ali: Oh, I was going to say I feel like I have a very easy [chuckles] solution to this. Which is, either going to your GM or another player and being like, “give me someone to disagree with.”

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Mm-hm. Yeah. Yeah.

Ali: [chuckling] And, like, even if it's just like, the one interaction with this person, you could at least get into the mode of like, oh, I'm going to have this arc with this, this character, that I'm going to not be accommodating to.

Austin: Does Brown and Jessett City come to mind, in terms of recent characters?

Ali: Sure. I mean, this is even, this is even, uh, Marne and Kercern, right?

Austin: Right, sure sure sure. Yeah.

Ali: Yeah. Where like, Marne's mostly, [laughing] Marne, Marne chewed people out sometimes, but like, was mostly a nice person, up until being like, “well, you're standing in the way of my goals —“

Austin: Right.

Ali: “And I'm sort of mad at you about the things that you're doing.”

Austin: But the difference is, you really wanted to fight with Jessett City, whereas I think what you wanted with... what you primed me, me making Kercern someone in your way was a surprise, because I wanted to complicate that. Whereas, I think you messaged me about getting into an argument with Jessett City like four times before it happened.

Ali: [laughing]

Jack: [laughs]

Ali: Sure, yeah, well...

Austin: Uh...

Jack: Yeah.

Ali: Be... your superiors, you know? [chuckles]

Austin: Uh-huh.

Jack: I think that, uh, yeah. Getting to... just that moment of antagonism, right, Ali? Like, even, it's like you said, even just one argument, being like, "all right, so this character is pretty easy-going and conflict-avoidant. I am deliberately going to try and stage a situation. And I find that in... [laughing] stage it more in talking to the GM than in the world, but that too, I suppose. Uh, but I find that when I am struggling, if I do sort of throw the character into deep water just once, I don't, I don't have to commit to it to be like, this is going to be a full-scale thing. But if I just get one argument or one moment of softness, with Pikmen as well, I sort of had the inverse of Marne, I suppose, where I was trying to pick moments where Pikmen would soften. And there's some of that coming up. And I think just these little bits don't feel like I'm making a big, you know, sort of groundswell shift in what the character is, but it does really help me sort of zoom in on these aspects of the character that I don't necessarily hit as often.

0:05:55.5 I think something else that has always really helped me is like, doing the classic old-school Dungeon World beliefs.

Austin: Mmm. Mm-hm.

Jack: Uh, where I think a lot about Hella's really excellent, like, "destroy something rather than try to understand it" belief. Which is, I'm sure you'd be able to speak better to how that felt to play, Ali. But I feel like you're sort of setting yourself a challenge, right? To be like, oh god, now I have to do this.

Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali: [laughing] Right, yeah, exactly. It's, it's good to use those things as a way of being like, "when I encounter a thing I'm going to do Y instead of X." And like, having enough of that, like, guidance can, you know, sort of be like a, like a, a crutch, almost. When you're like, "oh, I'm in a scene, and I sort of [laughing] didn't catch everything that was going on," or whatever —

Jack: [chuckling] Yes.

Ali: "But at least I like..." the compass points, you know?

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Did you find it — oh, sorry, go on.

Janine: No, go ahead. No, you.

Jack: Did you find, like, did you ever find it frustrating, playing Hella with that belief?

Ali: Uh...

Austin: [chuckles]

Ali: [laughing] I think Austin is laughing because he knows all of the time where I was like, no, Hella would be really nice to this person.

Jack: [laughing] And Austin had to step in.

Ali: [laughing] Or at least the one thing [laughing] that happened.

Austin: There was — I mean, yeah.

Ali: [cackles]

Austin: That's like, the fundamental moment on Hella, right? Is like, that's the —

Ali: Right, yeah, exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Austin: Figuring out who Hella is, and what the two of us mean by evil, in different ways, right?

Ali: Right, yeah.

Jack: Yeah.

Ali: And like, yeah, I don't know that it was frustrating as much as it was, like... I guess the repetition of it, of being like, well, I'm going to be the person in the scene who's going to maybe [laughing] fucking things up for the rest of the... the group, is sometimes a frustrating thing. But it's like —

Janine: Yeah...

Ali: A thing I'm willing to do, so...

Jack: Mmm.P

Janine: That's what I was going to say, is that like, I think a big part of this is like, not wanting to be the person who fucks the situation up. Uh, and I think.... You know, I think there are some situations where you can kind of trust that like, you know, this is a thing I have to tell myself sometimes, is like, the thing that decides an outcome, I have to remind myself that the thing that decides the outcome is often just the numbers. Uh, and the framing like, is the flavor of it, right? If I'm really rude to someone, but I still roll, like a still get a critical success, or whatever you want to call it, like, I still, I still completely nail that encounter, then it doesn't matter that I was rude. I'm still going to get the thing I wanted.

0:08:33.0

Austin: This is why I like Forged in the Dark so much, is because, uh, that gives me the tools — you can say you're going to be rude to somebody, and I can say, “and you're going to have lesser effect, because being rude is not the most effective way to get an outcome here,” right?

Janine: Yeah, like, it, so it depends on, it depends on the system. It also depends on like, the, the GM themselves, and like how — because there are certainly some Gms who are going to find ways to penalize you for stuff like that anyway, and I could see that like, kind of being difficult to work within. But like, there is always that fear of like, I want to play my character, but I also don't want to ruin this. I want to like, find the answer to the situation that I'm like really sympathetic to... I think my, like, actual advice here though is, uh, to... you know, the idea of the, the, the beliefs in Dungeon World was mentioned. And like, I think simplify it even more from that. Like, summarize your character's, not necessarily goals, but like... summarize the thing that defines their actions in one sentence. Like, with Adaire, not even like a belief thing, but what your goals are with them. Like, with Adaire, I set out really strongly to, with a desire to enable other people's bad decisions.

0:09:52.8

Austin: Mm-hm.

Janine: Uh, that was like the [chuckles], the like philosophy when I made her, was like, I want someone who would tell people to do bad things, for whatever reason. With Signet it was like, I wanted a character who cared for people.

Austin: Right.

Janine: I wanted a character that could demonstrate care for others. With Thisbe, I wanted to break things. Very simple. Just wanted to break things.

Jack: [laughing]

Janine: Uh, with Ess, I just wanted to be extremely, like, flashy. I wanted, I wanted a character that was just like, uh, [chuckling] a spectacle.

Austin: Mm-hm.

Janine: And like, having those things to sort of winnow in on makes it a little bit less distracting to try and like, manage every individual situation, uh, because you are always going to want to, you know, find the solution. You are always going to want to be a good member of the table, but like... you know, if you have that one principle to kind of come back to when you remember to, that helps, I think.

Austin: A thing that I really like... I have a lot of complex feelings about Heart, the City Beneath, after running it for a year. One of the things I like a lot is beats, and I actually almost wish that we had gotten into the habit of writing our own beats. I think that pulling them from the callings is really good, but I think about things that I've done as a player in the past, where I would say to myself, "hey, I've been playing this character as too much of a nice person. I'm going to go into the session and insult someone today."

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: As like, literally a note I would make myself when I was playing. I'm thinking about like a Burning Wheel game I was in, where I was supposed to be playing someone who was kind of pompous, and [sucks teeth] instead became very conciliatory, and I was like... no, like, that's not who this character is. Like, this character's name is literally Basil the Bastard. Like, and I like need to be playing a bastard, you know? And, both literally and figuratively. And, and I needed to like, remind myself of that. And so, I would literally write down small goals around that. You know, kind of the zoomed-in version of "I want to break things." Uh, and I think that it's worth giving yourself those little, those little mini-missions [chuckling] almost. And you can never know where a session is going to bring you, and you, you're never going to be sure that you're going to meet someone worth insulting, you know? But like, I don't know, I, I do this in terms of my NPCs, too. It's like, I go in knowing like, hey, this is someone who wants to hurt someone's feelings, and like, gets off on it a little bit.

0:12:30.2      Uh, and having that be very clear and not ambiguous or like, caught up in adjectives or character, you know what I mean? You don't have to write yourself a really intense description for who the character is. You can be very straightforward with yourself in terms of what you're going for. And, and if you can give yourself those kind of verb goals, I think you can, it'll help break away from, from your natural instinct. And also, here's the other half, here's the... devil's advocate a little bit. It's totally okay for tabletop roleplaying games be the place —

Jack: Right.

Austin: Where you are playing a... the same character every time. Uh, uh, but I do, if you feel really, in your heart of hearts, that you want to play messy characters, give yourself a scaffolding to try it. And, if you try it and you decide, "I miss being kind of the accommodating, easy-going person," then it's okay to let yourself go back to that. Don't beat yourself up over it. All right. Uh, Nicole writes in and says, "hello, table friends. I work at a small public library. As we were adding back programming — as we're adding back programming now that apparently pandemic restrictions are no more —"

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: "My coworkers have suggested that I lead a tabletop roleplaying game program. As with most new things that I have little experience with, the prospect makes me rather nervous. I've GMed very few games, and those have been with family and close friends. So, do you have any tips and/or game recommendations for GMing one-shots, especially any advice on how to keep games under two hours, and for playing with people who I don't know personally?"

Janine: Uh-oh.

Austin: Thank you, Nicole.

Jack: This is very funny.

Austin: What's — okay.

Ali: [chuckles]

Austin: Okay. What — let me hear the uh-oh first.

Janine: We are notoriously good at keeping things under two hours [chuckles].



Jack: Yeah!

Ali: [giggling]

Austin: That's very funny to ask us, yeah, it is.

Jack: This is like asking a dog, you know, "how do you not have any teeth and not go bark, bark, bark all day?"

Ali: [cackling]

Austin: The two things that dogs are defined by.

Ali: It's true, yeah.

Jack: Every single dog has teeth, and every single [laughing] dog —

Ali: [unintelligible]

Austin: Goes bark, bark, bark.

Jack: Uh, this is hard. It's, it's, this is tricky. Uh, and I'm trying to stop myself from giving my, like, standard recommendation forged in the fires of tabletop, which is, The Quiet Year is excellent and contains a lot of tools for guidance on how to do exactly this, right?

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Like, Avery has done a lot of work writing about playing tabletop games with people that you might not be super familiar with, and also providing structure within the game to stop it from getting massively sprawling, right? The quiet year has great rules about, uh, who speaks, when, and what the, what the... [laughing]

Austin: Sorry, I'm just laughing because we've never —

Jack: It's like we're parodying ourselves. I know.

Austin: Every, run The Quiet Year —

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: In anything like two hours.

Jack: No, no.

Ali: [laughing]

Jack: Not, not remotely. But I mean, I think my first thing would be like, look for games with very clearly defined, uh, sort of like an act structure, or a game that is like, all right, in this game you're going to play three particular scenes.

Austin: Mmm.

Janine: Oh...

Ali: [laughing] Austin's increasingly knowing "mmm"s.

Austin: What? What?

Ali: [laughing] it's like —

Austin: I, so I actually have — yeah. I think that the three scene thing works. I think there's ways to do that well. My instinct — I have two, two big instincts. One is, they're both about game choice and about prep. Uh, one is to pick something that is extremely simple for people who do not play these games, like Lasers and Feelings. Uh, or other very low-prep games.

0:16:13.8 Uh, uh, —

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: And, and with that also, like, have pre-gens, have character — let me, let me pause and slow down. My suspicion is, the sorts of people who are going to come to this are going to want to play games where they play a character who goes on an adventure. That might not be the case. Maybe the people who show up will be really interested in playing unique, contemporary story games, and that's rad. Uh, but I bet you can get people excited about Honey Heist very quickly, and get them on board with it very quickly, and start to develop a sort of skillset from which you can broaden out what types of games you play.

Jack: Right.

Austin: Uh, uh, so things like Honey Heist and Lasers and Feelings and other one-pagers are, I think, a really great starting point. Uh, if you're going to do something bigger, my — the second follow up for this is, to play something you know the rules of intuitively, and don't worry about teaching players all the ins and the outs. Uh, I have now run something like — you know, PBTA games and Forged in the Dark games, pretty focused.

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: Uh, with people who have not played those games, in ways where I don't have to do a ton of rule setup, I just help tell them what to roll when they tell me what they want to do. You know, I ran a PBTA thing for some people at my job recently, and managed to do that, a, a pretty, you know, full adventure in about 90 minutes. Uh, uh, a big thing that helped there was just, people made characters before coming. Uh, uh, and they it that by making three choices about kind of like, "hey, I'm from this place, I had this job, and blah-blah-blah." And frankly, I'd, I'd be within my rights to just have made those characters and let them pick from... hey, here's a blacksmith, here's a knight, here's a whatever, right? Uh, uh, but you knowing the rules and then not caring if you get them wrong as you move forward is a huge part of this. Not needing to stop to like, double-check how the grappling rules work, as it were. Uh, for instance, not that we're ever going to play anything where there's intense grappling rules ever, I definitely wouldn't, if invited to make a character in a complex, uh, uh, combat mechanics focused game, decide instead to make a grappling character and immediately grind everything to a halt. That's not what I would do —

Jack: Oh my god.

Austin: Uh... [chuckles] spoilers.

Jack: Now it's my turn to have a knowing — mmm.

Austin: Mmm. Mm-hm.

Ali: [chuckling]

Austin: Uh, but I really think GM knowledge here and flexibility, and then game choice, are just huge. Which, which isn't to say that you're wrong about like the three scenes thing, right? I think the idea of, of you having in your mind, hey, we're going to do scene one, and then, you don't necessarily have know what scene, that scene two will be a certain, definite thing —

Jack: No.

Austin: But like, having the like, we're going to be outside, inside, and then deeper inside. And I know it's basically —

Jack: And then, and then up in the space station.

Janine:[chuckling]

Austin: And then up in the space station, exactly. Will help quite a bit.

Jack: I think the other — oh, sorry, go on, Ali.

Ali: No, I, I was just going to say, there's also like a combination of those, those things which makes sense, which is like, if you're, to Austin's point of like, if you are only, uh, like introducing people to not all of the rules, but a specific set of rules —

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: If you have like, a very, like tightly sort of anticipated engagement, where it's like, “okay, I feel like I'm going to have to let them know about like, the rules about traversing over a place, or like, getting in this sort of fight. But not like the... if it's like Beam Saber or whatever, not like every single downtime move —

Austin: Right, right.

Ali: Or not, like, some of the more finicky stuff about like, your group or [laughing] you know, the, the like, faction that you work for, those sort of rules. Uh, and like, setting up the three scenes, quote/unquote, in your mind, is a good way of being like, oh, okay, how do I, how do I like, set up a map [chuckling] —

Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali: I've been playing Halo, so that's why I feel like I'm thinking of like, how do I set up this like, you know, structure in a world and be like, okay, I understand this enough that I can have people playing it very quickly.

Austin: And I don't want to undersell the idea of like, you know, the sort of-story game, the sort of itch style, or not itch style, itch doesn't have a style, it's just a platform where a style of games

has succeeded. But itch, and itch is a platform where you can sell that style of game, but that style of game has been made by people that don't work for itch, so I shouldn't, I shouldn't give itch the credit there. But when I think about like, you know, Augur, or Hawkers, games that, that, uh, Ali, you've been running on Live at the Tables in the past year, right? Like, those are games that you can get through in an hour. Those are games you can get through in two hours, right?

Ali: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

Austin: Uh, what was the... you can check out any time? That took us, I'm looking at the minutes — that's 205 minutes.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: So, no.

Ali: But I, I, I've, I've been cheating a little bit with some of the Live at the Table games, which is, where I'll find like a really interesting solo game with a structure that I really like —

Austin: Right, yes, yes.

Ali: And then be like, this is just a bunch of question prompts anyway, I can do this with my friends.

Austin: Yep. Yep.

Jack: Oh my god, guess who done it. [unintelligible] [laughing]

Ali: [laughing] Who done it is such a good game.

0:21:14.8

Austin: Right, and that's like 80 minutes or something, right? Or less than that, after intros, right? So...

Ali: Uh-huh. Right.

Jack: I felt like we just powered through that.

Austin: Yeah, totally.

Ali: [chuckles]

Jack: I think part of the reason that I also said three scenes, as well as, as well as invoking the kind of story game that we're talking about, is that I know that if I'm going to a library to hang out with people that I don't — you know, I'm, I'm thinking about the person who's not running it, the people who are attending.

Austin: Right.

Jack: If I'm going to a library to play a game with people that I might not know, and I might not necessarily be super familiar with tabletop games, I think that a bit of me might be overwhelmed by the GM saying, “we're going to do a story now.” Like, here we go, pick your — either pick up a character or play a character. Because, I wonder whether or not I would feel the impulse of like, “how long am I going to be here for?” [chuckles]

Austin: Right.

Jack: “What are we going to be doing, what is the framework in which we're going to be interacting?” So, the idea of showing up and being like, “this game is told in three phases.” You're going to be thinking about — you know, these, these — this is the beginning and end of what you're going to be thinking about. Because I think that part of the question here that is, is really worth considering is, is not only about making this, uh, accommodating for the GM player, for the, the question-asker, but also for the people who are going to be coming and playing this game —

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: In a, in a library setting, right?

Austin: Totally.

Janine: So, sort of to that point, we focused a lot on like, how to keep things short. But I'm thinking of, when I was a kid and I did a lot of these library programs, I like lived at the library for a little bit. Uh, not really. But, there's... [chuckles] there's a degree to which like the thing that we do can run long because we're all really close friends, and we all have all of these ideas that we feel safe sharing, and that we want to explore and things like that. But if I was a, if I was like 12,

and in a crowd of strangers, and I sat down at a table and like picked a character, I bet every answer I gave would be like, one line. And it would be stuff like, "I kick the box."

Austin: [chuckling] Uh-huh.

Janine: I ask the guy if he's seen my bird. Whatever. Uh... [laughing] there's a great story about —

Jack: Important thing to ask.

Janine: [chuckling] Uh-huh. So I wonder if, like, something to, to consider would be, as much as, as, as useful as it is to look at sort of short games, uh, to have something where there is a chunk of the story that you can put in, if you're running short, and take out if you're running long. Where it's like, "okay, well they need to find the amulet, maybe there's an antiquarian who was the amulet, but if we're running long, the amulet can be at the Berger's house." Berger like the role, not like the —

Austin: No, I'm pretty sure we mean hamburger.

Janine: [laughing] No, like a rich Hamberger. uh...

Jack: He's got the bird.

Janine: [chuckles] So something, something that like, also depending on the group —

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Like, if the group is a little bit cold and you kind of maybe want to wrap up early because it's not really going great, having something that you can sort of take or leave, drop in or out without things changing too much in terms of like consequences or stuff, might be something to consider. The other thing I would say is that, like, expect the first one of these to be rough, but also incredibly informative, right?

Austin: Yes. Yeah.

Janine: Like, maybe do a dry run with, like, find a group on roll20, like a lot of those tools are really robust now.

Austin: Honestly, do it with your coworkers. That, like —

Ali: Oh yeah.

Austin: Obviously, they will, maybe you'll know them better, but like, if you have, quote, very little experience, starting a little bit with people that you do — I can now run games with people who I don't know super well. Uh, I got interest because I've been running games with people I know really well, and have developed enough of a basic sense of survival [chuckles] that I can adjust for a new group fairly quickly. It's not the same, and you will trip on things. Like, the other hand of that is like, I can't — I, there are things I count on with y'all, because I've been running games with you now for seven and a half years, but I can't count on with a group of random people who I've never played with before. But I can always fall back on like, "what do you do?" A certain sort of cadence that I know is my GM cadence, and having that helps a lot. So, getting practice even with people you do know will help you get better at running it with people who are just going to show up to this program.

0:25:48.7

Janine:Mm-hm.

Austin: Don't feel bad about that, you know? And, and it's what you just said, Janine, which is like, the first one of these is going to be — it might not go the way you want, but you're going to learn a lot from it. [laughing]

Janine:Mm-hm.

Austin: Any other thoughts here?

Janine:Yeah.

Ali: Uh, yeah. One thing I just want to say before I move on, because this is such a thing that I respond to when I see it in games that are designed with it, is like, a prep thing that you might want to do if you're doing a more, like, story, or like character-driven game, uh, is having pre-genned characters, or at least, if it's a game with classes the way that we think of Dungeon World or Beam Saber or whatever, having either a couple of those sheets just pre-filled out with like, simple, like, appearance or like personality things that somebody sitting at the table could come to, or even just being like... okay, this is the version of a soldier who's like, this specific movie character versus this other one.



Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali: Uh, you'll see that or character sheets a lot, where it's like, you know, here's the witch class, and it was inspired by this specific witch from this — [laughing] I can't think of any examples — I guess like, oh, this, this which is like, Bewitched from the show, and this witch is like, from... why can't I think of any examples?

Jack: Kiki, Kiki, Kiki is a witch?

Ali: Sure. [laughing]

Janine: A witch from which?

Ali: [chuckles]

Janine: So we have Bewitched, Kiki, and the witch from Wicked.

Austin: And the witch from Wicked.

Ali: Yeah, true.

Janine: Done.

Jack: And the witch from The Witcher's —

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Right? Uh-huh.

Ali: And like, not, not everybody at the table's always going to have that same, like, media reference point. Uh, but I think that you could, you could choose sort of, big enough examples, or sort of feel out the table in that way of being like, well, when people come to the table and sit down, it's not a 40-minute long character-building thing, and then people wanted to play this game, it's like, oh, I guess you can come next week. [laughing]

Austin: Yeah, yeah. I also really want to emphasize the thing that like, for both of those, there's like a balance — both of those are two things in my head that I haven't said out loud. Uh...

Ali: [chuckles]

Austin: The first of those is, Ali, what you're saying, which is, heavy emphasis on prep that takes certain sorts of decision making out of the player's hands to help encourage them to jump right in, like character creation. The other hand is going back to what Janine had said before, this idea of almost a more modular uh, uh, you know, session. Uh, uh, which is a — that is an almost, uh, lower-case I, ideological, uh, choice. Uh... some people like to run games where everything is sort of being simulated, the idea that like, the secret information you're trying to steal already exists in the safe, and the, it's the only place that exists, and if the players fail to [chuckles], to crack the safe, they're not going to get that secret information, right? This is a, this is like, I know how I like to run games, but I'm also, uh, tolerant of the, of, I understand why someone might like a game run that way, right? I don't do it, uh, and I think for this, you really should lean into that style of play, and of kind of, uh, outcome resolution. Uh, you're really interested in, uh, not just, if you're really interested in that sort of, uh, simulated, completely almost like, uh, airgapped —

Jack: Deterministic?

Austin: Separated — predetermined, not even just deterministic. Deterministic is like, uh, for me I draw a line between deterministic and predetermined in weird ways we don't have to get into here. Uh, but yes. [chuckles] Uh, uh, way in which there's only one right way forward. You're going to run into trouble where, you might finish your content too early. You won't have that extra bonus thing that Janine is talking about ready to go, because you, you did all your prep and it's already there, and it all just runs the way it's supposed to run. Uh, and vice versa, if they run into, if they can't seem to make forward progress, they're going to get to the end of the two hours and feel like frustrated that they didn't get any forward progress. But if you can put that secret information that's in the safe into a thug's pocket, or into a loose floorboard that they decide to check out, or into a computer because they're hacking, they've decided to hack instead of try to break the safe open, if that thing can float around, and what they're rolling for is not cracking the safe but finding the information, suddenly you get a lot of flexibility and can quick, quicken things up in you need to, or broaden them out if you need to. Uh, it's one of the reasons why I think, and again, the example of us doing, actually doing this, is the blades in the dark GenCon game, where we literally did a full session in two hours. Uh, and obviously that was us like, characters were made already, everybody knows Blades in the Dark. I'm not saying that's an easy thing to do. Though of course, John Harper, of course, runs multiple scores in Blades in the Dark in a single session.

0:30:52.8

Jack: No he doesn't.

Austin: He does, he — I've seen him do it.

Jack: [laughing]

Austin: It's remarkable.

Ali: [giggling]

Austin: Uh, it's just a different style of play than what we do.

Ali: I know someone who said they've seen him do it. [chuckling].

Austin: I've seen it!

Jack: Yeah! Austin's seen him do it?

Austin: I've seen him do it!

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: He streams! He'll stream running Blades. You'll see John Harper —

Ali: [laughing]

Jack: Don't believe you.

Austin: It's wild, it's just a different style of play.

Ali: [laughing] [unintelligible] that I know would say — [giggling]

Austin: Ugh. Anyway. It's doable, and I think playing games like Blades, or games where you're not trying to, or running games in a way in which you're not trying to perfectly simulate the world, and perfectly have that sort of factual outcome, and instead let yourself lean into that modular design, where an entire room can disappear from the castle. They don't need to pass through the dungeon. They can get to the treasure room without going through a dungeon. It doesn't — dungeon doesn't need to be there, you know? They already got through the vault room.

Jack: A secret door has opened! [chuckles]

Austin: Exactly. [laughing] Exactly. It doesn't even, it doesn't even need to be a secret door. The stairwell can lead right there. It's fine, you know? You have 15 minutes left? It's fine. Uh, no one will be hurt because you've erased them from your prep so that you can hurry things along.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Uh... so, yeah. That's my, that's our advice. Uh... let's see, what's this next one?

0:32:10.0 Ah, Jack, can you read this one?

Jack: Yeah, uh, this is from Ethan, and Ethan says, "Hi all. Recently I've been running a game of Lancer, and it comes pre-packaged with a really fantastic world. However, I'm not super used to playing it in an established setting, and I found that it kind of gets in the way of some of my existing instincts, like asking the players questions and making use of the answers, especially when I've played myself into a corner of using existing and well-known factions, like the Trade Baronies and Harrison Armory." Ah, Harrison Armory. "Suddenly, I get the sense that I can make an incorrect call that can break the consistency of the world, and that the players, who are well-read in the setting, might take notice, even if they would never be rude or inconsiderate about it. Does anyone have experience playing in existing settings, and if so, how did you make room for player creativity, and keep things fast and breezy? Thanks so much, Ethan."

0:33:06.4 This is a good question.

Austin: I, I had, I had a conversation about this today.

Ali: [chuckles]

Austin: So I thought it was extremely funny —

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: That Ethan writes this in. We also, and I'll just say this outright, we did just record a game of Lancer. Uh, Dre was an excellent GM —

Jack: Fantastic.

Austin: I'll be releasing that in the feed over... it's a long game. It's extremely funny to answer this question immediately after the "can you run a game in two hours" one.

Janine:[laughing]

Jack: No, we can't.

Austin: The answer is, no.

Jack: Don't play Lancer.

Austin: But I really am excited we were able to meet us and our Mechs, Jack. We've made some truly fucked-up machines. Uh...

Jack: God. We made some real doozies.

Austin: Yes. And we, of course, did not play in the Lancer setting. It's par the Road to Palisade. Uh, we played in, in our own setting, and, and Dre did a really great job of finding new places to, uh, to, uh, you know, they, they, they added a bunch of really great stuff to the setting in a way that was really fun to see them kind of take ownership over a little bit of something, a little corner of, of the Principality. Uh, so that's, so look forward to that. But, I'm really curious, for those of you who have done a lot of, uh, you know, roleplay inside of other fictional worlds, uh, how this has felt. I've done some, but I'm curious, uh, for, for, from y'all to begin with.

0:34:23.7

Janine:[chuckles] It's funny, because we were talking about this today.

Austin: That's what I said, yeah. Uh-huh.

Janine:Yeah. [laughing]. Uh... but, you know, like a relevant, I mentioned this before. It's not a thing that like, ran for a long time, but like, very briefly, I was running a, a game of the, the, the Dragon Age tabletop game based on the Fantasy Age system, for some friends. And one of those friends [chuckles] was someone who like, runs a relatively prominent YouTube channel focused purely on Dragon Age lore.

Jack: Oh, wow. That's —

Janine:Uh...

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Scary, honestly.

Janine: So, like, no, no pressure there.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Uh, she was great. It was never a problem. Uh, the thing that would happen sometimes, and I think this is just like, the tone that we had — this wasn't like a thing I remember deliberately establishing. I think in hindsight I would have, at the start of it, been like, “hey, how do we want to handle mistakes in lore, and like, supposing things?” Because like, we want to have fun, but like, also some of this stuff is established, and it's established in — specifically the campaign I was running took place in the Free Marches, which is an area that like, in the games, is really prominent in Dragon Age 2. You get a bit of it in Inquisition. But there's a lot of it in the comics, and I have not read the comics yet.

Austin: Mmm.

Janine: So, and I, I had like specifically picked a town, uh, that didn't have too much going on in the way of comics, but it did appear. Uh, and so there was, there was some things where it was like [sighs] I'm just going to want to tell the story that I want to tell, and some of these things might end up wrong. I'm going to do my best, uh, and I was playing with people who thankfully like, when questions like that came up, we could just sit and ask and be like, “do we know if this is true? Or blah-blah-blah.

Austin: Mmm.

Janine: Uh, it doesn't help you all in terms of prep, which is why I say, like, it's probably worth having that conversation of like, “do we want to just kind of play it fast and loose?” Because like, the lore police are not going to come and find you if you say —

Austin: [chuckling]

Janine: That something is different than the way it is in canon. Likewise, if you find out you were wrong about something, in a lot of cases it's not, unless it's like, something really pivotal happened, you can fudge it and like, change it a little bit. No one's... unless you have a player at your table who's like really hardcore about getting everything right the first time, uh, I feel like it's

okay to make mistakes. And also, to consciously change things. Uh, especially if you have that like, vibe with your group.

0:37:11.6

Austin: Yeah, that's, that's always going to be, my answer is almost always going to be have the conversation, right? Uh, if you go to your players and say, "Hey, I know y'all know this setting better than me, in many ways. Or you, you know parts of it in ways that I don't. And I'm actually kind of anxious about that. So, you know, let me know if, if we diverge too much on something that's really important. Uh, uh, hit me up after a session and be like, hey, actually this other thing is, da-da-da-da-da, if you think it really matters. But I'd also just love to be able to elbow out our own room here, and, and, you know, maybe diverge a little bit from the source material where it's fun for us. I, I suspect, I hope, that the players would understand you being able to ask them that. Uh, and in fact, you might find that some of them are eager to make their own changes to the, to the canon, and, maybe, you know, introduce some ideas of their own.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Uh, I definitely think that you should, if you have to err in one direction, err in the direction of continuing to ask them, you know, uh, questions and using the answers. That to me is always going to be more interesting, and, in fact, it feels like it's in line with your general hope of being able to leverage their interest in setting already. So, if you ask them something [chuckles] like, how, you know, "What's a Trade Barony ship like on the interior?" Some of them may already know the answer to that, in, in, from, from, you know, concept art, and from book, you know, from, from lore in the looks of stuff, uh, and be able to use that to help, you know, fill in the gaps of your own knowledge, in, in, in terms of playing in that canon setting. Uh, and in the cases where they don't know it, they'll come up with something, and you'll get to run with it, and that'll be fun, so.

Ali: Yeah, that's —

Austin: Ali, it sounded like you were going to say something. Oops, sorry, go ahead.

Ali: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's, it's good to attach the end of that, because like, what you're saying is important in that like, uh... god, I really lost it. [laughing] Where like, uh, you know, it, it, you shouldn't think of the, the, the, world that already exists as a way of limiting the conversation.

Austin: Mmm.

Ali: If the people at your table have interest in it, like, you should be asking those questions. And especially at that like, pre-meeting, uh, I mean, this didn't, this isn't 100 percent the way that it was in Sangfielle, but you can hear that sort of manner of talking in Sangfielle, because what we did for that was, you know, I don't want to say people have like ownerships of, of, of factions or whatever. But like, if you had a question about a train, you would ask Jack about it.

Austin: Yeah, I think that that's 100 percent.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: I, I would say that you had ownerships of that stuff, to —

Ali: Yeah. Uh...

Austin: Like, I would hope that if I had said... well, obviously the Shape — the Shape Knights are all... they, they also, uh, they use the train parts to brew beer. And Jack would be like... "That's not true. They don't have enough Shape parts to do that." I would then go like, "Okay, yeah, well, you know, I'll figure that out. They don't use Shape parts then, you know?"

Jack: [chuckling]

Austin: Or whatever it is.

Jack: They caught the beer train!

Austin: They caught the beer train. Hey, everybody —

Jack: They've killed two trains. [unintelligible] the big one.

Austin: Spoilers for Sangfielle season two, it's all in the beer train.

Jack: It's in the beer train.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Uh-huh.



Ali: But that also brings me to my second point, which is like, the moment that you start playing that game, it is not the world anymore —

Austin: Yes.

Ali: It is your world.

Jack: Oh yeah.

Ali: It is a shared world that you're having with these people. So like, maybe the Trade Barons in the game is run by this guy who's like really stern and ruling with an iron fist, and then you play the first session and he fucking dies, and his son is in that place, right?

Austin: Right.

Jack: Yeah.

Ali: And like, suddenly that faction's like, impulses and priorities will change. So like —

Austin: That's roleplay, baby.

Ali: Right. Yeah, the, the act of playing is going to change the things on the page that like, try to internalize that enough to like, quell the anxiety [chuckling] inside you, I guess. Uh...

Janine: There's also, like, the, the thing of like, well, what does the average — oh, what was the earlier example? Trading — why do I think trading frigate? Was that a thing?

Austin: Sure. It was the trade, a Trade Barony ship interior, is what I was talking about.

Janine: Yeah, so yeah, so — there's, there is the question of like —

Austin: Yes, yes.

Janine: What does the inside of these usually look like, versus, what does the inside of this specific one look like?

Ali: Mm-hm.

Austin: Mm-hm.

Janine: And that specific one can be —

Austin: Can be whatever.

Janine: Whatever.

Austin: Because none of this stuff is —

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Monolithic, right? Uh, there's always an exception to the rules. People are always, you know, eking out some variation on the norm. Uh, also a thing that Janine, when we were talking about this earlier, one of the things that you talked about that was enjoyable about playing in an established setting for you, was about, wasn't about replicating the setting. It was about finding what, from an established canonical, you know, setting or relationship or character dynamic, whatever that was, uh, uh, you know, appeals to the people you're playing with, and, and honestly, shifting things towards that direction, you know? We were playing in Lancer, for instance, in the core Lancer setting. One of the things that I find fascinating about the setting are the ways in which, despite the way the book is written from the perspective of the Union, this, this huge kind of post-capitalist society, it's real fucked-up and weird that like, three big mega-corporations are still at the heart of the power and politics of that world.

0:42:25.3      Uh, and, the book isn't written in a way about how like, it's not, it's not overengaged with the question of the, the hypocrisy of the Union. If I ran a game there, it would be like running a game in OriCon where it's really interested in the hypocrisy of this workers' movement that nevertheless seems to be operated by a bunch of NeoCon like —

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: And Neoliberal corporations. Or at least where they have huge, in, in, you know, input. Uh, uh, and so I think like, making that world — and that wouldn't be because that's the canonical version of Lancer's world. That would be because I'm interested in that, and I suspect my players would be interested in playing some of that stuff out. Uh, but finding what the rest of the people at your table are interested in. Because even the fact that you're telling a story about Harrison Armory and the Trade Baronies, means that you're zooming in on, and going to get closer — it's like, you're going to be playing in higher resolution than what's available in any source book. You are going to be seeing more of that world, more closely, than anything any

source book could tell you. Uh, and, and leaning into that and kind of deciding as a group where you want to not represent, but explore, I think, ends up, will end up facilitating a lot of, of great, uh, investment, you know. I hope I didn't misrepresent what you were saying for a little bit, Janine.

Janine: No, I think you're dead-on. Uh... yeah, I... yeah, everything you said.

Austin: [chuckles] Uh-huh.

Janine: It's, you know. When you find out what you're interested in, you can, you can narrow down in a way where like, the detail isn't already pre-defined, and you can, you can have a lot of fun.

Austin: Yeah. All right. Good luck. I hope it goes well, Ethan. Uh... Ali, do you want to read this one, from Esoterica?

0:44:15.7

Ali: Uh, yeah. "Hello. I am the designated GM of my friend group, which I don't mind. I love world-building and playing the part. But I've found that I have difficulty retaining interest in whatever genre slash setting slash game we're playing with. I am always impressed by y'all's year-long or more campaigns, and I'm super curious how y'all stay excited about your characters slash the world slash et cetera."

Austin: We've gone over a year, was Mirage, was Mirage over — I guess it was, it was 63 episodes, huh?

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: 60... no, 67 episodes? 68 episodes, because we didn't do 69 because I thought it was corny.

Ali: [sputters]

Austin: Uh... yeah, that was over a year. That was June 2017 until September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018. That's like, that's a long season in a way that transforms itself. Which I think is part of my answer to this.

Ali: Mm-hm.

Austin: Which is, uh, I don't know. I think I'm real fickle [chuckles] about this, compared to many.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Like, a lot of other actual play shows go for years before changing settings, you know? And I —

Janine: I mean, you — [chuckles] you... at the end of like every season, at least that I've been involved in at this level, you definitely get into a phase where like, you have figured it out and you are done. For the most part. There are exceptions.

Austin: Partizan was an exception, I think, compared to Sangfielle and... Spring.

Janine: Well... Partizan, I remember the thing that happened was that, rather than — [sighs] so normally, it's, it's like you've figured out this, the puzzle and you're ready to move on to the next puzzle. Uh, I remember with Partizan, it was a thing of like, you were skipping a puzzle. You were, you were ready to move on to Palisade.

0:46:05.8

Austin: Yep. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Janine: [chuckling] You weren't, you weren't like, ready to move on to, to Sangfielle. It was like, well, we've got to figure out Palisade.

Austin: 100 percent. No, I mean, I will always — that, Sangfielle is the hardest season I've ever made. And that's like —

Janine: Mm-hm.

Austin: Twilight Mirage was very hard. Winter was very hard. Sangfielle I was done with, I, we didn't — we will talk a lot about this in the post-mortem, I suspect, or I will rant about it. But I don't feel like I did adequate, uh, pre-production. I didn't have time to do the pre-production I liked to do. Because, uh, of where, where the world was, and what sort of, where my mental health was, and where my, how my job was changing and all that other stuff. Uh, uh, so, yeah. I, I didn't have with Partizan, in fact, was still really loving Partizan when we finished, but did not

have that lead-in time on Sangfielle. And, I think by midway through Sangfielle, like, I feel like, if we, if I checked the tape, you know [chuckles], if I looked at our chat, I bet I would find, after Saphodia, I was like, "I think we're done. Are we done?"

Ali: [giggling]

Austin: Which, of course, now was 20-some episodes ago, right?

Ali: [laughing]

Janine:[chuckles]

Austin: Uh, and I, and like, I, the, my point there isn't, "And I was wrong, we still had so much to go." It's that, I don't think this is a unique issue. I don't think that you're weird for having this issue, Esoterica. I also totally have it, and deeply struggle with it. Like, I'm... now that we're done recording Sangfielle, I am happy with it. Uh, but I you know, everyone on this call will tell you, I spent about 4 months being loudly miserable [laughing] about it. Uh...

Jack: And, and then we all, all together we had to figure out what to do, at the same time, right? It's like —

Austin: We sure did, yeah.

Jack: I think, I think part of the reason that we are able to keep making the stories is because [laughing] it's our job.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine:Yeah.

Jack: Which isn't to say that they're not enjoyable to make, or that, that we don't find joy — like, I don't know, there was some stuff in the last recording that I did with Pikmen that is some of the weirdest, most interesting stuff that I got to —

Austin: Oh, I love the finale.

Jack: Do in Sangfielle.

Austin: All of these finale episodes are fantastic. I love them. I don't want to say that like, I want to be clear that like, I'm very happy with where we ended up. Uh, but...

Jack: But.

Ali: We had to get there. [laughing]

Jack: Oh god, we had to get there. We had to — [laughing] we had so many meetings that I can only describe as circular.

Austin: Uh-huh.

Jack: [chuckling] Uh... but yeah, no, like, I think part of the question is like, how do you do it? And the answer is, this is the show we make. We, we have to finish the story. Uh, we, we have to get to the end of it, in a way that makes us feel like we are at least mostly satisfied with it. And part of that is just opening the door repeatedly to be like, "Are we there? Is this it? How do we get it closer to the thing we want it to be?" Uh... but in terms of just like, searching for the thing, I don't know. I don't know whether or not... I think even within Sangfielle, Austin, you are always pretty good at drip-feeding things throughout a season that are interesting for us to interact with. I don't think I've ever made a season where I have gotten three-quarters of the way through and been like, "Well, I'm not interested about what Austin's going to show us this time."

0:49:21.5 Uh... I, I think that, uh, whether it's just the way you plan individual arcs, I remain surprised and invested in what bits of this world I haven't seen yet. Uh, and I know that we will always be able to find more of them, until we get to the point when we go, "All right, we're putting this show down for the year."

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Uh... but I do get sick of my characters, definitely.

Austin: Uh... I think that, yeah, yeah. The thing that I think we do often is reinvent the show halfway through a season.

Jack: Oh, every single [laughing] fucking time.

Austin: Or, or stop a season early, right? Like the, the, uh, the, uh... Hieron seasons are short, compared to every — to all the Sci-Fi and, and to Sangfielle, right? Like, Winter is 29 episodes.

Spring is obviously longer, it's 44 episodes. But it's not... it's not 68 episodes, or 67 episodes like Twilight Mirage was. It's not the 47 of Partizan, you know, plus the Road, you know? Uh, and Sangfielle, when it's all said and done, I guess, I'm guessing [chuckling] still —

Jack: [laughing]

Austin: Will be 56 episodes, right?

Jack: Stay away from numbers and dates.

Austin: Uh, plus [unintelligible] yeah. 100 percent. They're torturous. Uh, uh, but like, you know. Those first two Hieron seasons are short. They're under 30 episodes each. Uh, and that was because I was getting bored, uh, in both of those cases. And I felt like we had a natural conclusion. And we could have done that in COUNTER/Weight. I almost stopped COUNTER/Weight at, at An Animal Out of Context.

Ali: Mmm.

Austin: Like, truly. We almost did, we almost did that arc — uh, or maybe we, maybe we almost ended it, yeah, no, I think I almost ended it there. I remember recording the end of that episode and being like, “Well, that's it, everybody. I don't know where we go from here that —”

Jack: [laughing] Wrap it up!

Austin: Because like, in that, at that point we had not come to this dynamic of shows like COUNTER/Weight being standalones, right? Uh, and so I remember recording the... I believe it's that. Maybe it's the end of the Kingdom game, actually. I think it's the end of the Kingdom game. I remember recording a sequence where, uh, uh, a character is walking among a group of people, uh, or maybe that is the end of, of An Animal Out of Context. Uh, I don't quite remember. Anyway, uh, uh, one of the two of them. Uh, yeah it is. It's the end of An Animal Out of Context. There's a speech that Ibex gives. And I remember leaving and being like, “Well, we're done. There's no way that I can top that this season. Like, I, I — y'all might be able to, but I don't have it.” Uh, uh, I pushed through it. But, we then kind of reinvented the show in a real way, because the second half of that show, from the back half of it, ends up being like, one big weird arc, and then a fin, a very weird finale. Twilight Mirage, we changed systems halfway through, you know?

0:52:13.9      Uh, and I think even Sangfielle, we get halfway through, and then it shifts from being the episodic horror show to having a little bit more of a metaplot, to being focused, increasingly focused on character, the splits between characters and what they believe. There's way more focus on things kind of falling apart with characters. Uh, and so I think that like, finding a way to reinvent what you're doing, I think it remains a — even Partizan, right? We, we do the big, the big Kingdom game in the middle of Partizan, and the second half is different, in terms of, in terms of who's playing with who, and character dynamics and all of that stuff. Goals, uh... so, I, you know, I'm, I'm very much pro, “Hey, let yourself reinvent the thing. And let yourself take breaks.”

0:52:58.2      Uh... it's hard if you're the only one wants to take a break as a GM, and everybody else, like, wants to keep playing their characters. Uh, but you're so within your rights to be like, “I need a time, some time away from this. Can we, can we do some one-shots in another setting, or can we do, you know, can we just literally take a break and come back in a, in a month, in a month or two? I just want to like, get my brain into a better place,” you know? I think that's all within, within the realm of, of acceptability. And also you're not making a show, and you shouldn't act like you have to make a show, you know?

Ali:      Yeah. It feels like, yeah, that, that's the honest thing is that, we've like created these vents for ourselves, because we, we sort of understand the, the rhythm of the way that we like to play games, I guess? Or the way that we like to like, construct-stories.

Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali:      Uh, but like, even in like a smaller friends group, in the like [sighs], you know, in being in the situation of the GM and seeing that your players have a lot of enthusiasm, again, the, the, the, you know, advice of have the conversation, but like, of, of like, of you as a GM sort of losing the enthusiasm of seeing the, the, the, the, the home run of this, right?

Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali:      With the stretch, with the second half of this, is like having a conversation with your players in terms of like, “Well, this is what I want the arcs to be.” And, you know, when we talk about, uh, the Kingdom game, or An Animal Out of Context with COUNTER/Weight, I, I feel like me being like, “Oh, well Aria's going to be this like political figure now,” is, is enough of like, a light to sort of [chuckling] go to the structure of the, the second half of that game. And if you



have an idea of some of like, the longer beats, some of your players might want to get to, you might find that like, “Oh, I can build that path and we can have fun doing it, because the thing that I like to do is build that path.”

Austin: Right, right, totally.

Ali: Uh, the other thing is, in terms of doing one-shots is like, even if you want to change the game structure a bit, even if you find that like, your players have like, excitement about this like, very specific faction, or this, you know, this one session that you did, you can do the thing of like, oh, well let's play a different game in this setting. Uh, I think, you know [chuckles] this is a weird example, but when we return to the snowy Live at the Table fantasy doll-making town —

Jack: Oh yeah!

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: In like a different [chuckling] system entirely, like, that was, that was fun and it was refreshing, and it was like, the joy of being in a place that you're familiar with, and like, that mode of thinking, without being like, “Well, I don't want to go back and play that game again.” Because we had a good session with it when we played it.

Austin: Mm-hm. Yeah, like, I, I definitely think that you can, you can breathe a lot of life into a setting by exploring it in different games. I think that that can totally be a sort of, uh, jump start for you, you know? Uh, revisiting Marielda all the times we've done. You know, we, we, we've done I think probably two or three other games in Marielda, besides the main Marielda campaign. Yeah, I guess it's three. Because we did, uh, the holiday special in Winter, uh, where we played, what did we play? What was that? Was that also Kingdom?

Jack: We played that game about the... no, it, it — [unintelligible] shit, was it —

Austin: Was it Follow?

Ali: It Winter you did a —

Jack: Was it Kingdom?

Austin: It was Kingdom or Follow.

Jack: No, it was Follow.

Austin: It's a Ben Robbins game, it was Follow. Yeah. About the...

Ali: Oh.

Austin: The uh, the little, uh, uh...

Jack: The market? The market square?

Austin: The marketplace, post, post-Marielda.

Jack: Was that Kingdom?

Austin: That was Follow.

Ali: Oh, right right right.

Austin: Ben, Ben, Ben Robbins' Follow. And then we did, uh, uh, not miserable — Miserable Youth? Something youth. Misspent Youth, as a Live at the Table, about, about teens [chuckles] in, in Marielda.

Ali: [chuckling]

Austin: And then we did the GenCon oneshot, which was Blades again, but it was still a different — it wasn't the same full set of people uh... and revisiting Marielda each time we've done it in that way has been really a fun way of like, seeing that setting again. Uh... and obviously, I don't think we're, I don't think we're going back to Marielda for a full season.

Ali: [giggling]

Austin: But every time we go back to it as a little, a little breath of it, has been really fun, you know? Uh... any other thoughts here? All right. Uh, I think we're back around. Janine, do you want to read this from Andrea?

0:57:29.5

Janine: Yeah. "I remember y'all have talked about this a little before, so maybe this question was already addressed and I need to go back it and listen to that Tips episode. But I was struck at

how Austin introduced his Sister Maritia praying in the temple — sorry, in the chapel — how much the NPCs in Sangfielle feel like Dark Souls NPCs in their quirkiness, and how you just find them chilling somewhere unexpected, and I love it. But I love it because Sangfielle is a setting where Dark Souls NPCs make sense. What other kinds of settings other stories do y'all think this kind of NPC thrives in? What settings or stories does it not work so well in?"

Austin: Mmm.

Jack: This is... yeah. This is, this is a good question. Uh... and it maybe me think about sort of what I think about when I think of Dark Souls NPCs. Uh... because I feel like Dark Souls NPCs laugh a lot.

Austin: Uh-huh.

Jack: [chuckling] They laugh in a sinister way. Uh, it feels like they, uh, regularly providing, uh, guidance that is misguided, or, uh, they have an ulterior motive. But I think the thing that sort of really sets them apart for me is that, uh, they are almost always presented alone, uh, other than being in, uh, a hub setting. And they usually represent some sort of community or group or closeness to, uh, other people, or an idea that they have been separated from, whether separated from permanently by the game, where it's like, you know, a character who is, uh, has been cast out of the magical academy or something, or, uh, separate from temper — uh, temporarily, where it's like a character looking for somebody, or a character alone in a church, praying. Uh, and like that part of the reason that these characters worked so well in Sangfielle is, Sangfielle is absolutely the kind of place where you have these, uh, very strong, very distinctive, uh, communities or ideas, we have all the different faiths, uh, we have all these scattered little groups. Almost every time we had to come up with a town or village in Sangfielle, we like, rapidly gave them, like, one weird thing about them —

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: That sort of sets this town apart. I'm thinking about the town with the fish. Uh...

Austin: Sure, sure. Yeah.

Jack: Uh, even when we did the, the demo, uh, game, Austin, for Saphodia, we had that woman with all the bugs that come out of the ground. And it's like, you could totally see the Dark

Souls version of this with a character who has been estranged from this community, or estranged from the place, being like —

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: This is our little window into a society that is, that is not going to be onscreen, but that this character has, has some kind of strong thoughts or feelings about. So I think the games that these sorts of NPCs would work best for me in, are things like Sangfielle, where the world is strange and lonely, and people are separated from one another but point in necessarily want to be. Uh, but I don't know that it would work half as well in a game like [chuckling] COUNTER/Weight, or you, you know, a situation where there's lots of people —

Austin: Right.

Jack: And they're all hanging out —

Austin: Yes.

Jack: And there's, you know, messages can pass very rapidly between each other. It doesn't have the same loneliness, and the same sort of sense of separation of estrangement that Sangfielle and, and Dark Souls does.

Austin: Early Twilight Mirage ground game it would work.

Jack: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Austin: At least, at least out in the — not near the Crown, for instance, or other major cities. But that sense of, uh, worlds where, uh, worlds that feel hostile, which, at once makes seeing a person on the horizon, uh, relieving and scary, right? Because on one hand, it is great to reconnect to a person. There is Solare, arms wide, praising the sun, and you're like, "Ah, yeah, okay, cool. This is a safe zone. I'm with my bro." Or, Eileen the Crow. Going to talk to Eileen the Crow in, in, in Bloodborne, and being like, "We are of a kind, you and I." You know, like, yeah, all right. We're hanging out outside this church, and like, this is a, a spot where like, I'm hearing some weird, ambiguous stuff, but I basically feel safer around you. Uh, uh, versus stumbling into somebody —

Jack: Hm.

Austin: And being like, “Okay, I think you're telling me that you want to drink my blood. I'm pretty sure that's what you're saying —“

Jack: [laughing]

Austin: “And I'm pretty sure in 18 hours I'm going to have to have a boss fight with you, but I'm not 100 percent sure.” Uh, uh, and I think that that to me is like, the ambiguity of whether or not — there's like, there's a certain sort of ambiguity that comes from being in a place that's hostile, where seeing another person is both scary and potentially comforting, that like, you have to close the distance and talk to them and see what's up with them in order to find that out, uh, is, is where I like to deploy that sort of person. Uh, uh, you know, the, the Appleton, the very Dark-Souls-y character in Sangfielle, in one of the Saphodia arcs. Uh, you know, is in actually a very nice place. Just a very quiet, warm library, after a very chaotic trip through a ruined castle, and past this whole society of people, uh, but is separated from all of that, uh, and is, even with all of the, the kind of creature comforts of a nice fire roaring, and a very special table nearby, you end up being kind of creeped out by this person, because of the threat, the kind of, the hostility that's followed, or that, that emerges still in that place. And so I think that like, I don't know that it works with Hieron, right? Like I don't like the world, that I ever painted the world of Hieron —

Jack: No!

Austin: As hostile enough for the lone traveler to be Dark-Souls-y. You know, I'm sure there are some Dark-Souls-y characters in there, but...

Jack: Well, this is also, there's an overlap with like, the standards of west, of like the Western storytelling as well, right?

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Like, a lone traveler seen in the distance —

Austin: Yeah, yeah.

Jack: I feel like, uh... and I, I don't, has, has FromSoftware spoken about being influenced by Westerns at all? Because I feel like there is some weird overlap there. Uh, but I think we were also kind of hitting that in Sangfielle, as well. My favorite other Dark Souls NPC in Sangfielle,

who didn't speak much, but had this great Dark Souls feel, uh, was the Shape Knight that Marne met.

Austin: Oh, yes.

Ali: Oh, yeah.

Austin: That's a great Dark-Souls-y thing, that's like, yeah.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Yeah. I don't want to talk too much about it because it's such a recent episode, but —

Jack: No, no.

Austin: But, but yes. Uh...

Jack: And, and that's a Dark Souls character that didn't, didn't really speak a lot.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: Yeah. There was like implied conversation, but the, the like, sort of out-of-placeness —

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: That you... uh, emphasized in your answer, I think that, that person [chuckles] fits.

Austin: Yes. For sure.

Ali: Uh...

Austin: Uh, now I'm just thinking about Cad Bane as a Dark Souls NPC, based on the way —

Ali: Wow...

Austin: He shows up in, in a recent Star Wars thing.

Ali: [chuckles]

Austin: Uh, over the horizon, you know, a stranger in the distance, uh...

Jack: The Enico [sic: Ennio] Morricone song playing.

Austin: Uh-huh. Yeah, basically. Have you seen that sequence, Jack? Or are you just imagining it?

Jack: No, no. The last — I've only ever seen one Cad Bane sequence, I need to catch up.

Austin: Okay. Uh, no, yeah. This is a different thing, don't worry about it. I'll message you off, off...

Ali: [laughing]

Jack: Okay, yes, that's good. [chuckles]

Austin: Uh... so, yeah. That's our Dark Souls answer.

Janine: I think there's the...

Austin: Oop, go ahead.

Janine: So I, I think there's a thing that hasn't been touched on here, which is more of a mechanical component. Where, you know, to me, a thing that represents a Dark Souls NPC is that, like, they do not necessarily [unintelligible] to tell their story.

Austin: Sorry, say that one more time? You broke up for a split second there.

Janine: I, I was saying that, to, to me a thing that defines a sort of Dark-Souls-y NPC is that they don't seek you out to tell their story.

Austin: Right, yes.

Jack: Mmm.

Janine: You seek them out, to tell that story.

Austin: Yep.

Janine: And if you're not interested, you maybe never hear from them again. Uh, or like are you could accidentally swing your sword and kill them, and like —

Austin: [chuckles]

Janine: The game keeps going.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: There is a degree to which, like, there is a focus on the autonomy of their story, and the fact that like, you're only involved in it as much as you want to be. Uh, and, you know, I feel like not every system supports that, but also not every storyteller can. I think it's like —

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: I think it's like, as much of a, as much of a like, what kind of game slash, you know, setting, is, it's what kind of person is telling the story. Because if you're crafting your NPCs expecting a degree of interaction and presenting them in that way, then I don't think they're going to feel quite right, you know?

Austin: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Totally. Uh... all right. One more question here, from Ben M, who says, "Friends at the Table has now been around long enough to have seen an eventful period of tabletop history. When the show started, Powered by the Apocalypse was where many of the interesting developments in RPG design were found. The show transitioned to Forged in the Dark on the cusp of it's popularity, and introduced many to it. And you all engaged with and played a role in the utter creative explosion that itch.io's physical game storefront has enabled. A lot has happened. How do you feel about how the medium has grown over the course of the show? What do you think about your own place in the wider world of indie RPGs? What are your thoughts on playing games and playbooks inspired by your own work? Thanks for everything. Y'all have always kept me going forward. Ben M."

1:06:57.2      That's very sweet, thank you, Ben. It's weird, it's weird. It's a lot.

Ali:      [laughs]

Janine: [chuckles]

Austin: Uh, it's like, we've been here for no amount of time at all, in, in the history of RPGs. Uh, seven, seven and a half years is a long time in my life, but it's not a long time in the length of people picking up dice and rolling them to tell stories. Uh, uh, and in many ways, uh, it has been, it's hard, maybe, to see the shift from the inside, if that makes sense, because, I think that



there is a, a continuity, between, uh, the sundered land, where we played a lone pilgrim, in, in, as a mini-game, uh, about the, the young Samot, uh, exploring the wastes, being chased by the wolf, uh, in Autumn in Hieron. Uh...

Ali: I just read this today.

Austin: Did you?

Ali: [laughing] I just read the transcripts of it today.

Austin: Why?

Ali: And it rules, yeah. Oh, because I — it's a secret.

Austin: Oh, okay, cool.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Cool, sounds good.

Ali: [wheezes laughing] Sorry.

Austin: Uh, no, that's fine. Love a secret. Uh, uh, and the, uh, the, that stuff, uh, uh, has a continuity with me, for me, and, uh, the kind of itch.io, you know, subset of games that you're take the here, Ben, uh, especially with, with games meant to be played over the course of 45 minutes, or, you know solo games, journaling games, et cetera. Uh, which is not to say there has not been a development and that a lot of new designers don't exist. It's just that I, I would be cautious about saying that that style of game or play has not existed prior — previously, which isn't what you're saying.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: But I think it's easy to trip and fall into saying that. Uh... uh, and I'm trying to explain that I think if, if you were — I was like, on Google Plus during that era, and all of that has been wiped out — okay, here's the thing I actually want to say, and that I'll probably end saying again in the near future in a more detailed way is, I'm currently reading, uh, uh, for Game Study Study Buddies, a book about The Forge, the, uh, the, uh, uh, very design-forward, very complicated form that ran from 2001 to 2012, uh, that was where a lot of that previous generation of designer

— not previous, they're still ongoing, right? Like the, the Bakers are still making really great games. Uh, uh, but, uh, uh, we're like, you know, Apocalypse World comes out of that, Burning Wheel comes out of that, uh, Dogs in the Vineyard comes out of that. A bunch of, a ton of games come out of that, uh, which eventually create the early 2010s, a space, and then that creates the space that we're in now, in some ways, uh, uh, and, uh, today, it's, it's, the thing that feels like it's shifted [chuckles], is not like, what types of conversations are happening. It's that like, it feels like they're opaque, because they're happening on Discords instead of forums, and instead of on like Google Plus, where it was easy for me to follow those conversations. I think that shift is huge. I think the shift from like, here is a space that anyone can lurk in — uh, and frankly, a lot of those spaces were still gatekept culturally in many ways. But, from that to now, where it's like, I know there are Discords where people are making huge new steps forward in the tabletop roleplaying game and story game and LARP scenes, that are really hard to penetrate, because like, I'm just not there. I think that to me is the biggest thing that's changed since I was, you know, since the years before I was running Friends at the Table, through the beginning of Friends at the Table, 'til, to now, is, further fragmentation.

1:10:32.6      Uh, but from that, I think we've actually seen a lot of people feel like they're even more comfortable to make games that are non-commercial in the chasing a big budget release version of commercial, right? Like, I don't know, Stew Pot was my favorite, was one of my top 5 games, two years ago, you know? And like, that's a game that just does not, probably does not come out and get the attention that it deserves 10 years ago. Uh, and I think that that, that sort of game comes out of that design space where you're allowed to, and have the support to, iterate, try new things, and put something out quickly. Uh, uh, at least that's my read on that space. I think that's separate from the, where do we feel about, where we sit in all of it. But, I don't know, how do y'all feel about that stuff? How did y'all feel when you saw your character, your actual name show up Beam Saber, for instance?

Ali:      [laughing]

Austin: If you felt any way about it at all.

Ali:      I feel — [laughing] I don't want to be the one who's like, “I feel increasingly weird about it.” But that's my truth. I, I feel — sometimes, when we pick systems that are inspired by us, I really fear the Ouroboros effect, and like, want to be like, “ Oh, we, we, we shouldn't do this.” [laughs] That is an, an anxiety that I have. Because we usually have, like, a good time playing

those games. But like, I, the, the — I think that being a fan of the show gives you a very specific perspective on the game space. And I don't want to like, say that we haven't changed it. But there are designers who are designing great games who have never heard of us.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Truly don't give a fuck, yeah, 100 percent.

Ali: And like, itch is huge, huge huge huge huge huge.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: And like, you can go through there and find like, a lot of different like, creator spaces, I want to say. So like —

Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali: I, you know, I don't want to undersell us, but I also really don't want to oversell us, in terms of like —

Jack: Yeah.

Ali: The, the, the, the way the wind has gone.

Austin: We are a small podcast.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: It does not — it may sometimes feel like that's not the case, if you're — if you're someone who listens to this and have friends who listen to this, you might suspect that our reach is much bigger than it is. Uh...

Jack: And the things that we are interested in and have always been interested in are things that a lot of people are interested in.

Austin: Yes.

Jack: And are doing great things — you know, we —

Ali: Mm-hm.

Jack: Make shows about like, history, and faith, and nature, and politics. And [chuckles] those are things that people have always been doing really interesting work in this space with. You know, like, like Austin says, there is a, there is, there are questions about visibility, and there are questions about who is able to make those —

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Uh, kinds of games. But I think that, uh... uh, you know, very often... I don't necessarily think of — I don't read games and see us in them, so much as I read games and I go, "We were doing a thing at a certain time that a lot of people were also interested in doing." You know, the reason that it felt like there was this big —

Austin: Yes.

Jack: Groundswell, is that we were part of that groundswell, you know.

Ali: Mm-hm.

Jack: Uh, we weren't the, we weren't the waves lifting all the boats up. We were the boat being lifted up by the waves, uh, along with a lot of other little boats.

Austin: Yeah, totally. When we found The Sprawl, like, for me, uh, I think a lot about this in, in, in terms of games like Tech Noir and The Sprawl. Tech Noir was a game I already loved, that emerges from someone who was close to The Forge, and, and like, uh, uh, Jeremy Keller was like, in that, that collection of, of designers. Uh, and it, it did something small really well, and was really cool, uh, but was hard for us to get into because we were still new at playing these sorts of games, and represented a sort of focus and non-modulator that the PBTA kind of expansion, uh, moved away from, and towards a sort of univ- universal language of play, 2D6 plus stat, et cetera, from, from PBTA. And so when we picked up The Sprawl, which we played in playtest, and we played Blades in the Dark in playtest, it felt like we were finding tools that were fit for the moment, and for the way we wanted to play games. Uh, uh, uh, and I think that that's, I think, Jack, the thing that you hit on there is exactly right, that like — I do think Beam Saber gets made without us, you know? I, I, I don't like COUNTER/Weight produces Beam Saber.

Ali: What?

Jack: Yeah.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: I think Gundam produces Beam Saber, you know? Uh...

Jack: Yeah, in the same way that like, Ursula LeGuin produces Hieron.

Austin: And, and — right. Or more importantly —

Ali: [chuckling]

Austin: Uh, I hadn't read Ursula LeGuin when we were making Hieron, so, I only, I'd read, not — I'd read stuff that was not, uh, uh... uh, Earthsea, uh, of Ursula's, of Leguin's. But I'd not read Earthsea, I believe it or not. Uh... which is, which is a failing of mine.

1:15:31.9

Jack: Well but, I mean, I suppose this is kind of —

Austin: But that's the point, right?

Jack: The, the, the fact that you read Earthsea and go —

Austin: But the things I'd read — and people had read Earthsea, people who I'd read, right?

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Obviously. Uh, uh, also, I should say, Austin Ramsay made Beam Saber. Do you know what I mean? Like, that's a specifically person — when I said Gundam makes, made, made Beam Saber, what I mean is —

Jack: [chuckling] Oh, yeah, sure, yes.

Austin: Austin Ramsay already loved Gundam before... I believe — maybe I'm wrong about this. But we don't make COUNTER/Weight without a lot of other influences, and I wouldn't want to overstep or overtake that. And also, I do want to also say that like, I actually think there were much bigger actors in this space than us. I think like, if you look at the stuff that like, uh, Possum Creek Games is doing, with Wanderhome, and uh, uh —

Jack: Mm-hm.

Austin: I, I know that there's, there's a joke around how to pronounce this game, but Gazebo, or Gazebo's Bed and Breakfast — I actually don't think those games are very Friends at the Table, and actually are going to have a much, much bigger influence on what like the future of tabletop roleplaying games look like, because they're opening up a style of play that is extremely, that's extremely distinct and is speaking to something, uh, that the PBTA and the Blade style of game have not spoken to, right? And those are pulling on threads like Avery Alder's, uh, uh, not just Avery Alder, because dream — I always just say Avery with Dream Askew, Dream Apart, uh, uh, which is incorrect, because it, it is of course also, uh, a person whose name I'm going to look up, which, again, is a, feels like a failing of mine. Uh, where is my Dream Askew book? Uh... sorry, now I've done this and I feel like I need to actually credit —

Jack: To follow through?

Austin: Yes, I need to actually follow through, otherwise I'm going to feel bad. Uh... of course, this is now taking much longer than I thought. But someone else speak while I, while I get credit for —

Jack: Avery, and also like, Jason Morningstar and the crew at Bully Pulpit have been making these kind of games —

Austin: Sure, yes. Benjamin Rosenbaum, there we go. Got it. Anyway. Yes, Bully Pulpit stuff obviously, for sure. Uh...

Ali: Mm-hm.

Austin: So yeah. I just think it's more multi-faceted than that. I hope we've shown people a lot of games. I think we have been in a very unique position because of our adjacency to bigger, to people with big audiences, who pointed their audiences at us, right? Uh, I think that there's, uh, a lot of contention with the, the actual play shows. Uh, but I think that a convergence of fandom and a convergence of careers meant that a lot of people got siphoned from — not siphoned, because they didn't stop listening to Adventure Zone.

Jack: [chuckling] Siphoned.

Austin: But a lot of Adventure Zone listeners would give us a shot, and would learn about different types of games, and would go on to play and buy other types of games. Uh, and if that could be — and I think that, you know, to your, to your point, Jack, that was one vector from

which people were going from a very traditional style of tabletop roleplaying game, and D&D 5<sup>th</sup> edition, to other stuff. They were also seeing other streamers do that. They were going into their local game stores and having people who, you know, paid close attention to these spaces introduce them. They were having friends introduce them to other stuff

1:18:41.6      Uh, and I think it's, I think what we're seeing was more of a trend of the, the spread of the hobby and the, the kind of, uh, the, uh, just a wave of new, not us. [laughing] Uh, you know. I don't know.

Ali:      Yeah, I mean, there, there's — actual play as like a genre, started growing as we were doing this, right? And like, the, the like, idea of the audience for each of those shows, around like, across how many different, you know, podcasts there are versus how many different games that are being played into a microphone. Like, a lot of the way that we, we start some of the game selection, if there's not like, you know, something that's in the works that we're like, “Oh, but maybe when this is finished, it'll be a good thing to play, or whatever.”

Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali:      Like, some of that conversation starts with like, “Oh, do you know another actual play that's done it?” Like —

Austin: Yes, totally.

Ali:      I want to be able to learn this quicker than reading it.

Jack:    Yeah.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali:      And like, the, the, the fact that the, the, the ocean is so deep in that, you know, has been a help to us, as much as like, I think people who are designing games, listening to us, and been like, “Oh, that's a good idea.” It's like a, it's a, a, a ping-pong in every direction.

Austin: Absolutely. And, I mean also, it's the other half of this is like, the other things that have happened are deeply material, which is, it got cheaper to make podcasts, and it got cheaper and easier to make, to release a PDF of a game, to share it, to make a little bit of money on it, to spread that further. And like, I think that that is... you know, I kind of scoff at the phrase of like “a democratizing effect,” right?

Ali: [snorts]

Austin: Uh, but I do think that what you've seen is, when those things become more accessible, and when there are easier ways to make smaller, safer communities to explore this stuff, that is the stuff that produces a, a breadth of, of available new exploratory and experimental, you know, tabletop games, more than anything else. Uh, so, yeah. I think we were part of a wave. And I'm very happy that you've been part of that wave, and I'm probably a little more comfortable, Ali, with seeing the occasional shoutout.

Ali: [giggling]

Austin: Uh, but I, but I... it can be, it can be hard hard because it can be like... there is the thing of like, we exist on a podcast for people, and on a Twitter feed or whatever. But on a podcast, from when the show starts to when the show stops, and that's the only access they might have to our interests. And it can produce a sense of, of knowing the — a one-sided, you know. At this point I think talking about parasociality is like... it's not trite, but like, you know, you know what the fucking deal is, if you're listening to this. You know what it means to be parasocial.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Uh, and I don't even necessarily mean parasociality, but it, it does produce an incomplete view. Uh, and so, there have definitely been times when there are, there's a disconnect between like, how I see the show that we produce, and how other people see the show, or like are what I think we would be interested in, versus what other people are. And that doesn't matter to me, because at the end of the day I'm not looking for people to make stuff for us to play. I'm, I'm interested in, I've always been interested in showing that you can make cool stuff for yourself and your friends. That, to me, is like the, the mission, or at least one of our missions, is that like — hey, it's so dope to tell stories together. It's so dope to get in there and tinker, and make a little game for you and your friends to play, uh, that is not, is not about commercial viability, it is not about, you know, a, a thing that happened in one of the currently released episodes of the Sangfielle finale is that we ended up putting one game aside and playing a completely different game.

1:22:33.4 And like, the... it's, I love that people responded well to that. I love even more the fact that if, you know, one percent of the people who listened to that episode go and realize, in



the middle of playing a game, that they can put that game aside and play a different game. Which goes back to the Sundered Land thing, right?

Ali: Mm-hm.

Austin: It goes back to what we've always been doing on the show, is playing with the format in ways that you can go play with the format in. Uh, and, and the format being the medium, the idea of sitting around a table and telling stories with your friends using games. Uh, that to me is the, if we, if we leave any sort of mark on tabletop roleplaying games, it's — that I'm happy with, it's that we maybe inspire a handful of people to like, incorporate that style of open-ended flexible, uh, non-, non-deterministic style of play, uh, uh, in, in, you know, at their tables. So, I think that, I think it's been very fun to be part of the spread of that sort of ethos, uh, to the degree that we have been. So —

1:23:35.5

Ali: Right. Yeah, and I don't want to like, I, the the like, anxiety I mean is like the, the sort of feeling of like, when you pick up your phone and the screen goes black and you see your face inside of it, like —

Austin: Oh yeah. [laughing]

Ali: There's, there's that. Like, because I, because like, looking at a — and that's why we end up, I think, playing these games. Because it ends up being a [mutual] interest in terms of like, design, or like, you know, character set, or whatever, where, where that's why Beam Saber really worked, despite it having those references. Uh, but, and like, the, the, I, the feeling of looking at character sheets and being like, “Oh, this, this class was inspired by Aria,” or whatever. Like, that's flattering and I appreciate that, but like, as much as I'm like, “Well, I don't want to just play Aria again.”

Austin: Uh-huh.

Ali: The, the other thing of like, you know, shying away from the influencers, that like, even Aria is like [Lakas Kline] —

Austin: Yeah, yeah.

Ali: She's, she's the character from [Macross]. Like —

Austin: Mm-hm.

Ali: The, the, that she's a projection of, uh, like different genres, and different stereotypes or whatever, is a useful, like, shortcut.

Austin: Right.

Ali: But like, when that part is deciding that class, it's not like, "Oh, this is the best way to be Aria Joy," or whatever, you know.

Austin: Exactly. Uh, shoutouts, by the way, to Armour Astir just got a new drop of playtests.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Uh, Armour Astir encore has 6 new playbooks, including the Icon, who is very much the Lakas Kline or the Lyn Min Mae or the Aria Joy style of, of, you know, idol and performer who brings the, the war [unintelligible] you know, to them.

Jack: God, that character sheet also has an incredible reference to another tabletop game in it.

Austin: Yes.

Jack: That I love so much. It's so neat.

Austin: I won't spoil it. People can go try to find it themselves. It's a reference to another game we've played.

Jack: It's a mechanical references.

Austin: There's like three references. Yes, it's so good.

Ali: [chuckling]

Austin: Uh, also, I should, I should clarify something really quick. Our names show up in Beam Saber. Austin Ramsay reached out to approve that. Uh, to — reached out and said —

Jack: Oh yeah. Uh-huh. That's important.

Austin: "Hey, could we, could I put in, you know, Project Lead Walker, an ambitious and hard-working manager, Virtue de Quidt, uh, an experienced and crafty noble, et cetera." Uh, that

was a, that was a — that was not something, uh, that Austin Ramsay did just without any sort of outreach, you know? I would, I would, I would follow in Austin's footsteps, is what I would say.

Ali: [chuckling]

Austin: Not just with us, just in general. Uh, because sometimes you don't want to, you don't want to exist publicly in that way. Uh, anyway, it has been a fun seven and a half years of making that show. Is that number still right? That's right, right?

Jack: Yeah.

Ali: [exhales] I believe so, yeah. It's going to, about to be our 6-year anniversary of the Patreon.

Jack: Wow. Wow.

Austin: That's wild. Wait, so is it longer?

Ali: Uh-huh.

Austin: Wait, when did, when did we start? We started September 2014, is that right?

Jack: Oof.

Austin: So we're coming up on your 8<sup>th</sup> year.

Jack: Time just goes, doesn't it?

Ali: Right.

Austin: Yeah, uh-huh.

Jack: Oof...

Ali: Good for us...

Jack: Yeah, I guess —

Ali: [giggling]

Jack: I don't — do you have something that you want to add here, Janine?

Janine: No, I think — I think it's all kind of been said. Like it's, uh... I agree that like, we're... we [chuckles] we're a sign of a thing and not the thing, right? Like —

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Yep. Yeah.

Janine: We, we had an idea at a time when a lot of people had similar ideas, and had feelings about things that aligned with other feelings people were having in some ways. And, and... uh, it's neat to... it's neat to see that grow, though, right? [chuckles] There, it's, it's sort of, it's a thing where it's like, however it came about, there are a lot more games in the style that we enjoy now today than there were before.

Austin: Yeah. Mm-hm.

Janine: And like, that's cool. It's cool that like, that happened, and there's more stuff for us to enjoy.

Ali: Mmm.

Janine: Uh, just objectively, that's a nice thing.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: Yep.

Austin: And like, again, like, it rules that this is, this is stuff where I've seen people go from, “Hey, this is an idea I have, here's a playbook, to like, “I'm actually going to be able to pursue this in a bigger way. Maybe not my full-time job, but my, I'm going to be able to make, uh, games for, for, and, and like use that money to help save up to fix up my kitchen, or to, you know, help someone with their medical bills, or to, you know, buy off, pay off a car” — or whatever. And I think that that's been, you know, not, again, to, to resort and, and, to the financial aspect of it, but like, this is stuff, there are alternative models to supporting huge companies and their products, and like, getting the right frameworks in place and then spending your time showing that stuff off, and not just, you know — a thing that happened earlier this year that frustrated me a lot, this was — it must've been earlier this year. Was when that Dark Souls D&D got —

Jack: Oh, yeah.

Austin: Announced. Uh, one of the things that I saw from a number of major outlets who reported on it was, which, it's your job to report on this stuff, I'm not, you know, whatever. Like, I, I've been in that business, you know? Uh, there would have probably been a Waypoint article on that if I was still in charge of Waypoint at the time and our content strategy was that you had to do news posts, still, you know, pre, pre-Wavepoint plus. Uh, the, what frustrated me, are people whose job it was to report on the tabletop space, that was what their job was, writing with a certain air of inevitability, that that is how the Dark Souls games, the official Dark Souls game had to come out, as — for people who don't know, there was a Dark Souls, there is a Dark Souls RPG now on the market, that is a hack of, of D&D 5<sup>th</sup> edition. And I say hack with like, you know, there are some changes to combat rules and stuff. Uh, when, in fact, I think there are lots of other games out there. Uh, the one that comes to mind immediately is Delve 2.0, or Delve 2, Delve Version 2, that captured what I love about Dark Souls from the sort of dreamlike and strange environments, to the very tactical and thoughtful combat stuff. Uh, and in fact, there is even a, a Dark Souls, there's even a Japanese Dark Souls tabletop RPG that already exists, and what came out is not that. It's not a translation of that official Dark Souls from Japan. It's, it's a new, different one. And I, you know, I understand you work for a company, you get the Dark Souls license, you're told to make something. I get what goes into the thought process of like, “Well, we should probably make a 5<sup>th</sup> edition game, because that's the thing that's going to sell, because that's what people, so many more people play 5<sup>th</sup> edition than anything else. I get that. Uh, I don't, it's not what I would do, in that, in that I would not want to do that. I would not want to have the job where it felt like that was the only thing I could do, was make 5<sup>th</sup> edition again, or make something for 5<sup>th</sup> edition that would burn me up from the inside.

1:30:52.3      And, and that's not a moral claim, but that's just a personal who-I-am thing. What does frustrate me is that people whose job it was to report on that reported on it as if this was inevitable and indefensible — or, sorry, uh, like, incontrovertible as a thing that would, that got done, and failed to provide any sort of links to, at the time, the two ongoing Souls tabletop RPG jams that were happening —

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: Where dozens of people were putting their heads to the ground and saying, “How do we, how would I do this? What are the other, what are the other versions of this?” And in fact, just sort of wielded the success of the biggest tabletop roleplaying game in the world like a cudgel against the thought that you might want to play something else, or that something else is out

there. And, I suspect that that comes from, that comes from a lot of places. It, I think it, I, I can't psychoanalyze writers, I don't, you know, what the fuck do I know? Uh, I know that I have been bored in the past when I end up wielding, uh, uh, an argument like that, where I say, "It's just the reality of the thing, I've been ground down." I understand that. I, I, where sometimes I'll retreat to a sort of cynical indifference to, to an ongoing debate, or I'll feel like I've been so burned by, uh, an argument that becomes increasingly superficial, you know. Uh, if it was my job to report on tabletop RPGs, and any time I mentioned 5<sup>th</sup> edition, people were in the comments being like, "Yo, fuck D&D." And I'd be like, "Yeah, I have a quota to make." [chuckles]

Ali: [chuckles]

Austin: "I have to get X number of articles out this week, and D&D articles do numbers. What the fuck do you want me to do?" I get how I could get to be that way. But I, I, I think that like, if your job in the space is to bring people's attention to tabletop games, your job should be to bring people's attention to tabletop games, and to, to do your best to champion the, the hobby and broaden the scope of your coverage, and try to bring eyes to something, uh, to things that maybe don't have eyes. Because I think that's good for the hobby writ large. And even if you want to make the case that like, 5<sup>th</sup> edition has been good for the hobby it's brought so many more people in, and so many of those people have now gone to make and play and buy independent games and small press games, then you have to kind of like put your money where your mouth is, and like do that work and show that off. Uh, uh, and it's for that reason that like, we do want to sometimes play things that have no connection to us, right?

1:33:23.3 Like, shoutouts to Rowan Rook and Deckard, and the team behind Heart: The City Beneath. I don't think those people listen to fucking Friends at the Table, you know what I mean?

Ali: [chuckling]

Austin: That is not a Friends at the Table-ass game. And, and, uh, whenever I think about that game, having played it now for a year, I think it's an extremely well-made game that has a really great identity that emerges from a particular kind of design, uh, background and experience, and, and uh, you know, Grant and Christopher made a really fucking cool thing, uh, and I think that it's, it's valuable for us to be part of, uh, not just our little corner of the games world, but to continue to try to show bits of it that have nothing to do with us. Uh, it's why we ended up playing a game like Lancer. Uh, not that the, not that the people who make Lancer aren't familiar

with Friends at the Table. There is, Ibex is absolutely in the Lancer book if you look close enough.

Ali: [chuckling]

Austin: Uh, I donated to that game's kickstarter at the tier that let me add an NPC, and I absolutely —

Jack: And you added Ibex? [chuckles]

1:34:17.1

Austin: Yeah, did you not — yeah, uh-huh. There's like, there's like, I gave Ibex a happy ending in Lancer.

Ali: Aw!

Austin: Atar Rose is in the Lancer book, just being like, a good person and helping people, because he gets to live in a world where helping people is rewarded, because he was born after the Union did their shit. And it's still fucked-up, but he's not like — that world still has its issues, but he's found a little place to live in. Uh, anyway, that's what you get to do if you have an OC.

Jack: Shoutout to Ibex.

Ali: Love this for you.

Austin: Uh-huh. Thank you. Thank you.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: But, but, my point being that like, Lancer's not the type of game that we play normally. But it was fun to, to do that like it was with capers during Bluff City last year, where we like played a game that's extremely not from this particular stream that we always, you know, kind of lean into, and try something else out. And I think that like, that's the way the wave grows, is by like, taking that — taking that responsibility seriously, if you do have a platform, and like, doing your best just showing off different stuff, you know? Uh... anyway, can't wait to play Armour Astir, a game that feels like, like Beam Saber, it was made, made for us.

Ali: [laughing]

1:35:23.2

Austin: Uh, big hypocrisy hours. Anyway, I think that's going to do it for us. Unless anyone has any final thoughts on this before we wrap. All right.

Ali: I should have said, the Samot thing is not a secret. There will be a, a, a, a future postcard series, including —

Austin: Ah.

Ali: Friends at the Table deities, and —

Austin: Ooh.

Ali: Spoiler alert.

Austin: Spoiler alert, that sounds cool.

Ali: [laughing]

Austin: Stay tuned to [friendsatthetable.cash](https://friendsatthetable.cash), to learn more about that.

Ali: Uh-huh.

Austin: Uh, I suspect we're going to do at least one more Tips, uh, before we get back to Drawing Maps in some space. So, please send in questions to [tipsatthetable@gmail.com](mailto:tipsatthetable@gmail.com). Uh, and again, you can find us on [friendsatthetable.cash](https://friendsatthetable.cash), uh, for, for other Patreon stuff coming up.

1:36:06.8 I hope everybody has a good night, and a good week. Bye bye bye.

Ali: Bye.

Jack: Bye.

Janine: Bye.



