

[Tips at the Table: Hackers Welcome! \(October\)](#)

Transcribed by Sophie [until 0:19:00]

thelostlarrikin [0:19:00~0:29:00]

Daneran [from 0:29:12 until finish]

Austin: Welcome to Tips at the Table, an RPG podcast focused on critical questions (Jack laughing), hopefully smart answers, and fun interactions between good friends. I'm your host Austin Walker, you can follow *me* on Twitter @Austin\_walker. Joining me today: Art Martinez-Tebbel.

Art: Hey, hi. You can find me on twitter @atebbel, and, uh, One Song Pod is a... place you could be, I guess.

Austin: We'll get there. It's-- We had a meeting about it. We didn't have a meeting. We had... seven exchanged messages about it. About trying to sneak in--

Art: We have until March. We have until *March*.

Austin: Is that a year? That's a year, you're right.

Art: Well, that's about a year.

Austin: Yeah, I'd like to finish it before that, but we'll see. Uh, also joining me: Jack DeQuidt.

Jack: Hi! You can follow me on Twitter and find any of the music from the show at [notquitereal.bandcamp.com](http://notquitereal.bandcamp.com).

Austin: Including the new-- *Not* including.

Jack: No, not including that.

Austin: No, not yet. But-- but I sent an email two days ago, or maybe it was last night, to push us towards a world in which the-- all of the live music could also go in somewhere.

Jack: Yeah, the email was to me, and it was Austin saying, "Now, look."

Austin (laughing): "Now, look right here."

Jack: (laughing) "You've got to put this online."

Austin: "It's been--"  
(Janine laughing)

Austin: "Listen here, you." Uh, no, it's to get... we can't put it online until we have good cover art for it, so... I reached out to Craig to be like "Hey, do you want to do this?" and we'll see... Also joining us: Janine Hawkins.

Janine: Uh, hey. You can find me @bleatingheart on Twitter.

Austin: Um, and anything else, do you... do you want to promote anything? I feel like we've done promotions with the first... the other two guests.

Janine: Uhhhhhh... naw, I think I'm good.

Austin: Ok, great. *Hitman 2* in stores now. Uhhh...

(Janine laughs)

Janine: I don't like saying it.

Austin: Yeah, well I do. It's--it's cool. Um...? Thank you all for--

Jack: Oh, could we have a link?

Austin: I should've put one in, did I not put one in the, uh? The?

Janine: Yeah, there's a link. I have a link.

Jack: Oh, in the patreon?

Austin: Mm-hm!

Jack: Oh, I see it. Ok, sorry, I'm sorry.

Austin: There's two. There should be two links. You're good.

Austin: Thank you, everybody for watching, and for supporting us as always. If you're currently watching with a friend, or have stolen the link because you're, um, a hacker, um. One, congrats.

Jack: Shout out to hackers.

Austin: I'm gonna... here's just... uh... two words of advice, here. Uh: aim higher. Uh, is what I would say...

(Jack and Janine laugh)

Austin: As a hacker, than *this*, but cool, hey. You can support us by going to Friendsatthetable.cash, or search for us on Patreon. Okay! Let's hop right into it, does that sound good?

Jack: Mm!

Janine: Mm-hm!

Austin: Good- good to get some hops in. Okay, this one comes in from Rick, who says: "I play with a loosely affiliated group specializing in weekly one shots. There are a few regulars, but people totally new to Role Playing have shown up from time to time. Lately I'm having some anxieties with a few things, chief of which is my reluctance to GM. While I have facilitated GM-less games before (but I'm running out of games), I'm not super jazzed about GM-ing, mostly because I'm not good at big picture improvisation and get flustered easily, and boy do I know how often players get up to unexpected shenanigans. But never offering to GM makes me feel like I'm taking advantage of the people who do, in that I have a good time every week, without having to deal with any of the responsibilities of running a game. To me, the only way to make this feel fair to go ahead and offer to GM despite my fears. Do you have any advice on how to get over GM-ing anxiety, especially for someone who 1) might be GM-ing for someone new to the hobby, and also 2) is not great with coming up with new plot on the spot?" Thank you, Rick, for reaching out. Um, I think there's a lot of ways t-to answer this question, right? Like...

Art: I wish this was a call-in show.

Austin: So that you could talk through it...

(Janine laughs)

Austin: You know what, I thought about doing it the other day, I was like... "Could we do a call--?" and then I thought, that's a lot of work.

Art: It's SO much work.

Austin: That's a lot of responsibility... It's a whole thing.

Art: Uh-huh.

Austin: Um... but I think--

Art: We'd have to take out the live component, honestly. We could do--

Austin: Yes. Yes.

Art: We could do a call-in show that people... couldn't see.

Austin: That. Right, exactly. Um... but we're not... doing that, so...

(Austin laughs, Art laughs)

Austin: I think there's a lot of ways to come at this. And I, I want to start with... I think the place for me to start is... that it's okay if you don't want to GM? And that if you... and that one of the things that I, as GM, am often... the thing that I try to keep in my mind is that my players are also *ideally* preparing and prepping. Maybe not the same way that I'm, like, looking at character sheets and putting together enemy encounters and all of that stuff, right? But that as a player, you already do a lot of work, and then you do even more at the table, to make sure that you and everyone else are having a good time. By which, I really wanna underline, you can be a really active, and, and, um, you know, strong player, someone who's read the book, so that you can clarify rules when rules questions come up, someone who understands the tone of a game, someone who can help facilitate the game as a player, and that could help you feel like you're not taking advantage of anyone at the table. And I wanted to start there, just because if in your heart you don't want to GM, I don't think that you should be beating yourself up over that fact, first and foremost.

Art: Mm-hm

Austin: Other people here? Thoughts.

Art: Yeah, that's why I said the thing about the call-in show, because, like, there's a very important follow-up question, are other people in this group complaining?

Austin: Right.

Art: Like, is this something that you think is a problem, or is this something that other people think is a problem? Because there's a chance that, like, the other people don't have a problem with what you're doing. Everyone has different things they're comfortable with, everyone has different skills, and like... you don't have to feel bad for playing to your strengths, if no one is trying to make you feel bad

Austin: right.

Janine: and facilitating GM-less games still counts, like you're still...

Austin: Yeah, absolutely.

Janine: you're still... you're familiarizing yourself with things so that other people can be kind of eased into them... like that's still worth something.

Austin. Totally. Jack, do you have any thoughts before we take the second part of this question, maybe?

Jack: Um... (Really considering) No.

Austin (laughing): Okay. Well, then... how about this--

(Janine laughing)

Jack: My thoughts are more the second part of the question...

Austin: So, the second part of the question for me is, like: Okay, maybe Rick knows who they are better than we do, and they're like, 'No, I wanna do this. I wanna start GM-ing.' Do you have any advice on how to get over GM-ing anxiety, motherfucker?

(Janine laughs)

Austin: so, do you have any advice for getting over that anxiety, uh... specifically for-for... in a situation where you might end up GM-ing for someone new to the hobby, and also for people who aren't great with coming up with new plot on the spot?

Art: Ugh, it's-- this is really hard, because it's not a group of friends? It's a loosely affiliated group? Like, it doesn't... it sounds like these are largely strangers?

Austin: Yeah...

Art: But like i think the general... the general, like, comedy advice I think is important, here. That no one is showing up to this to be mad about someone doing a bad job at GM-ing, and give you a hard time about it--

(Jack laughs)

Art: --like, people are coming to have fun, and you have to, like, sort of just live in their desire to have fun.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Yeah. Really briefly, people who are watching: remember I made that joke about hackers...

(Janine and Jack laugh)

Austin: and like, hey, if you're watching this and you're not supposed to be, you're a hacker who blah blah blah. Well, quick note: patreon changed the way that they do, like, what tier and above should have access. They made it, like, a bunch of, like, check-boxes, instead of a drop-down box, and so what I did was make it accessible to the Hacker tier and everyone who's paying *less* than that a month, instead of the Hacker tier and everyone who's playing-- paying *more* than that a month?

Janine: Oh, boy...

Jack (laughing): Oh, my god.

Austin: Oh, well, here we are. I've changed it, so if you got in that window: nice work. You're a hacker. (Austin laughing)

Jack: This episode sponsored by Gritty.

Austin (laughs): Exactly!

Jack: Hacked open the doors!

Austin: You're already here. You know? Uh, I've changed it, but anyway...

Jack: Yeah, welcome!

Austin: Um, sorry for derailing this question... Um, but speaking of railing! This is another thing: is railroading is okay to get, when you're getting your feet... especially in one-shots. Um... Railroading is this, like, really dirty word inside of tabletop roleplaying games. Uh, especially in this particular moment, um, where so many games are about... maybe not *exactly*, like... there's the old school renaissance, which is still very much more about a much more designed space, but it's still not pro-railroading... um, in any case... sorry, I'm getting *deep* into some bullshit. (sighs) I think if you listen to a show like ours... where... I do my best to be *really* open-ended, in terms of... what the players and the characters can get up to, and where I-- at the very least, that's an aspirational goal, and not... if not a lived ideal, week-to-week. It can seem like that's the only way to do it. But this is a weekly game of one-shots. This isn't a big campaign. And in a one-shot, especially, you can get really focused on your... on your prep, and you can do things that are kind of goofy, in terms of like denying players some degree of access to things, right? You can say, like, "oh, yeah, all the cell phones on this island are-- don't work, and all the bridges are... are blocked." you can say, like--

Jack (as GM): "The Joker's here."

Austin: The Joker's here! The Joker showed up. Now, I know we're not playing a superhero game. I know that this is just a workday comedy game-- it's like *The Office*-- but it happens to be happening while the Joker is here (laughs).

(Jack laughs)

Austin: So you lost access to the-- to leaving. You're allowed to-- to do that, especially when you're getting your legs, right? The thing to do is to, like, be willing to take... take steps when they do end up still breaking your prep to make sure everyone's having a good time, and not get

too... to try not to push them too quickly back onto your path. But when you're first getting your legs, I really think it's okay to, to-- especially for a one-shot-- to be like, here's a cool adventure for them to go on. It's very well structured, um, and to start there, and to not beat yourself up over that.

Jack: And... And on top of that... you know, y-you're talking about finding the space to have fun. I feel like the thing I find really helpful when I'm approaching something that I don't have a lot of experience with, is when people say things like, "Well, this specific thing has worked for me in the past," or, "This kind of framework has worked for me in the past." and i think... yeah, leaning... leaning into a more, uh, trying to find another word other than railroading... leaning into a more linear sort of structure... is good. But... but also two sort of things I find really help both as a player and when I've had to do GM-ing in the past is... you want to... sometimes it's helpful to think of yourself as the stick kind of just swirling up all the mud at the bottom of the river for the player. And... if you can ask yourself, "what do the players really want to happen in this moment, and what do the players really NOT want to happen in this moment?" and play with those things... that, I find, is a really... useful way as a sort of facilitator, or as a GM for moving a scene into a place where you feel like it should go...

Austin: Yeah...

Jack: Like some of my favorite moments of Austin GM-ing, that I've learned from the most, is when Austin arrives and just screws stuff up for us--

(Austin laughs)

Jack: --in an embodied way. Like, you know, you never want to be the GM that's just like, "And then a rock falls on your head." but sometimes Austin will just be like, "The person you want to see the least right now has walked into the room." Um... and I feel that that's just a great way to get... get the improv going, um, a-and-and begin to hand stuff over to players' prep. You know, put some of the onus on, like, the players responding to a thing, uh, rather than it just being you.

Austin: Mm-hm.

Jack: Also, listen to the... listen to the flags that the players are giving you. What are players interested in experiencing in these stories, in one way or another? And very often they'll tell you without telling you? And also you can just ask them, right? You can just say, like--

Austin: Yeah.

Jack (as GM): "What is it about this story that's exciting to you?" Um--

Art: Yeah, with a new player I would be more explicit about it, because... I think it takes a while for people to figure out what they're really flagging...?

Jack: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Austin: There are things where.... So, so.... This was... a year ago now that I did the Apocalypses World for Giant Bomb, and Dan Rykert, it was the first time he'd ever played a Tabletop Roleplaying-- that's not true. But it was the first time I'd ever run something for him. He'd done a *little* bit of D&D or Pathfinder, but in a way that was deeply antagonistic to everyone else at the table. And the--

Art: Did you just say--

Janine: He was playing Rick Flare in that, wasn't he?

Austin: He was playing Rick Flare, as a fighter...

Janine: [indistinguishable] *Pathfinder* game...

Art: Did you just say that... that no one... that people play without you... it's not Tabletop Roleplaying? Is that what you just said?

Austin: Yeah. Uh-huh. Yeah. Uh-huh. Um... the thing that I did with him to bring him on board was... and this is, I think, a pretty good trick no matter what... um, is to be *very* direct. To say, "What do you want? What's the outcome you want in this sequence? What's the thing you want to see happen?" And then to break that down into smaller goals for that person, because I think a lot of people come to the table, and they think in a big... in a *big* sense. "I want to kill the bad guy..."

Jack (as player): "I wanna be the king!"

Austin (as GM): "I wanna be the king." Like, well, how do you become the king? What's the first step? Let's zoom in a little bit, there...

Jack: Gonna need to get a crown.

Austin: Gotta get a crown. Kay, where do you go to get the crown, Jack?

Jack: Crown... shop!

Austin: Uh, the shop's closed. They close on Sundays.

[SOMEONE]: Aw, no!

Jack: Got to steal a crown!



Austin: Ok, well. Ok, so you're gonna break into this place-- Now we're going somewhere. So you wanna get wealth so you can be a king one day, got it.

(Jack laughs)

Austin: and you can work down that path, and kind of help in that direction. The... second part of that with...with those sorts of questions, and kind of like getting them to flag things, 'cause Art's right, it can be hard... to-to get people to say this is the thing that they want, necessarily, or this is what they're excited about... is to be... is actually to do something that someone in the chat just said. Ashley said it, in the chat. You can say... "Ok, we're gonna play this game. And I'm... I didn't prep for you guys to leave this fuckin' island. I didn't prep for... like, we're just gonna play this game out," and it's okay to...[for] you as the GM to say, "what I really would love is for everyone to stay in this possibility space. I *know* you could betray the team, but because I had a limited amount of time to prep, please don't betray the team for this run. You're playing characters who are loyal to each other." Um. and there are ways to do that that don't feel restrictive. Something like Masks does it really well. Where Masks says, "at the beginning of the game you are neither loved, nor hunted." and that's just true, right? And so that doesn't necessarily say you couldn't be a bad person deep in your heart, but it does say you haven't been killing people. You haven't been, like, getting away with murder. You're-- People know who you are as a superhero, and they know what you've been doing, and it limits a little bit, and restricts a little bit, enough of the way to keep people on your prep, you know? Um...

Janine: Um--

Austin: Ok... any, any other stuff here?

Janine: I'd also just say that, like... in terms of the... in terms of... i think we've addressed, like, how to limit what you come up... or how to limit what you have to improvise, and stuff, but I think there's also something to be said for, like, uh... I mean... the thing I try to bear in mind whenever I'm GM-ing for a group is, like, time in those moments where I know I have to come up with something RIGHT NOW--

Austin: Mm-hm

Janine: --Time, um, is not... the way I'm experiencing time is not the way everyone else at the table is experiencing time.

Austin: Right.

Janine: You know what I mean?

Austin: Yep.

Janine: I'm in that mode of like "I need to think of something right fucking now." So, for me... a minute feels like an hour.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Whereas for them it just feels like a minute. Um. So, I have to often remind myself, to like, okay, well... you know, I can take a few extra seconds to figure this out. I can take a few extra seconds to, like, more importantly... instead of doing the knee-jerk idea of, uh, "There's a goblin behind the door!"

Austin: Right.

Janine: I can, like, take that extra ten seconds or whatever and zoom out on the sort of world that our--

Austin: mm-hmm

Janine: --That we're working on here, and, like see the big picture. Um... It's often enough time for like, if I am... If I have my notes and stuff, I can switch over to a page where I've just like put a bunch of touchstones of just, like--

Austin: Yep.

Janine (as GM): "Here are things I'm not... I'm not like using straight up right now, but things I think have a place in this world as part of prep." Um, I'll like sample stuff like that...

Austin: and then you can pull them in.

Janine: Yeah. Sometimes I'll even, if the... if the book I'm using has like stats and things of things that I *think* could fit in the things that happen? I'll just like copy and paste those into my notes--

Austin: Yeah

Janine: --so they're just, like, right there. Um... I just try and like pool... and like things like that, especially if you're running the same system a few different times, you can just reuse some stuff. Like if you build a little bank of, like, things that might be fun to throw in at some point...

Austin: Totally.

Janine: Then... you can refer back to that when you're having those moments.

Austin: Definitely. And really the last piece of advice that I have here is just like the best advice is to continue to do it.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Like, I like... I like Autumn in Hieron, but I like Counter/Weight way more. [laughs] Right? Um, and that's because I spent a year recording Autumn in Hieron and then... it's doing the work, like doing the thing does just... give you a familiarity with that sort of... that sort of rhythm of thought. Where, as Janine just said... you can end up saying words about a part of the world, about the character, about a... part of the setting, so that you're continuing to speak with your group, while the rest of your mind is scrambling for what the next step is. And you develop that. Like, it really is just a skill that you have to practice at. And it comes. It can be really, really hard to develop it. Like, I'm not... I don't think this is, like, "Just put in three hours of GM-ing a week, and you, too, can be an incredible improviser!" [Janine laughs] but I actually do think that is the road to get there, no matter what. Is... just... continue to do the thing. All right. Um... next question. Sound good?

Art: Yeah.

Austin: It's from Jamie, who says, "I'm starting a new campaign, running the curse of Strahd, which is a gothic horror, Wizards of the Coast-published adventure, but as I've been reading through it to prep, I keep finding aspects of it that don't sit well with me. My players and I are all fans of the aesthetics and feel of gothic horror, but the published adventure seems rife with troubling themes and content that I know are endemic to the genre, like harmful stereotypes of Romani, and poor treatment of disabled characters and women.

[0:18:50]

TheLostlarrikin transcribing from here

AUSTIN [cont'd]: "I've been making tweaks and changes to the setting and the plot as I go, but strange and potentially uncomfortable material keeps popping up. Do you have any advice for playing games or telling stories in historically messy genres? I do think there is a cool story to tell both in the genre and this adventure specifically- excuse me- but I'm worried about not catching some weird / bad aspect of the story and making people at my table uncomfortable. Any advice would be appreciated."

AUSTIN [cont'd]: Jack I thought about this because you just finished a Let's Play of Silent Hill 2, uh-

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Which is certainly a game that is- it's not a tabletop game obviously but it is a game that plays in a genre space which is rife with some really harmful tropes. And it's a game that falls into those traps pretty-

JACK [cross]: Mm. Very frequently

AUSTIN: Not too often but, but, yeah. I'm in a pretty- I'm watching that LP through now, um, and I'm like "ooh, yikes, okay." Ah, and it's frustrating because it's also in a place where it's also doing really fascinating work as far as game design goes, or, or in far as-

JACK [cross]: Yeah.

AUSTIN: -you know, trying to communi- there's a bit where James just keeps going down into holes and it's great, except-

JACK [cross]: Just increasingly frightening.

AUSTIN: Increasingly frightening and increasingly into spaces where marginalised people and their suffering are used to-

JACK [cross]: Yep.

AUSTIN: To solve puzzles.

JACK: You know Historical Society, Austin?

AUSTIN: I'm, I'm in a prison, Jack.

JACK [cross]: Yep.

AUSTIN: I've been through the Historical Society, I've gone through the hospital, there is a lot happening. Um, but yeah. So I'm curious for you as someone who just came out of playing a video game about that stuff, and as someone who tells stories, and, and who recently wrote an adventure for Fall of London, which is a game that, that takes place in a world that certainly is adjacent to some of this stuff. I'm curious how you, how you think about this?

JACK: Totally, um. I think that like, there was a tweet doing the rounds the other day, I think it was by Michael Lutz? Shout out to Michael Lutz, um-

AUSTIN: Always shout outs to Michael Lutz.

JACK: About uh, Evangelion, uh, where he was just like-

AUSTIN: G, gelion, I'm- err, uh, umm, err

JACK: I've never- you know this is one of those situations where you [*laughs*] hear a word for the first time-

AUSTIN [*cross*]: I know-

JACK: for the first time-

AUSTIN [*cross*]: I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

JACK: Ah, no, it's fine. But like-

JANINE: Neon Genesis *Evangeline*.

AUSTIN [*cross*]: I mean-

JACK: Neon. Genesis. Evangeline.

AUSTIN: Mhm.

JANINE: That's my name-

AUSTIN [*cross*]: It's- You should just-

JANINE: That's my character in the next sci-fi season

AUSTIN: [*laughs*] You could just call it what the Japanese means which is "a gospel for a new century."

JACK [*cross*]: That's an incredible, incredible name.

AUSTIN [*cross*]: It's a fucking incredible name. [*Janine laughs*] Anyway, but also that's a show that has a lot of this stuff in it. You go-

JACK [*cross*]: Also it's-

ART [*cross*]: Call it Evo. Just, um...

[*Austin and Jack laugh*]

AUSTIN: That's what people mean when they say it's evo-season, right?

JACK: God, I love-

ART [cross]: Yeah.

JACK: Yeah that's great. Um, Michael said something along the lines of, and I'm paraphrasing, like, back in the day we all watched it and went "that's messed up" and we didn't have anywhere to post about it. [Austin laughs] Ah, which is an incredible tweet because it, it, it, it encompasses both the posting about the messed up stuff and also that it is messed up. Like, that tweet doesn't take away from the fact that, like, the thirteen year old you or whatever looks at the screen and goes, like, "damn that's messed up." Um, and I feel that, like, often when I look at this stuff in, in my own response to work, I try and get closer to that, like, "damn that's messed up" as a start point to go, like, "alright, fine, something here is making me uncomfortable and something here-"

AUSTIN [cross]: Umhm...

JACK: "Is, is- and something here is weird and difficult and unpleasant." And I wanna try and get to the heart of why I find this weird and difficult and unpleasant, and why other people find it weird and difficult and unpleasant. And in settings like Silent Hill 2, and in, ah, you know, um, not fall of london itself, but the Victorian literature of the time-

AUSTIN [cross]: Mhm...

JACK: around that. And also H. P. Lovecraft. Austin and Ali and I had a great conversation about H. P. Lovecraft. Over and over again you stumble across these moments where you go, like, "oh my god, something here is really up, um, and it's existing in this millur of stuff that is maybe interesting to me, or stuff that I just feel is kind of bland. Um, and there's- there are these harsh points sticking out in the middle." And, and when I come to that stuff I keep- I, I, I kind of try and think of two things. One is to tell the stories that I *wish were told* in those spaces, or that I wish were told with these things. Um. Meg Jayanth, who wrote 80 Days-

AUSTIN: Mmhm...

JACK: Um, talks about this really, really well where she talks about, you know, writing a Victorian set story, adapting Around The World in 80 Days, and, and, and knowing that it is *existing* in a world that, you know, was going to feature at its heart questions about gender, and questions about colonialism and imperialism, um, and, and, and, and Meg took it as an opportunity to tell stories that didn't, you know, take away from those things, or, or pretend that they didn't happen, but, but center different voices in those stories, use as an opportunity to tell the story of a rebellion, or-

AUSTIN [cross]: Mhm...

JACK: Of a push back against colonialism, or about marginalised people and positions that they might not otherwise be in. Um. So when I look at settings like, [*sighs*] like your gothic horrors, and like your Lovecrafts, and when I think about the sort of stories that I'm interested in, it's an opportunity to go "what do I feel- what am I saddened by what is happening here, and, and, and in what ways can I refocus to talk more critically to talk about that than is perhaps in the original source material."

AUSTIN: Yeah I-, you know one of the things that I come back to a lot is, [*mumbles*]. Uh, so we just read *The Ballad of Black Tom*, over on Waypoint, which is a book by Victor LaValle, who is a black horror writer who grew up reading- I think in an interview he said his four, like, 'horror gods' growing up, um, were Stephen King, Shirley Jackson, Clive Barker, and H. P. Lovecraft-

JACK [*cross*]: Oh wow.

AUSTIN: and only as a young man was he like "oh shit" like-

JACK [*cross*]: There's a lot here.

AUSTIN: There's a lot here. And with Lovecraft specifically, much of Lovecraft's work ends up being about the fear of the other, the fear of miscegenation, and the erasure of purity, largely ethnic purity, fear of the foreign in general. And the question that LaValle ends up facing, or the thing that he does, that I try to encourage writers to do when they're playing in these boxes, is- He ends up writing the book *The Ballad of Black Tom* which is like a rewrite of *The Horror at Red Hook*, which is another Lovecraft story. And a lot of people in the cosmic horror space, they'll attempt to sidestep the stuff that is problematic inside of Lovecraft. The horrors of the unknown, the horrors of, you know, multi-tentacled faced beasts and such, that isn't a line with Lovecraft's racism and xenophobia. They try to side step it and just like "okay we just won't have any characters of colour so it's clear that we're not making an analogy between this Lovecraftian horror and this character of colour" or, or "oh, we'll just fill it with characters of colour. There'll just be a bunch of black and brown people here, and women, and that will be enough to show that-

JACK [*cross*]: Mmm...

AUSTIN: "That we're taking this seriously." But that isn't enough. Like, it isn't enough to sprinkle in diversity and say that you've fixed the genre. What LaValle does in *Ballad of Black Tom* is tries to understand what the core of the genre is that appeal to him to begin with, what is the core of cosmic horror that works for him, and what happens when you shift the perspective character just a little bit into a position where what seems like the necessary outcome of that horror becomes almost laughable. And so in that story, just to spoil it very little, just to give you a taste of what this is, the character Tom is a black, kind of con-man, who goes into white neighbourhoods with a guitar and a case, and puts on his best jazz man look, and takes them for what they're worth. He knows three songs, he doesn't know how to play the guitar anywhere

near as well as his father, and he stumbles into a kind of cosmic horror situation, and along the way he realises that when the white men who have gone down this path have faced the horror, what they see is indifference, and they're so afraid of cosmic indifference, they've been taught their whole lives that they are the most important things in the world, the world revolves around western culture and around white men, and to have that kind of taken away from them- because to look at cthulhu is to know that you are nothing- is terrifying. But for him he knows that there is something worse than indifference, which is cruelty, which is systemic, you know, structural cruelty. It is the police, you know, hurting people like him every day, and the bulk of Americans not batting an eyelash. And by making that perspective shift, LaValle is able to *keep* the elements of cosmic horror that first drew him in, but he doesn't, he engages with how those same elements would be distributed among people who either were completely ignored or vilified in the original works. And so for me, like, my biggest piece of advice is that when you see that stuff, and you're like "okay, we have to get rid of this, we have to make sure this is a fun game to play", I- this is like a big ask maybe, because people are allowed to just have fun, but like, I want you- I would advise removing the harmful stereotypes of Romani, but not removing the characters who were supposed to *be* Romani and instead shifting it a little and saying "How do I modify this game? How do I modify this adventure in such a way that these people who are being stereotyped are instead complex, real characters who- and what is their perspective on all of this? How do I make them feel real? And how do I call attention to the faults of the genre instead of pretending like- just scrubbing it clean." Like that's the number one thing I would push against, that sort of, like, "Okay well now they're just aren't any- there isn't someone there to be problematic-"

[29:12]

JACK: Nothing is problematic in this story now!

AUSTIN: Yes. Yeah.

ART: Yeah. I've... I've spent... a reasonable amount of time during this answer reading the uh Fandom wiki page for Curse of Strad.

AUSTIN: Great, thank you!

ART: Um... Which is not *super* helpful. It has, like, you know. It has, like... like, in-depth table of contents and, like, a very brief summary. So I'm not there yet. But like... I... Hm... Yeah, I think you're giving very good advice here and also take all of that lens and look at everything in... certainly Dungeons and fucking Dragons!

[Austin laughs, Janine chuckles]

AUSTIN: Is your fear here, Art, that there's just no saving it?



ART: No.

AUSTIN: Okay.

ART: My fear here is that like... Is that like...

[0:30:00]

ART: Don't get too focused on this and then don't...

AUSTIN: [cross] I see.

ART: [cross] ...and then don't look at the orcs. You know?

AUSTIN: Yea-yea-yeah. Yes. [chuckles]

ART: [cross] Uhm...

AUSTIN: Right! don't make the game where you're like: "okay, well, I've gotten rid of all of the terrible Romani stereotypes. *Instead* they're gonna kill these barbarous savage orcs."

[Janine chuckles uncomfortably]

ART: Right.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

ART: [cross] Or any like... I understand that Wizards of the Coast is trying their level best at this point. That...

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

ART: That modern Wizards of the Coast is doing better than maybe they've ever done before. But it's not great. Um...

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Yeah. Yeah.

ART: You know. I don't know what a Mongelfolk is, but it makes me nervous!

[Janine vocalizes discomfort]

AUSTIN: [cross] Yikes!

ART: [cross] In the “Monsters and NPCs” section!

AUSTIN: Maybe it's mongel...folk.<sup>1</sup>

ART: If it's mongelfolk,<sup>2</sup> it might be fine. That could be anything. I don't know what that means.

JANINE: Uhm... [chuckles, then hastily] Just because you don't know what it means doesn't mean it's okay. Uhm...

AUSTIN: Okay, Art, I think you meant mongreelfolk! [chuckles]

JANINE: [cross] Uhm, yeah. No... Wow.

AUSTIN: [cross] Which is honestly not that much better at all!

ART: No-no. I'm... The thing I'm seeing is m-o-n-g-e-l-f-o-l-k.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I think that's a mistake on the fandom wiki part.

ART: Hmm.

JANINE: Uhm.

[Austin sighs]

ART: Well, then keep that! Keep mongelfolk!<sup>3</sup> [chuckles] And...

[Austin & Janine chuckle uncomfortably]

JANINE: A thing I was gonna say is that, like, just in terms of... In terms of the part of this where it is like “what if I miss something” — because that's a thing that, like, all the prep in the world will not save you from, missing something — all the, like, careful change... Like, you might still miss something.

AUSTIN: Yep.

JANINE: The thing I would say to that is, like... [chuckles] This is not the most actionable advice, but try to cultivate an atmosphere at your table where if something does slip through it's not going to, like, kill the mood. Like, I think... I think we're usually okay at this...

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounces it with a soft g, like it rhymes with “cudgel”

<sup>2</sup> Pronounces it like Austin.

<sup>3</sup> Pronounces it with a soft g.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] ...of, like, if something comes up that we're that we don't love we can be pretty candid with each other. We just like: "uh can we... I don't know if that's... this is okay?"

[Austin chuckles]

JANINE: Like... It doesn't... I don't think... It usually... In the cases... [laughs] I'm being really diplomatic and careful with my words! Most of the time it's not an issue because we just have a sort of understanding that, like, we all have the same goal. I guess, is what I want to say. Is, like, we all kind of want to tell the same kind of story and in that context when... or *if* something comes up that we're not really sure about then... it's not a mood killer. It's not a thing where everyone's going to leave the table sour because we can all talk through it and course correct.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: And that atmosphere is really important if you are telling stories that are kind of high risk in that sense, but you all kind of want to shape them to be something you're proud of.

AUSTIN: Two things there: one, is like you're totally right. That... Part of that is about having the conversation ahead of time to develop that rapport. Because we all know at our table what we care about and we know... If I introduce a character who was, like, very clearly a weird Romani stereotype I hope someone would be like: "yo? Austin?" [chuckles]

JANINE: Uhum.

AUSTIN: "Hey. Um. This thing." Right? I mean, we've spoken before about there being a point at the middle of Twi... I mean, Twilight Mirage in general is... is us pushing against really often... loaded and problematic things: space colonization is not like... a clean fantasy to have. Do you know what I mean? Um. And so there was a lot of very careful work done to try to make sure we weren't fucking up. But... And that happened because of collaboration. Right? Like... I again, Jack, you you can speak to the time that you Ali and I sat in Outback and pondered over how the fuck to deal with the Advent Group stuff. Right?

JACK: Right. [cross] Right.

AUSTIN: [cross] That wasn't just like... "and then we'll roll with it! It's cool!" It was like "okay, let's sit down and talk about what it means to negotiate with fascists." And, like figure out a response!

JACK: [cross] Well, what was interesting about that conversation was, like, we came out of it with this kind of... an answer as grim as it was interesting, right? Which is just like "well let's put Advent Group on screen."

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. Yeah.

JACK: [cross] And let's make their actions have consequences. And let's have the players negotiate... negotiate both... [half-chuckles] negotiate with Advent Group and also negotiate with what it means to be in proximity with Advent Group.

AUSTIN: Right. Right.

JACK: And that was kind of a scary moment, right? Because it felt like a real commitment to this story that we were about to tell? To go like...

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: "Okay. Fine." There's a version of Twilight Mirage where it's just like "it's a space utopia and we're not putting any fascists on screen." Um...

AUSTIN: Yeah. Exactly. [cross] Everyone is chill.

JACK: [cross] But we did put fascists on screen.

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Uhm. The other part of this is that... [sighs] I think maybe this thing also has sub-two-different-things [chuckles] "Two Things: Austin Walker." "The Austin Walker Story: Two Things." Um. There is... Once you have that... once you've cultivated that you should be able to have that experience at your table where... I think everyone should be responsible with the stories that they're telling both in their personal lives and in public, but...

Four or five friends at a table is different than a megaphone in the street. And so if you fuck up... Right? You know, if you do make mistakes at the table, please understand that... hopefully, that those are mistakes between friends that are an opportunity for you to learn and improve. And that you're not on high alert for not making any misstep ever. We *all* make so many mistakes both in our craft and in our morals and in our... and in our vision of the world. We are...

We all grew up in a space that was, like, *deeply* programmatic. Like, it... We have been programmed to do certain things and to respond in certain ways and to accept certain aesthetic choices and to make associations. And when you're playing an improvisational game those are... some of those deep associations that you haven't thought actively about in a long time will bubble to the top and you will... end up dealing in stereotype.

And when that happens: one, if you're being active in your play and you're being critical as you play you should recognize that... or someone else should; and two, the thing that I'm going to judge someone on is what they do from there. Which is, like "oh wait, hm. This is not the right voice for that character. I'm... Okay. I'm gonna take a step back and fix this." Do

that. Or say, you know, someone comes to you after the game and says: “hey, I really had a good time, but... blah blah blah.” Like... Take that under consideration. Bring that in and adjust from there.

No one needs to be perfect on this stuff. And... In fact, I fear sometimes that, like... we are certainly in the age of instant online discourse very eager to have the least faith in people? And that comes from a place of pain. And comes from a place of seeing people who we give our trust to cont... continuously disappoint us.

But at the table with your friends who you know are attempting to do something right here — I'm not saying give them the benefit of the doubt. But I'm saying be collaborative in... chastisement. And hope to produce a collaborative... learning experience. And not one where players are looking for the opportunity to... Not “looking for the opportunity,” but hopefully one where people can be collaborative in their response. You know what I mean? That it... It's so much about what is happening in a private space with friends should be different than what's happening — again — you know, on your Twitter feed. So that's a big thing for me.

And again, the second thing I keep pushing back is: just figure out what you like about the genre. Write it down! Then go around in a circle! What are the things we like about this? Is it just the buildings? Is it just... Is it vampires? Is it... You know, what is it? And try to figure out what those things are at a deep-deep-deep level, so you can bring them up and focus on those. Instead of just kind of taking the package deal and feeling you can't change anything.

ART: For sure. And I think... An extent of this is that WotC<sup>4</sup> is your enemy here.

AUSTIN: Right. Sure.

ART: That, like, when you're... If you're sitting here and you find something in that book that you didn't come with... you didn't, you know, pre-check, if you, like, realize in the middle of a scene, or... you know, middle of anything. Like, “this is getting to a place that makes me and/or others at this table uncomfortable.” It's not your fault. It's the people who made that book's fault.

AUSTIN: I see what you're saying. [cross] You're right.

JANINE: [cross] Oh, Wot-C!<sup>5</sup>

AUSTIN: WatC. Yeah. Wizard of the Coast. That's... Yeah.

JANINE: I thought you meant the ice-man. [laughs]

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<sup>4</sup> Pronounces it as “what-see.”

<sup>5</sup> Pronounces it like Art.

AUSTIN: Who?

JANINE: [chuckling] The frozen ice mummy. His name is, like... Ötzi,<sup>6</sup> or something?

AUSTIN: [cross] Wh... I'm...

JANINE: [cross] And I was like "what's his point here?" Is this, like, is this a saying? I don't know!  
[chuckling]

AUSTIN: Frozen Iceman?!?

JANINE: The iceman!

JACK: [cross] The ice...

AUSTIN: [cross] Is that Robert Drake? Bobby Drake? What?

ART: [cross, chuckles] I also don't know what Janine is talking about.

JACK: [cross] Frozen ice...

JANINE: [cross] The Ice... Hang on. I'm gonna type Ötzi the ice...

JACK: [cross] ...mummy.

JANINE: Yeah. His name's Ötzi.

AUSTIN: [cross] Ohh!

JACK: [cross] Ötzi!

JANINE: [cross] Also called The Iceman, the Similaun... man.

JACK: [chuckles] Now, in cases like this Ötzi is your enemy.

AUSTIN: Yeah. [laughs]

JACK: He's gonna come for you...!

JANINE: [laughing] Understand why I was confused, please!

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<sup>6</sup> Pronounces it as "oat-sy."

AUSTIN: AKA The Iceman, AKA The Similaun Man AKA The Man from Hauslabjoch AKA The Tyrolian Iceman AKA the Haus[la]bjoch<sup>7</sup> Mummy. Houseja... I don't know how to pronounce that. I'm sorry, I'm butchering it. Great akas right here.

JACK: "The well-preserved natural mummy of a man who lived between 3400 and 3100 BCE."

AUSTIN: [cross] Love it.

JACK: [cross] And he's coming for you.

AUSTIN: [cross] He is!

ART: [cross] This man is also your enemy.

AUSTIN: [cross] And be careful...

JANINE: [cross] I think he has, like, six... sick tattoos.

AUSTIN: He has a copper ax!

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: And the right shoe!

JACK: Yup!

AUSTIN: I'm looking at... He had a quiver with 14 arrows! Made of vibranium! Oh, that doesn't say vibranium. This is viburnum... which is some sort of shrub. [laughs]

JACK: Are you... Are you wearing a left shoe right now? Beware!

AUSTIN: Don't look down! Whatever you do, don't look down at your left shoe! [chuckling] Ötzi is there!

JANINE: Also, yeah. He is an ice mummy. So, like, if you look that up there are gonna be gross pictures he's a mummified ice... It's right in the name.

AUSTIN: Yo!

JANINE: [cross] It's on the can. [chuckles]

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<sup>7</sup> Pronounces it as "house-block"

AUSTIN: [cross] I gotta be honest. Ötzi is cut!

[Janine chuckles]

AUSTIN: [chuckling] This naturalistic reconstruction of Ötzi...

JACK: Oh, damn!

AUSTIN: ...from the South Tyrol Museum of Archeology? Yo, my guy! Look at these chaps he's got going on! I don't know if you noticed, his thighs are showing! He's out here. He's showing it off.

JACK: Oh, yeah.

AUSTIN: He also has a holster of some kind? But nothing in it.

ART: Where is... Where are you posting this?

AUSTIN: I'm just looking at the Ötzi page... [cross] On...

ART: [cross] Oh...

[Janine chuckles]

JACK: [cross] How do we feel about his shoes? That he's lost one of?

AUSTIN: Uhm! You know!

JANINE: The fact he even has one is amazing considering how old he is.

AUSTIN: Exactly. I will have lost all of my shoes by the time I am... six... five thousand years old.

[Austin & Jack chuckle]

JANINE: I was just last night watching a thing about how we basically have no clothing from poor people surviving from hundreds and hundreds of years ago because it just... no one...

AUSTIN: [cross] 'Cause no one saved it!

JANINE: [cross] Because it was just, like, would get passed down until it was scraps and then they turned into of paper. So the fact he even has one shoe is a fucking miracle.



JACK: [cross] He has tattoos!

JANINE: [cross] Which is: be a saint.

ART: [cross] So now he's an ice aristocrat?

JANINE: [cross] Yeah, yeah. I told you he... He has sick tattoos!

AUSTIN: Wait, I missed the tats.

JANINE: I think the theory with the tattoos is that... I might be confusing him with another ice mummy. But I think tha... I think the deal with his tattoos is the placement of them and the fact that some of them are, like, retraced...

AUSTIN: [cross] Hmmm...!

JANINE: [cross] ...leads people to think that they're, like medical tattoos? For, like, joint pain and stuff?

JACK: [cross] Ohh!

JANINE: [cross] Or, like, little injuries?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: Yeah.

JACK: Huh.

AUSTIN: 61 tattoos.

JACK: That's a lot of tattoos!

AUSTIN: [cross] Hell yes.

JANINE: [cross] He had a hard life! Got a lot of joint pain. Didn't have any Aleve back then!

JACK: [chuckles] Uh... apparently he's cursed. Which, I mean, of course he is. [cross] I don't...

JANINE: [cross] Everything's cursed.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JACK: [cross] Look, everything's cursed.

AUSTIN: Everything's cursed.

JANINE: Honestly, he shouldn't be cursed. He should be thankful that he wasn't... he wasn't, like, found and eaten...

AUSTIN: [cross] He... [chuckles softly]

JANINE: [cross] ...by the... by that whole situation. That whole mummy eating thing that happened.

JACK: [cross] Oh, yeah!

AUSTIN: [cross] I thought you were gonna say he should be...

JANINE: He should be blessing us.

AUSTIN: ...he should be... he should be thankful that he has a shoe.

[Janine & Austin chuckle]

JACK: He should also be thankful that he has a shoe. [cross, from a distance] How did he die?!?

AUSTIN: [cross, sighs] Alright. We should get back to these questions.

JANINE: We should, yes. Sorry. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Ehm... I think that's our answers for this but Art's... To Art's last point, like: you didn't write this adventure, Wizards of the Coast did. You're allowed to do what Jack and KB do during their *Silent Hill 2* stream which is like: [inhales sharply between teeth] "Ooh this took a weird turn, huh!" And then, ideally — because this is not *Silent Hill 2* and a video game that you can't change unless you're an elite level hacker, which I know some of you are — is...

[Jack chuckles]

AUSTIN: You can change it in... on the spot to some degree... And as a GM it is a thing that you could do ahead of time. So I'm glad you're already doing it. We should keep moving because we are *really* burning cast. That's not what I normally... That's not how I say that in a normal... Anyway. Moving on. This is another fun one. This one's in from Hella Tired Of This Shit. [chuckles]

[Janine laughs]

JACK: [chuckling] Oh, this is a good one.

AUSTIN: They say: Hello Friends, Recently I've been GMing games for a club in my school which has a really long name so we all just call it Nerd Club. However, the president of the club has joined one of the campaigns I run and even though I welcome new players, what he wants out of the club seems to be a personal narrative. He tends to try to become the star of every game we run butting into other player scenes and trying to make his own run longer, or interject them into inappropriate situations. When his attempts to become the star fail he usually tends to try and make life harder for the other players, becoming antagonistic, or just downright difficult.

While this is okay in some games such as *Fiasco*, the other players I have... and I have found that this tends to make play less fun as it can be tiring to face combat or plain uncomfortable situations for both me... Sorry. I don't know if that's "the face combat" or to face combat... Uh... I think "it's time to face combat or playing uncomfortable situations for both me and them." I was right the first time. Do you have any advice on how to deal with players who act like this? Normally, I would just tell him to stop, but his role as the president makes me a bit wary of this approach. Any advice you could give me would be much appreciated. Opening thoughts.

ART: I think that it is just wildly unprofessional of you to take some internal criticism of my work in the later half of Twilight Mirage...

[Austin laughs, Jack & Janine chuckle]

ART: ...pack it up in this fake game club narrative...

[the others laugh more]

ART: ...and then just spring it on me in the middle of a Tips at the Table...

[Austin & Jack laugh]

AUSTIN: [cross] Wow!

JACK: [cross] Look, Art, we've been... We've been talking about it, and...

[Austin & ART chuckle]

AUSTIN: And the thing is... [chuckles] You just... You just cause too many fights! You know.

[ART laughs]

AUSTIN: Um...

JACK: Yo, this guy's suuucks!

AUSTIN: This guy who fucking sucks! [cross] This guy...

JACK: [cross] There's two answers, right? And, like, one answer is just, like... kill him.

AUSTIN: Uh, no. [cross] Jack.

JANINE: [cross] Jack!

JACK: [cross] No, don't kill him.

[ART laughs]

[0:45:00]

JANINE: No!

JACK: No. [cross] But, like...

JANINE: [cross] We are not legally responsible! That was a joke.

JACK: No, no, no. Yes. No, please.

AUSTIN: And also Jack knows in the future you're [whispering] supposed to whisper it. Quietly.  
[cross] Like, conspiratorially.

JACK: [cross] Yeah. Exactly like this.

AUSTIN: [with a faint whisper] Kill him. [chuckles]

JACK: But, like, no.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yes.

JACK: [cross] Maybe there's a conversation that needs to be had here. And I know that this isn't, like... There's two answers that we can give, right? One answer is, like, find ways to mitigate it in play itself.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JACK: And those are things, like: ask questions of the other players — other than him. You know, like...

AUSTIN: Explicitly say.

JACK: Like.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JACK: [cross] “Austin, tell me what the music here is like?” “Austin, did you meet this person's brother?” Etc, etc.

AUSTIN: And if he's interjecting at that point [cross] you can very clearly say...

JACK: [cross] “No, I asked Austin.”

AUSTIN: Yes. Yeah.

JACK: The other thing is — and I know it's really difficult to have these conversations. Especially with people who are in positions of power. Like, I don't want to come out here and just be like “just tell them to go fuck off.” Because he's, like, the president of the club. And you... That's not an easy thing to do.

AUSTIN: It isn't.

JACK: But I think that the situation here warrants a conversation! And you don't need to go up to him and say: “you're an asshole and you're ruining our games.” Even though that might be the case.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: You can say: “we've been talking and, you know, have you thought about doing X?” or “have you thought about the way that the last session went?” And I think that's a conversation that needs to be had.

AUSTIN: I want to underscore something that's going to make me sound deeply Machiavellian.

JACK: [chuckling] Oh Lord!

ART: [cross] Oh, boy!

AUSTIN: [cross] You are in control of this situation. And... In ways that...

JANINE: [cross] Oh, so kill him in the game! [laughs]

AUSTIN: No... Well. Okay. That's actually not what I mean. Um...

JANINE: Uhum.

AUSTIN: It can... In a situation like this I'm 100% with Jack when Jack says that this can feed it's really hard to to confront someone who's in a position of power and I don't want to undersell it. It sounds like a silly thing but being the president of Nerd Club [cross] still is something. It... For real.

JACK: [cross] No. It's for real. Because he could just go, like: "no more game!"

AUSTIN: But. [chuckles] He couldn't do that, Jack. That's the thing.

JACK: [cross] 'Cause then we're just go and play the game elsewhere!

AUSTIN: [cross] Hella Tired Of This Shit... Hella Tired Of This Shit is GMing the games. This guy isn't doing shit. This guy's playing in them. Hella and the rest of their friends could leave and go play elsewhere. And...

JACK: Right.

AUSTIN: By that I don't mean go do that. What I mean is when you... when you do have this conversation with them try to be confident in it because you are the one who is bringing something to the table here. You've already said in this email that the rest of your crew is also *annoyed* by this! Like, you actually have a lot of leverage here to helpfully bring this person into a space where they can learn a lesson about sharing the spotlight...

JACK: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] ...about having fun, and collaborating. And... And it can be — and I want to be so clear — I absolutely understand that this is *terrifying*. It is *hard* to have conversations like this. And it is doubly hard to do that with people who absolutely have a degree of power over spaces in your life. I get what it is like to not want to... not go to... Not be able to go to Nerd Club anymore. Art can vouch for this, right? Like...

ART: Yeah. Uh-huh.

AUSTIN: We... There... A person in my life who fits this mold in a weird opposite way! Like, what if this dude was the GM — and was... was the worst? I can talk to that experience. I know who that person is.

ART: Hmm...

AUSTIN: We've been there. It's... It's tough! And it's *hard* to have those conversations. And it can be... It can be, like, traumatic to have those conversations. But I... And so, like, you know. Godspeed with it! But I want you to at least *know* going into those conversations that you are not in a position of complete... you know... you're not being dominated here.

You're not being like... You have flexibility and strength. You are clearly a skillful person, because you're running a game that this asshole wants to be part of. And all of your friends still want to be part of it! Right? You're still doing something that's fun for them! To some degree...! Because they're doing it despite this fucking asshole!

So go there with strength and confidence in yourself because you have what it takes to continue playing games forever. With people who aren't him. And if he wants to get on the train then he can learn how to ride safely. And if he doesn't then he can fuck off. And that is something that, like... just carry that strength with you as you say this very politely to him and try to, like, bring him onboard. [laughs]

JANINE: I have an idea here that might... It might be a terrible idea. Uhm...

AUSTIN: Uh-oh.

JANINE: It might be the kind of idea that is born out of my lack of experience playing with bad groups...

[Austin chuckles]

JANINE: And my experience of only playing with two extremely good groups. Um... But. This guy wants the story to be... about him. And I wonder if there is a way for you to simultaneously grant and deny that wish...

[Austin sighs]

JANINE: By... If you take that character off the board... [cross] for... for something...

AUSTIN: [cross, chuckles] You do want to kill him!

JANINE: Temporarily!

AUSTIN: Uh-huh.

JANINE: But if you take that character off the board — temporarily — and then have that player, like, help you a little bit with, like: “okay...”

AUSTIN: Hm.

JANINE: “So we’re gonna say, like, what if this character... had disappeared?” What if this character, like, Fantasma’d for a bit? And, like, what if... You know. Why do you think that might be? And, like, what can we... And, like... Have them maybe help you build a scenario around that, but one that they aren’t playing?

AUSTIN: [cross] It is...

JANINE: [cross] So that they can have players engage with their ideas but also maybe see the value in letting players do shit without you?

AUSTIN: I want this to work so bad... [cross] I’ve had so...

JANINE: [cross] But probably wouldn’t?

AUSTIN: [sighs] I am thinking about specific players who played in my games, again, that Art can speak to who weren’t part of my Nerd Club. Who were part of Hofstra University Gamers who... One, were just like... would just be like: “no! I’m just gonna roll a new character.” While this character’s dead. And this is the new star. “I’m gonna... I’m gonna make a character who’s all about avenging my old character.” And then: two, like, I don’t want those... I wouldn’t want this type of person ever near my prep!

JANINE: [cross] Yeah...

AUSTIN: [cross] I don’t... Do you know what I mean? With a good group? 100%! It would be great! It would be great. But it’s... I think the most important thing is just having the conversation. For real. Because otherwise... Like, there were times... there are times when the thing you’re talking about is something I will do.

I think I’ve said this on this podcast or on Drawing Maps but like part of the reason I wanted... part of the reason that Dre ended up being in the worldbuilding episode for... Not worldbuilding episode. The faction games for COUNTER/Weight was that coming out of the first season of Hieron I could tell that both Dre and Nick both had very traditional tabletop role-playing game experiences, and I wanted to get them rapid fire framing scenes, and getting into the idea of playing characters who are not their characters. Like, the thing you’re pitching. Right? Exactly, Janine.



JANINE: [cross] Uhum. [chuckles] Yeah...

AUSTIN: [cross] Except they weren't terrible assholes. They were just used to playing *D&D* and *Pathfinder*. And were interested in developing that side of their kind of storytelling game apparatus. And I think it worked really well! Obviously, Sylvi<sup>8</sup> stepped in instead of Nick there.

But for both of them it was fantastic to see them blossom as storytellers and as role-players because who they are after that season, after — you know, months and months and months of actually figuring out how to jump from character to character and thinking about character priorities — like, coming back to to Hieron after COUNTER/Weight Thrandir immediately took on this, like, whole other... angle or element (I guess that's what I'm looking for), and Ephrim, like came off the fucking starting line in a blast! Like, it was great! And that, I think, that method does work. It's just...

JANINE: [cross] Uhum.

AUSTIN: [cross] ...you have to have buy-in from people for it to be a thing. And I want to be clear, like, that wasn't like a punishment for Dre in any way!

[Janine chuckles]

AUSTIN: [cross, chuckling] It was literally me being, like: "okay, I can tell that Dre hasn't done this type of role playing a lot. Let's do it! Let's do a bunch of it! It'll be fun as hell!" And it was! And, like, that made COUNTER/Weight so special! So... I think you're dead on but you need to have some buy-in.

JANINE: It also depends a lot on, like... It's hard to know from this question but is this person just an asshole, or are they...

AUSTIN: [cross] Right. That's a good point. Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] ...are they, like, immature? As a role-player. Because, like... [chuckles] You know, you guys have the experience — you and Art in particular, I mean — have the experience of, like, dealing with this person who is *just*, like, legit the worst. But when I read this question I read into it a lot of like... I was definitely, like, in high school... I remember, like, when I was in group storytelling kind of situations I did do the thing where I thought had to be about me.

AUSTIN: [cross] Big same. Uhum.

JANINE: [cross] And, like, if I didn't get my way my instinct was not deliberately to set out to ruin it for other people, but I would get, like, very sulky. And I think I still can kind of fall into this a

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<sup>8</sup> The name in the audio recording is no longer in use, hence the audio/transcript discrepancy.

little bit. Um... But, like, you know, if it didn't go the way I thought it would, I would get sulky and I think that could manifest in a similar way. So it's like a... Yeah. I don't know how much of this is them legitimately sucking or them just, like, not having the perspective.

AUSTIN: The fact that this says he usually tends to try and make life harder for other players is like... That's the point at which you have to have a conversation.

JANINE: Yeah. I...

AUSTIN: [cross] Right? Yeah...

JANINE: [cross] No. I agree. I just think that that should... It should influence the conversation of, like... Is the conversation: "hey stop being a dick!" [chuckles]

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Right!

JANINE: Or the conversation...

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: "Okay, it's actually you know here's what this usually looks like when it's..."

AUSTIN: [cross] Totally.

JANINE: [cross] You know. Like, "here's what a collaborative story is. Here's what we're trying to go for." Like...

ART: [cross] Uhh...

AUSTIN: [cross] And... Go ahead, Art! No. You, please!

ART: Um. Do we think school in this context is high school or University?

JANINE: I don't know.

AUSTIN: It could be either. [cross] It really could be either.

JANINE: [cross] I don't know that they're that different sometimes. [chuckles]

ART: [cross] Well... I mean... I...

AUSTIN: [cross] I had this problem in both is what I will say. I was this person. I was the asshole.

[ART chuckles]

ART: [cross] Well, I assume...

JANINE: [cross] That was also... I was also kind of thinking of that, but I didn't want to say it.  
[chuckles]

AUSTIN: Wow! Owned!

JANINE: [laughing] Look, we're both very candid!

AUSTIN: [cross] Uh-huh. [chuckles]

JANINE: [cross] Because our shortcomings, as you've...

ART: Well, because the... You know, we went through that experience with Hofstra University Gamers, AKA HUG.

AUSTIN: AKA HUG.

JANINE: [chuckles] That's cute!

AUSTIN: Do I still have the art for it somewhere?

ART: [cross] I sure don't.

JACK: [cross] By Craig Sheldon.

[Austin & Janine laugh]

AUSTIN: No. It was by... It was by friend of the show Matt Silvestri. That I had flier art for it for the longest time! Off to see if I have it still somewhere. [cross] Continue the...

ART: [cross] I appreciate that you kept it like well into your 20s and 30s in case you ever needed to whip up a quick Hofstra University Gamers flier...!

AUSTIN: Listen, I uploaded a fucking Evangelion... [cross] MIDI file to the internet...

JACK: [cross] Oh, it's Evangelion,<sup>9</sup> Austin.

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<sup>9</sup> Pronounces it with a soft g, like "evan-jelly-on."

AUSTIN: Oh, thanks, I appreciate it. Thank you. [laughs]

[Janine chuckles]

ART: But you don't have that song! Um...

AUSTIN: I don't have *that* song, no.

ART: [cross] Um. But, like...

AUSTIN: [cross] I never had it. Sean... Anyway. Continue!

ART: We... Well, we're talking about different songs.

AUSTIN: Oh, okay.

ART: It's okay. But we went from a situation where, like "okay, this... A person that we don't like is in charge of this." And then we were in charge of it. Um... And then we're like "wow, that still didn't fix it!"

AUSTIN: That didn't. You're right. That did... That did happen. In our case we... So, in our case we had a president of the club who was also GMing the biggest possible thing... that was like this huge *D&D* campaign — 3.5 campaign — that had... everyone in the club was in it. And he was running multiple games per week and was eventually kind of tapping people to be GMs for the next *season* of it... And ended up... We ended up having like a really antagonistic relationship... Partially, because of love interests, in real life... It was a whole... It was messy. It got very messy and bad. And there were lots of lines that this GM crossed. And he also ended up stepping away from the game...

And Art and I and the third friend of ours ended up running to take over the, like, leadership positions of it. And we did. But, like, we're still college kids! And we're still playing with college kids, and many of the... issues around personality clashes, and boundaries being crossed, and the things that we hoped would have been fixed by a change in culture because of this one person stepping away — were not fixed, in fact. And were about... Where people were at as, you know, 19 year olds. And, thankfully, I think over the course of those few years we did see a lot of growth and a lot of change and stuff.

I think that's part of why I say I was like this asshole character. Or player. Because, like, when I was playing online RPGs, you know, and Mucks and MUDs and stuff I was very much the person who always wanted to win and wanted the spotlight on me. When I was playing in tabletop RPGs, you know, at HUG it was the same situation. 100%. So...

ART: And, like... But, like... we and our people grew and changed and got better! But the universe has an inexhaustible supply of annoying 18 and 19 year olds!

[Austin & Janine laugh]

AUSTIN: It turns out.

ART: And they will just keep coming in a university setting!

[Jack chuckles]

ART: Um. And, you know, eventually we just stopped... doing it! We were like "wait a minute! You six people are the people I want to hang out with. Let's just do it here! We don't have to go to this club." And I understand that, like...

AUSTIN: [cross] It's pretty... Yeah.

ART: [cross] ...saying that one day you won't need the club is the least helpful advice for someone struggling with a club right now...

AUSTIN: Who likes the club!

ART: Yeah. Um. But you should do everything you can to save this club — you know, run for president yourself. You know, do all the work you can to save this club and when you can't save it be ready to leave. [chuckles]

JACK: [cross] Also please don't kill him.

ART: [cross] If! *If* you can't save it.

[Janine chuckles]

AUSTIN: Thank you. Thank you for clarif... clarifying there, Jack de Quidt. Any other thoughts here? Should we move on? [chuckles] You know, last week they did an incredible episode of this show? And they did it in an hour? And they was, like, in and out. Unbelievable. Unbelievable! [cross] Next question.

ART: [cross] Maybe we're the problem!

AUSTIN: I think we're the pro... I think they're gonna leave!

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: [chuckling] And go play with each other! They don't need us!

JANINE: Oh no. What's gonna happen to Nerd Club!

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Oh no! This one comes from Rodrigo. This one maybe will be quicker. In two days I'll be GMing a campaign of Dungeon World with friends that uh that have never RP'd before. If you're reading this I hope that I did a good job. I hope so, too, Rodrigo. I have a lot of questions about GMing for the first time, but I believe some of that will come with experience. I promise it will. However, what frightens me the most is an encounter and dungeon design: which enemies to pick; how much of them; how many of them? Friends, could you give me some advice on this subject?

Obviously, this is like one of those things that it's... There isn't a silver bullet answer here. [chuckles] Because one dragon is... going to be a lot uh harder to kill than like five goblins, probably. I don't know what the situation is. You know. We don't know what the classes are. All of that.

[1:00:00]

AUSTIN: But instead I kind of wanted to give some more meta commentary on this. Which is that... [cross] encounter design is...

JANINE: [cross, whispering] No one has to see the numbers! No one has to see the numbers.

AUSTIN: [cross] One... Yeah. No one has to see the numbers. It's very funny, we just...

JANINE: [cross] You can fake it!

AUSTIN: [cross] We just listened to... I just listened to the last episode — the last Tips at the Table episode — one of the questions that came up was about cheating. What was about, like, someone who was fudging dice rolls at the table. Not in the GM seat. A player was fudging [cross] dicerolls...

JACK: [cross] Oh my god!

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Jack, I need you to know that you are so much more scandalized!

[Janine laughs]

AUSTIN: They all came down on the side of, like “don't do it.” But your voice just now was *truly* aghast! [cross] And I appreciate it.

JACK: [cross] I just... I hadn't realized it was an option!

AUSTIN: It isn't for us!

ART: [cross] It isn't for us!

AUSTIN: [cross] Because we all use Roll20.

JACK: [cross] Right.

AUSTIN: Exactly.

JACK: Also... You know, we care about the... what the dice say. But I don't know that I care enough about what the dice say to lie.

AUSTIN: Right! Right. [cross] Well, like the thing that we do is we do a...

JANINE: [cross] You don't have to lie! You just have to put it in the oven for like a few minutes and then that kind of weighs the sixth side or whatever...

[Austin & Jack chuckles]

AUSTIN: [cross] Aha!

JANINE: [cross] That's... Right? That's how you do it? [chuckles]

AUSTIN: UH-huh.

JACK: Yes. [chuckles] Exactly.

AUSTIN: Uhm... The thing is like... The thing is that what we do is try to make failures really interesting, right? And so to some degree that's one lesson to take into this, Rodrigo — which is: if the party... if you over or under prepare the encounter and there's too many of them or not enough? It's okay. Find a way to make that interesting. If you really needed an extra four goblins in that fight, they can show up! [cross] They can hear the noise. They can show up...

JANINE: [cross] Reinforcements. Someone blows a horn.

AUSTIN: Or the other thing which is like "hey, we just wrecked those goblins. Why? Why were they so weak? Why weren't there enough of them? There should have been more goblins here! What hap... What's going on with the goblins? Are the goblins okay? [chuckles] Right? Like, start figuring that out! Or the other way around where's like "oh shit! There are way too many

goblins here!” You don't have to... When *you* win that fight it doesn't have to be like “and now the party is all dead.” Right? There are lots of death gods to make promises to. There are lots of ways by which you can say “actually, right before you die the Goblins, like, patch you up and have captured you.” Right? Like, especially if it's the first time. Especially with players who've never played before — they aren't gonna rules lawyer you into hoping that they die [laughs] in a combat encounter!

And I think that's, like, the bigger picture thing here which is like... what Janine was saying: you can change *your* numbers. Right? As a GM I appreciate that my players aren't lying to me, and I do my best to... you know, make sure that when... that there's great drama at the table, and that when a dice roll is a failure that something interesting happens. But there have absolutely been times — I'm not even that secretive about it! Where I'm like: “Yeah, I'm ending this encounter early because it's dragging on.”

I think a *lot* about one of the first fights in COUNTER/Weight between the Weightless... Or no... Was that the Weightless... I think it was between the Weightless and the Chime that ends when... when Aria does, like, some fireworks. And then I'm just like “alright, they're distracted. Y'all can all get away if you want to get away.” Right? That experience of like “hey, you can end the scene if you want to end the scene here” is... I almost just referenced something that happened in a game that no one's heard yet. So I can't do that! But!

[Jack chuckles]

AUSTIN: It happens in Twilight Mirage, certainly. There are points where characters were, like... when I was like “okay you can you can eject from this now.” And... At that point you're kind of putting the ball in their quarter: “no, I want to keep fighting against all odds! Even though you've given me an opportunity to get away.” Or you can do the other thing which is just, like: [hushed] “they don't know how much HP those goblins have, dawg! They could just... They could win that fight!” And then you can adjust for the next fight. You know?

JACK: [chuckles] It's just like “oh, wow! The goblin died!”

AUSTIN: Uhum. Yep. [cross] Totally.

JANINE: [cross] The other thing is that... This is not true...

AUSTIN: [cross] Or left! Or was, like “I don't want to get killed!” Go ahead. Sorry, Janine.

JANINE: Yeah. This is... That's kind of what I was going to say, is that, like, not all systems have this... the system that I do most of my GMing in does. It has a system for enemies that's like a morale system, basically.

AUSTIN: Right.



JANINE: So, it... lays this all out in rules but I kind of like to... [cross] jazz it a little more.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: To sort of... just kind of fudge it. But if you... I guess, if you're the kind of GM who wants hard rules and who wants the hard numbers it's there for you. Having a system like this basically, like, it's one of those things where like "if the leader is taken out or something then there is a dice roll that you can make to see if the followers that remain are interested in staying or if they want to leave," or whatever.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: And having things like that in your back pocket is also a good way to, like, if an encounter... Not even... Like, a difficult encounter can be super fun!

AUSTIN: Yes.

JANINE: But if the difficult encounter is not fun — if it feels like it's dragging, if your players are getting tired and frustrated, or whatever — having stuff like that in your back pocket... is handy. Because the... You know, the whole thing is: make the story flow. And, like...

AUSTIN: Yep.

JANINE: You know, make sure if people are having fun with a hard fight then it's still a good fight. But if they're not having fun, then... workaround.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I mean, that's the thing. It's, like, you're right not every game has that system but it *does* because every game is narrative driven.

JANINE: Yes.

AUSTIN: Right? It's story... [cross] Well, at least... Right.

JANINE: [cross] But not everyone... Not everyone's comfortable, like, playing it fast and loose like that. Like, some people do want...

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. I know. Yeah.

JANINE: ...you know, the system I'm playing in also has, like, a range system for like "if you're X close to whatever then you can fire and it'll have this damage." Like, I don't engage with that at all.

[Austin chuckles]

JANINE: Because I don't think anyone at my table would think it's fun.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right. And there...

JANINE: [cross] So we just ignore it *completely*!

AUSTIN: There are people who would, right?

JANINE: [cross] Yes, totally!

AUSTIN: [cross] Like, I think about a game like *Lancer* which is a tabletop RPG coming out that's about giant mechs... It's one of many giant Mech games I'd love to play that's out right now. I don't think it would be a great fit for us. Because it is a lot of that style of role-playing game where, like...

JANINE: Blast blast templates and shit?

AUSTIN: Blast templates, and... I don't think it has blast templates, but basically: yes. You know. Like, yeah. That sort of number-crunching. And it's not as bad as... It's not as complicated as plenty of other stuff, for sure. Like, I... You know, I learned the rules to *Cyberpunk 2020*'s... Friday Night Firefight system. Which is a system that is like... You know how *Dwarf Fortress* models all the different parts of a body? And it's like "oh, yeah. You got hit in the pinky." That's what Friday Night Firefight is like.

[Janine laughs]

AUSTIN: In *Cyberpunk*. Like, it's straight up: every shot that you fire, you roll a die to see where it hits or doesn't hit on a person's body, and like covered... It's ridiculous. Like, a super-super intense tactical RPG style thing. And I learned that system and I loved it at the time because I was someone who really much believed in the simulationist school of game design and role-playing games — where the whole thing was like: "oh how cool would it be if there was just a game that perfectly simulated this world! And then, like, the game is... it's realistic that way."

And I don't agree with that anymore! But I do still understand what the appeal is. Because the appeal is like you put in stuff and cool stuff comes out. And... Honestly, it was a relief for me as a GM to think about things that way because it meant I didn't have to do the on-my-feet improv stuff the way I do here. Um... But in the long run realizing that I don't need a morale system. That I can just say as a hard move... Or, you know... as a response... in response to someone doing damage I can say, like "okay, they're breaking. They're scattering. They're gonna flee." Or! As a hard move someone fucks up. Someone fails a roll, especially in a game like *Dungeon World*, on a failure you can make a move as hard as you want! One of

those moves can be they shoot... you know, an alarm box in the air, and it blows up, and it goes like [imitates noise] BRRRRR! And then you hear more goblins rushing through... from the trees. What do you do. As a way of encouraging people maybe on their side to flee, or whatever. Right? There are...

The possibility space is so broad here in the realm of... kind of fiction first role-playing. Really lean into that and adjust on the fly. And that can be really scary, but, like, trust yourself! Think visually, think cinematically, and those connections will just start to come. Because you know that in the movies you like and the books you've read it isn't, like... 12 people standing in a circle [chuckles] hitting each other with swords most of the time. Most of the time something is happening. And when you start thinking in that way it will start to come a little bit more naturally.

Yeah. Ian in the chat notes that *Burning Wheel's* combat systems are incredible but they're also super involved and require absolute buy-in from the participants. I love those mini games. They're fantastic. And also... Yeah. They're a lot. [chuckles]

Alright. Next... next question. From David. Who says: I'm a lonely old dad that just isn't in a place to make time to run a tabletop game with friends. What's up with solo games? Are there any systems card games or anything that facilitates telling yourself stories and building worlds... a world as a working hermit father? Jack, you had this marked as a question you'd like to answer.

JACK: Yeah. It's a great question! Um... I think about this a lot. Because I feel like part of my job as a writer is... to do this. Is to go... What are interesting solo games that I can play with myself [cross] that will help me create a world?

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

JACK: And it's one of my favorite things to do. And so it's really nice to see someone ask this question. Um... I just have some kind of straight up recommendations before sort of a broader thing.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. Hm...!

JACK: [cross] The *Arkham Horror Card Game* doesn't sound like it's going to be a tabletop RPG at first but it is one of the... kind of... That game can be played solo. Uh... It does stuff with cards that I have never seen a card game do before, in terms of creating a space and interacting with that space in different and interesting ways.

And asking you to make really interesting critical decisions about what you've got in your hands, and what kind of a character you want to be, and often narrative decisions as

well! You know: what do I want to explore? What do I find out? Who do I want to save? What do I want to make time for?

The *Arkham Horror Card Game* is a game where you can — in one game — go from the cards modeling a... an open world city that you explore — on the table, in front of you — to modeling a circular dance during a Venetian carnival... to modeling the various cars of a train that you're chasing up and down. It's an incredible game. Um.

Similarly, if you have... if you uh prepare to spend a bit more money on it *Gloomhaven* is just an extraordinary box! It's a hell box, full of 1 million components [chuckles] that can be played solo and used to create these kind of stories.

And also *The Quiet Year*. Which is just a great standby game. Uh... The nice thing about *The Quiet Year* is that once you've finished it you've got a map. That you can point to. And you can say: "here's something that I wanted to explore a bit more in the game but we didn't get a chance to." Or, you know: "but what's happening on the other side of that hill?"

AUSTIN: [muffled] Yeah.

JACK: And it's those kind of questions that really drive *me* when I'm thinking about... you know, inventing a world for myself. But... the most specific recommendation that I would have is... inspired by something I saw on Twitter. I think Johnnemann Nordhagen retweeted it? But I just looked for it and I couldn't find it. Which was a fantasy book written in the late 90s, I think? That was just a guidebook to a fantasy realm written by a character inside the realm.

AUSTIN: Hmm!

JACK: As though it was a tourist information guide. But not, like: "go see..." Actually, it was! It was, like: "go see the lake. The lake is beautiful." And then as though they were writing a tourist information guide they were like: "well, why is the lake beautiful?" Um... "Why are people drawn to this lake?" Um. "What are the people... Where's a good place to eat in this town?"

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JACK: "What is the exchange rate over here like?" And so my answer might just be: write a guidebook! If there's a world out there that you're interested in and the thoughts of just sitting down and going, like, "I'm gonna write all about it" is a little daunting...

[Austin chuckles]

JACK: ...start from the perspective of a traveler. And think "well, where do I want to stay tonight?" And then write an entry about the inn. And then go like "well, what music is playing in the Inn?" What can we know about the music in this region?" And so layer by layer build up!

Build up this space! And I think that's a really exciting exercise to create a world. And to spend time creating a world.

AUSTIN: That sounds rad. [cross] I wanna do that. All the time.

JACK: [cross] Yeah! I just want to do that! I saw that and was like: “can we just do that instead of work?”

AUSTIN: In life? Yeah.

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: Listen. Let's figure out communism, and then, number two write adventures! Um. I wanna add the opposite advice to what Jack just said — which is that you are not the only one who has this question, David. And maybe it actually seems to run... there's an irony here. But if you look into solitaire RPGs or solo RPGs you'll find that there's actually kind of a lot on the product side out there. I know the one that gets passed around a lot is the *Mythic GM Emulator* in which there is literally an engine to replace a GM.

JACK: [cross] Oh my god!

AUSTIN: [cross] They're putting me out of fucking work!

[Janine chuckles]

AUSTIN: For 6.95 you could fire me and get my cut! I... You know.

[Jack giggles]

AUSTIN: I bet it does okay! You know? [chuckles] But there are things like that. I think there was a play by... Not play by. Powered by the Apocalypse solo RPG that came out recently. Kind of a fantasy RPG called *Ironsworn*. Which... which seemed like it could be neat. And those do the things that a lot of people are looking for in tabletop role-playing games — which is like: “I'm rolling dice to see if I'm successful, I have stat scores that go up and down...” That stuff is out there, and... There are places to look at them. Like, Drive Thru RPG has a bunch of it. And I'm pretty sure if you search for Solo or Solitaire you would find them.

And my go-to advice on basically everything is to search for people talking about it. Look at story games... the storygames forums. Look at the rpg.net forums. Also shout outs to the rpg.net forums for being, like, firmly anti-fascist, suddenly! Not that they were, like, pro-fascist previously, but they've gotten to be... There's a point now that rpg.net has just straight up been, like: “yo.” And you get banned if you're supporting... If you are posting in support of Trump or his administration.

JACK: [cross] Damn! That's great!

AUSTIN: [cross] So rpg.net! Which is, like, a space that I'd always thought of as being kind of politically neutral — came out and made a statement... last week, or two weeks ago? Nope. The end of October. That... basically said straight up, like, "racism and rhetorical alliance with white supremacist groups: no. Hostility towards trans folks: no. Attempting to ban transgender service people: bad." Like, all the stuff that's just like "here is our proof for why this dude fucking sucks! Do not come here to do that! If you want to come talk about games you can come talk about games! But do not even... Don't even fucking try!" So shout outs to them. But yeah.

You can go there! Look at those places. Try to find conversations about this, because there are people who have the same question. I know I have. I've... I have played my fair share of board games alone in my room. After watching people on the internet do the same thing! [laughs] So...! I've been there, David! [cross] That is... Uh-huh!

JANINE: [cross] Remember that guy who like made a bunch of personas for that ga...

AUSTIN: Yes.

JANINE: I mean, that's another option. If there's like a game that you're really into... [cross] Like really really into...

AUSTIN: [cross] Yes.

JANINE: Get really-really into it!

[1:15:00]

AUSTIN: Yeah. There was a... There's a... So *Netrunner* takes place in the world called the Android Universe. And they... The first game in that universe was a game just called *Android*. It was by Fantasy Flight Games. And it is just... the most obtuse ridiculous...

[Jack chuckles]

AUSTIN: ...*amazing* board game — in which you are playing as characters in this cyberpunk world trying to solve a conspiracy and also a murder mystery. And it's from three to five players and I lived in Canada! Where I was the only person in my city. There's one person per city up there. And so I couldn't play it... at all! With anybody!

And so instead what I did is first watched someone play it where they took on different roles...? Like, he was using an old... He was using an old board game that was sort of, like, a dating game? It basically was, like, they had the dating profile cards? There was, like, a picture of a dude and on the back it would be like: "I like walks on the beach. I'm an architect. My favorite food is spaghetti. I really hate fakes and phonies. And the Philadelphia Phillies, they're the best ones!" And then he would take that person and embody that person [cross] and play the game with them.

JACK: [cross] That's so good!

AUSTIN: It was... It's so endearing! I think he runs like a... he's cool. He seems like a nice guy. He seems like a nice guy. And so I was like: "Yeah. Fuck it. I'm doing that. I'm playing Android that way. I don't give a fuck. I want to play this board game. Even just alone on my bed." And so I did. [chuckles] And... the more power! More power! Honestly. Seriously. Like, play cool games!

ART: I want to go... us all the way guys all the way back in the other direction to a... to a simpler... [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Yes!

[Jack chuckles]

ART: ...alternative to the games that Jack suggested. I'd like to shout out the *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game*.

AUSTIN: Oh! Yeah! That game's cool as hell!

ART: Yeah. I mean... It might give you a little more of that because like the conflict resolution in *Arkham Horror* is picking tokens out of a bag which works for randomized outcomes but doesn't feel like rolling dice.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JACK: And Pathfinder just has you roll with dice.

AUSTIN: [cross] That game's digital, too? Right?

ART: [cross] And it is episodic. What's that?

AUSTIN: That game's like digital now, too.

ART: Yeah, there's an app. I don't know if the app got far enough. The trick with Pathfinders there are four campaigns for it and they really got better at game design as that went on.

[Janine & Austin chuckle]

ART: At designing that, like, idea. So, like, I think the first one is substantially weaker than the ones that came out after. Like, the first one is this very, like, generic fantasy. And then, like, the second one is "you're pirates!" And the third one is "you're in a town that's being swallowed by hell." And the fourth one we didn't get to the end of but it was, like, Egypt or something.

[Jack laughs]

ART: Maybe not that one.

AUSTIN: [cross] Maybe... Yeah. Hmm!

ART: [cross] They didn't fix shit.

AUSTIN: Yeah. [laughs]

ART: Um...

AUSTIN: Don't vouch!

ART: Uh... Well, we didn't finish it because the people we played *Pathfinder* with moved away.

AUSTIN: [cross] I gotcha. I got you.

ART: [cross] We just... We didn't get to anything that... objectionable. But I thought that was very fun. And I do know that if you go to BoardGameGeek there are lots of discussions about people who play it by themselves. The trick is you have to play more than one character, but we just went over that's not that bad.

AUSTIN: Yeah. That game is cool. That game seems really neat. [cross] Alright. Janine, do you have anything? Go ahead, Jack.

JACK: [cross] The last thing is... Oh, sorry.

AUSTIN: Nope.

JACK: Um. Download Twine and make something!

AUSTIN: Yeah.



JACK: Twine is just an incredible tool and is... scales really well. You can do some really complicated wild stuff with Twine and you can also do some really cool stuff just straight out of the box. And if you are itching to build a world and tell a story in a world... You know... Make something!

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah!

JACK: [cross] That download... Download Twine and make a game.

AUSTIN: It is... It is really-really fun to find an outlet in that way. And it can be... I guess the other thing I'll say for David is, like: there can be times when you're doing that sort of worldbuilding by yourself and be, like, "Oh, does this really matter? Like, no one else is here to play with... like, explore it with me..." Yes, it matters.

JACK: [cross] Oh, yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] This is me telling you: I think it super matters. It is so fulfilling to tap into those creative parts of yourself! Things don't need to provide use value for somebody else for them to be valuable to you. So... You know. With Jack. I'm encouraging you to stretch those creative muscles and build some cool stuff! Janine, do anything before we continue?

JANINE: Uh. No! Not really.

AUSTIN: Alright. One more question. and this one is from Tomas. Who says — and I've already asked three other people this question, but I've not asked you all this. I don't think. Unless I came up... Unless it came up on a previous episode and was not deleted from our big document.

Tomas says: how do I promote in-character interaction between players? My players tend to gloss over role-playing interpersonal communication in favor of acting on their own or making forward plot progress. This leaves me as the GM wishing they could have a more clearly defined rapport. To be fair, they do interact with some and have been getting better at it over time.

Over time has an asterisk which says: "playing some role-playing... interaction-heavy one shots like *Downfall* may have helped and I may bring them back..." Excuse me... "to something like *Fiasco* for more consequence-free sandbox play but I'm honestly not sure if there's a correlation there."

But... They mostly merely do it rarely enough that I feel any sense of group dynamic is less defined by their interactions and more by their external actions. Beyond direct nudges from me for say, a player to speak in character rather than say, "I tell those Discern

Reality answers to the others” how can I cultivate a proactive habit within my players for them to communicate with each other? You're all players. How do I get you to talk to each other?

JACK: My favorite trick is when a character asks one of us about another character.

[Janine chuckles]

AUSTIN: Hmm...! U-hum.

JACK: When someone's like: “hey, what's the deal with Hella?” And I'm like “what *is* the deal with Hella?”

[Austin chuckles]

JACK: And then I inevitably say something, like, either: wrong; or right and interesting; or right and uninteresting. And Ali goes like: “wait, hang on.” And now suddenly you've got... you've got characters thinking about their relationship with each other. And you can frame scenes later where, you know, a player who felt differently about the answer you gave might want to refocus that in some way.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JACK: Or even if, you know, like... Keith does this really well. Like, uh someone will ask someone about somebody. And Keith will give an answer that... like, some of us just straight up don't agree with. Our characters are just, like: “wait! Hang on! That's not right!”

[Janine chuckles]

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JACK: And then, like, it's very exciting to lean into those moments! To go, like: “now why are we disagr... Why are our characters disagreeing here?” Or “why are our characters agreeing and being surprised by that fact?” And I find that sort of the GM or other characters kind of putting the cat among the pigeons in that sense has led to some really fun interactions.

AUSTIN: The... One of the things that I think that we do pretty well... Or one of the things that helps is to have situations where you as a GM can anticipate a disagreement or... at least... a difference of opinion on something. So I think about the first adventure that we made. The first... the Tower... Eventide Tower. The Isle of Eventide in Hieron. That ends with like oh there's a magic book. What do you do with it? And, obviously, it's a five-person game which means there's definitely a good chance of there being disagreement there. But specifically I knew when I put that book... when I kicked that book off the pedestal that Fantasma would want to study that book...

[Jack chuckles]

AUSTIN: ...and that Hadrian would want to put that book back where it was and then never see it again. Because magic is dangerous. And... to help underscore that I built an entire adventure that that kind of said, like: "look at how dangerous this magic is! Look at how powerful this magic is!" Because I know that Fantasma really... like, I forget what the exact alignment thing was now...

Oh, man! I guess Adam Koebel's playing this... *Burning Wheel* game again, because it's at the top of my Roll20 sheet! Weird. Uh. Sorry. I got distracted there. But when I looked at Fantasma's... Oh, is Fantasma not over here? Damn. Oh, wait! Wait. Down here. Here it is. When I look at Fantasma's alignment... Nope. It's gone. It was something about getting power. It was something about being powerful, basically. And... Hadrian's it was about... You know. Wrongdoers or whatever. I was, like: "I can put these in direct competition with each other — direct conflict with each other. They will talk about this! Because they will not want to agree." And so... giving them opportunities for that.

And if you can't think of ways to do that, then... it suggests to me that you might want them to better define their characters for you. Because everyone should want things and everyone should... Everyone should be able to fill out a very basic, like, a dating sheet... [chuckles] that says: who they are; what they like; what they don't like; what their... you know, what their interests are. And I'm not saying that they should do that. But I'm saying they should be able to, and you as a GM should basically be able to do the same thing.

I know that Hella likes boats. You know? I know that Fero does not like boats. [chuckles] So of course I'm going to put boats in front of them! And that's just like a low-key thing that will start to generate... It gives them a sort of, like, a coffee table book to talk over. If that makes sense. Art and Janine?

JANINE: Um. For me a lot of this comes down to, like, taking bits and pieces from other systems that I feel really strongly about. Like... for the players in the group that I run... the thing that we're doing that is not built into the system we're using at all — but, like, a thing that I'm doing is: one, between acts we sort of are going to be doing... (or are, I guess, already in the process of doing) little side stories that kind of establish the next area.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And these are independent of actual characters. But the thing that we do when we get back to the actual characters is... a sort of part of the session where we're gonna be, like, taking up the next contract or whatever it is. There's built-in downtime. There is, like, it's not laid out in the way that it is laid out in... like, *Blades in the Dark*, or whatever but it's going to be specifically time that I'm setting aside for, like: "figure out what your character's priorities are..."

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum.

JANINE: [cross] "...and then as a group we're going to kind of address their priorities." So, like: "is there stuff that you need to go buy? Is there someone from the last arc that you want to go talk to and follow up with? Do you want to talk to the... like, knight character, because you think he handled something poorly and you don't want it to happen again?" Or whatever. Like... I want to set... set time aside specifically for, like: "there is no plot to drive forward right now."

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: Because if your characters are really focused on that then give them a moment where it's, like: "okay, well, your contact isn't here yet."

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] "So you have a day to kill." Um... But there are other... You know, there are a lot of... A lot of systems, like, give you kind of tools for this sort of thing? So, like, finding one that works for the group and attaching it would be good. Like, there're, you know, Love Letters. And... Bonds.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] I really like Bonds. I think I've also bolted Bonds into that system because it's just very... It's a good way to make someone, like, concisely sum up their relationship with every character.

AUSTIN: [cross] Totally!

JANINE: [cross] So that they have it in the back of their mind.

AUSTIN: It's also... It's also useful just to, like... The thing that you've hit there so much is about space. Giving players space and being like: "alright do some shit. I don't know." It was... One of those things that was really funny was doing Twilight Mirage — the back half, which had... Playing the front half of Twilight Mirage was one of the things that we hit was, like: "there's not enough downtime. There just isn't downtime. At all."

And we didn't even... We did two and a half adventures in space and, like, one and a half adventures on the ground. So it wasn't even, like, there was a lot of... happening, anyway? But there was never a point where you were, like, able to just be in the world and do stuff. And one of the things I wanted downtime to do from *Scum and Villainy* was to give you that space. But that still didn't really do it! By the very end it started to.

And I knew that it was something that, like, I wanted to do more of when we came back to Hieron. And so the two things that we've done to try to encourage it: one, we opened with a lot of just like: "alright, there's not really a system here..." Or even with the *Coldest Winter* stuff in Spring... There's a system, but mostly there's a lot of time to see Ephrim and Thrandir and Fero onscreen together. They're not being driven somewhere. They're not, like, you know... They're not running away from something or chasing anything. They're not trying to break into anywhere. They're in a place. But then especially in Aubade and in... And then with Fero and Samol stuff, like... All of that is: I want characters on screen together.

And every time we went to Aubade I was like: "I unprepped! Like, I can tell you... I have prep in terms of I know what Aubade is! You tell me what happens. Who's there with you? Let's have those conversations." And it can be awkward at first! Because it's like: "okay. Like, what are we talking about?" But by the end of those Aubade scenes y'all were all killing it. And totally knew who you were and knew what types of sequences you wanted to have. And there were some really surprising interactions from that!

And I think we're going... We've already seen with the first of the kind of main adventures — now, that we're back on the back into like the main swing of things — that same ability for those characters to talk to each other, and snipe at each other, and support each other is really being played up! We've only recorded one recording since the... like, the end of the intro segment for this season (I guess I'd say). But that recording was filled with that stuff. And I think partially because we *really* got in the right headspace out the gate. Right? We were not doing high intensity combat situations out the gate. We were doing: "here you are. What do you say?"

And the second thing for this season is that we have this one place where people will be. And so giving your NP... or your player characters both time alone together and giving them literally and saying "I don't have anything today. What do... What do y'all get up to? Let's play it by ear today. What are *you* interested in?"

And then: two, giving them a space that is their space. Where they can get comfortable and they can start to imagine where their characters hang out. It's a really goofy thing to do, but, like, for me I know enough of y'all have played BioWare games — that part of that conversation with like: "add more stuff to the map." I was like: "where do you hang out?" Like, if I was playing the BioWare RPG where would I come see you? And part of it was just like: "okay. Well, now... I know we're gonna have a scene at some point where someone goes to the little alley games place that Adaire is near. Or to the Three O'clock Tower where Hella hangs out. That stuff is going to keep coming up.

[1:30:00]

AUSTIN: And it's gonna give you more authorship over that space — which hopefully will encourage y'all to actually be able to, like, immediately take hold of those scenes and run them yourselves. You know?

JANINE: I make a lot of jokes about, like, when topics like this come up. I think I... I think I make them with both, you know, the Friends at the Table group but also the group that I'm GMing for. Of just, like... I will use the phrase, you know, "it's the beach episode."

AUSTIN: [cross] Uhum. Uhum.

JANINE: [cross] Or, like, something like that. Where... You know... Referencing, like, how a lot of anime has just one episode that seems completely detached from everything else, where it's like: "oh they go to a beach in this one. Or they go to a hot spring. Or like..."

AUSTIN: Uhum.

JANINE: And the... The joke is that those are kind of perceived as, like, fluffy, sort of unimportant things. But they serve a function!

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] Like, those are... Those are episodes where the relationship between the characters is what's being foregrounded. And the story is just kind of a thing that, you know, you can leave in the background for a bit. And that's important! Giving those characters room to just, like, joke around and show off the dynamic is a totally significant and good feature... [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Totally.

JANINE: ...of that kind of episode. So, you know, don't be afraid to have a beach episode, I guess!

AUSTIN: The... Yeah. Aubade was our beach episode. People have been asking for years for a beach episode. I was like: "I'll give you four. Have fun." Jack and Art! Anything here? Anything else here?

ART: I don't know that I have a good answer to this that isn't just, like, very simple...?

AUSTIN: Uhum.

ART: Like... You know. Try tossing out experience points for doing it!

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. Totally.

JANINE: [cross] Yeeah.

ART: [cross] You know, just give it that, like, that little... carrot can be very useful.

AUSTIN: Uhum.

ART: But, like... The fact that they seem to be trending in that direction in the question, like, just let it keep... let them keep trending that way! Like... It's a difficult skill... It's a... a thing that has to just, like, kind of come. And if you... If you push *too* hard you can wreck it.

AUSTIN: You could wreck it.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Yeah. [cross] Yeah, fair.

JANINE: [cross] Even with the... XP thing, like, it needs to feel really spontaneous. Like, that's a thing I do for my players is, like, whenever they do something... Basically, whenever they do something that surprises me that, like, they didn't have to do and they did it for flavor. Even if it's interacting with the world and not necessarily each other. Or something like that. I will give them a little XP bonus on that. But I don't have, like, a list of like: "well, if you do a good scene with each other that's 5xp."

AUSTIN: [cross] Right.

JANINE: [cross] "If you do, you get this..." Because then they'll try and, like, game it. It just needs to be, like, an off-the-cuff like: "that was really cool! That thing you did just now was super cool!"

AUSTIN: Really cool. Yeah. Totally.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: If you don't want to give XP there are other things you can give. Give a +1 forward. Give a... you know, a... whatever, like a Kudos Point. Some systems have some sort of, like, bonus die that you can give. Give someone a Gambit. If you're playing *Scum and Villainy*. You know? [cross] Be like: "hey nice work, here's a..."

JANINE: [cross] It's two characters stop at, like, a candy apple stand and you can give them, like, a candy apple. It's like: "oh this will heal you! [cross] You can have a candy apple."

AUSTIN: [cross] This'll heal you by 2 HP. You have a can... Yeah. Exactly. That's nice.

JANINE: You can bribe someone with it. It's great!

AUSTIN: Uhum. [chuckles] Thomas Whitney says give five dollars!

[everyone laughs]

AUSTIN: Could you imagine! If someone said something really stirring and good and I was like: "yo, gimme that PayPal address! [chuckles] I got something for you!"

JANINE: Just have a bowl of quarters and Werther's Originals in the middle of the table.

[Jack chuckles]

AUSTIN: [cross] Uh-huh!

JANINE: [cross] And whenever someone does something good you give them a treat.

AUSTIN: We finished that... We finished the Benjamin scene in Winter in Hieron and I just go right to Art's uh Amazon wishlist and I just send you... whatever the top of that is. What is that? A broom? Got it! Done.

JACK: It's a Dyson... One of those cool Dyson fans.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Congratulations, great scene!

JACK: We love our Dyson fan, thank you very much.

AUSTIN: Oh, boy... Alright. I think that's gonna do it for us today.

JACK: [cross] Yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] As long as you can follow up and send your own questions to [tipsatthetable@gmail.com](mailto:tipsatthetable@gmail.com). Please do! Like, seriously! I love getting these questions. I love putting them in front of everybody and being able to discuss all this with everyone. [Tipsatthetable@gmail.com](mailto:Tipsatthetable@gmail.com). And as always you can support us at [friendsthetable.cash](http://friendsthetable.cash). Hey, if you happen to be a cool hacker... Hack a bank! Don't do that!

JANINE: Again we cannot... It is a joke! [cross] We cannot be legally held responsible...

AUSTIN: [cross, whispering] But if you... But if you came into some money go to [friendsatthetable.cash](http://friendsatthetable.cash) and spend it there!

JANINE: [cross] Tip us for our good play! [chuckles]



JACK: [cross, whispering] Yeah!

AUSTIN: [cross, whispering] Or wherever you got it! Or...

JACK: [cross, hushed] Unless you just hacked friendsatthetable.cash and you're giving us back our own money!

AUSTIN: [whispering] No! Still do that! That way it's still ours! [laughs]

JACK: [hushed] I mean, yes. [chuckles] Yeah. That's true.

AUSTIN: Uhm...

JANINE: I will also accept Werther's Originals.