Tips at the Table: Queen Anne's Get Away Boots (January)

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AUSTIN: Welcome to Tips at the Table, an RPG podcast focused on critical questions, hopefully smart answers, and fun interaction between good friends. I am your host, Austin Walker, and joining me today - Andrew Lee Swan.

DRE: Hey, you can find me on Twitter @swandre3000.

AUSTIN: Janine Hawkins.

JANINE: Hey, you can find me on Twitter @bleatingheart.

AUSTIN: And Keith J. Carberry.

KEITH: Hi, my name is Keith J. Carberry, you can find me on Twitter @keithjcarberry, and you can find the Let's Plays that I do at youtube.com/RunButton.

AUSTIN: You can follow me on Twitter @austin_walker, you can follow the show @friends_table, uh, and as always, thank you for supporting us over at friendsatthetable.cash. We are gonna jump right into it because we have a bunch of questions today.

This one comes in from Riley: "I absolutely love the more GM-less world-building stuff in RPGs, but I'm really grateful to your podcast for introducing me to it. I'm always super enthusiastic to talk in the abstract about characters, relationships, and the world" - excuse me - "and I know my own strengths, and I'm really good at it. But when it comes to roleplaying in-character or describing specific character actions, I've a whole lot of trouble. Since listening to FatT and being able to think about games as stories as opposed to scavenger hunts the party is trying to win, I've definitely gotten better at having the confidence to say stuff while playing, because I now feel like that abstract character stuff actually has worth in the story. But I still rarely know what to do or say in situations where I have to react to things as my character. I try not to think of this as some horrible flaw that means I'm banned from RPGs, like I just prefer stuff like The Quiet Year and Dialect and have unique perspectives - and have a unique perspective on RPGs. I even started writing some! (metagame.itch.io - am I allowed to say that?) But I also really enjoy reading the playbooks of different kinds of RPGs and thinking about how their mechanics work and affect the story, and I really wish I was better at playing them. Do you guys have any tips on how to turn thinking about your characters in the abstract into actually being able to think during roleplay about how they react to specific situations?"

Um, good question, Riley! Does anyone want to start here with how you go from thinking about your character in the abstract to actually being kind of embodied in them and making decisions? --Dre? Was that- was that a "hmm" of "I have an answer that I'm- I'm trying to figure out how to word"?

DRE: Kind of?

AUSTIN: Uh-huh?

DRE: I- I think something that I always try to do, especially if it's a game that we're, like, new at playing is looking at what mechanics the game has in place to kind of reward you, whether that's, like, through character progression, like XP triggers and stuff like that. Um, and until I really get the feel for something, just really try to, like, hone in on that stuff. Because to me, like, that's the- if the game is trying- is rewarding you, or like dangling this carrot in front of you through a mechanic, to me that's like "okay, the person who made this game intends me to be doing this."

AUSTIN: Right.

DRE: "So I'm just gonna try to hit this, like, really hard during sessions."

AUSTIN: That sounds really inter- that sounds like a- a good way of doing it, if only because it gives you kind of guiderails in terms of what you should be focused in on, even if- even if, you know, three sessions in, four sessions in, you decide "oh, here's something that's not on my sheet, that's not incentivized, and I wanna play that part of it," um, then either 1.) you can play it, or 2.) you can start to adjust the sheet so that it *is*, um but like to start off, like, being like, "okay hey, this is my belief in the game" or "this is my- this is my alignment, I'm going to look for opportunities to really bring that out in play, because it's rewarded mechanically and because it gives me some direction." Sure.

KEITH: Um… it- so is it- is it, uhh, is it the Dungeon World book or is it- that says to "be a fan of the characters"? Is that-?

AUSTIN: That is, like, a lot of the PbtA stuff, the (cross) Powered By The Apocalypse stuff, be the fan of the characters-

KEITH: (cross) Okay, I was just- whether it was the Dungeon World book or the- the Apocalypse World thing.

AUSTIN: It's in all of the Apocalypse World- It's one of the GM principles, yeah.

KEITH: So- so, it's one of the GM principles, I think that one way to look at roleplaying a character is that, like, you have to be a fan of your own character? Like, you've really got to- in the same way where you can watch a favorite TV show and have really strong opinions about character interactions and like, one character doing one thing and being like "that's fucked up," like, "that character, like, is screwing over this character that I really like." Uh- it's- it's, you know- I feel like we're- it's a feeling that a lot of people have all the time passively- or not passively, but like, when consuming media and not a lot of the people have experience with when roleplaying a character? Cause you tend to do a lot less roleplaying characters in watching TV. Um, but it's a lot easier, I think, to know how to react to something if you're really invested in what you think your character is feeling about something.

AUSTIN: Right, and like- and like rooting for them effectively. (cross) Right? Where it's like, you want the best for them. Or the worst, you know. [laughs]

KEITH: (cross) Right, yeah. And for me, part of that- yeah, for me, part of that is like- Yeah. [laughs] Part of that for me is like- is, you know, it ends up bringing a lot of yourself into a character, which I think is, like, something I like to do, and I think, works for the characters that I play. But I think there's a give-and-take between, you know, the character's-- there's a lot of me in characters because I'm playing them, but also because I'm really trying to invest in their stakes.

AUSTIN: Sure. Janine, how about you?

JANINE: So, I mean, I think it's probably pretty common-knowledge that I, like, the way I sort of deal with getting into characters' headspaces to kind of like bombard myself with pictures of dresses and- and like, pictures of this thing and that thing and playlists and all that, and like, that is stuff that I'm also doing as I'm playing. I will usually have, at the start of my notes - I know I've mentioned this before - like a, a few images of like "this is kind of representative of where I think this character's headspace is at right now," um, so, for when we got out of Aubade, I had on Adaire's page, I had like, um, some fanart that someone had drawn of Adaire that I thought was like really representative of that moment. I included that in my notes, and I also included some, uh, fanart of Majima from Yakuza 0, and also some fanart of, like, pre-Fall Solas. Of like, when he is sort of, kind of figuring things out in the- the sort of Elven Court and things like that. Cause I wanted as my touchstones, I wanted to be like, you know, this is Adaire who is maybe a little more classed-up, like she's had the opportunity to live honestly, she knows what that's like now, but also there is, like, a deep discontent, and still a desire to kind of fuck around within the system, and like an uncertainty of how best to conduct that energy.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: So, those are the things that help me, but also, you know, don't- obviously, don't prewrite your characters and things you want them to say before they happen in the scene, cause that'll never sound right. But, uh, sometimes I will, like, have an idea of, like, "that sounds like a thing that Adaire would think at some point," like, "this is just- this is just, like, a random line that, like- this line itself cannot be used, because it would sound fake and bad, but in terms of, like, a touchstone, in terms of like a way to remind myself of where her head is at, it's valuable to have that, sort of, written down so I can kind of refer to it and be like "right, this is- you know, this is a point that she's attracted to right now, or a thing that would kind of spike her interest, or things like that."

AUSTIN: Think the type of response she might give, the types of things- the types of opportunities she might prioritize or be interested in, yeah, sure.

JANINE, under Austin: Right, exactly. Um, and like the tone of- the tone of how she's engaging with the world right now, like is she super, super angry? Is she really aloof? Um, things like that. I guess the other thing is also to be aware of the flags that the GM is gonna be picking out of your character, because

there're often situations where, like, the more you keep those in the front of your mind, um, the more you might be able to recognize opportunities where the GM is kind of like, giving you room to do stuff.

AUSTIN: And just to be really clear with the GM helps too, in terms of like, "hey, this is-" like, it is *so* never a hassle to be told by a player "this is the sort of scene I wanna have next week" or "this is what I wanna do." It helps prep *so* much because it goes from being a guessing game or being like "hey, okay, I'm gonna look at this sheet, lemme see what they've prioritized" which I still do, to like "oh, okay, that does sound like a good opportunity," or- this was before, but I think a lot about Ali telling me during Twilight Mirage that, like, she wanted to be in more cities, um, and more, like, places where there are a lots of NPCS. And so the whole back half of that season changed, you know? To allow for that. So like, that's a thing to say the second you want it, you know? And the other thing is like, you can- as a player, by doing that, you end up setting the stage to- in such a way that like there's a better chance that you'll have the experiences where you will naturally be able to embody your character because you won't be looking for that groove, right?

JANINE: Yeah. I think Adaire and Rix and Rowe are a good example of that stuff working out. So far.

AUSTIN: Totally. Yeah. And we'll see how it continues. [*laugh*] Uh, I'll add a thing- a specific piece of advice for you, Riley, given the stuff here where you say you're really into the GM-less stuff, is actually to push yourself to GM some stuff. Um, a lot of the skills that make those games- that help players do well in GM-less games, in terms of worldbuilding and thinking about, in abstract, characters' relationships in the world, work really- help you a lot as a GM. I know they help me a lot as a GM because they help you start to think about the big picture and help you, uh, care about the story, capital S Story, and plotting and all of that. And it's hard to- to GM, but doing it- one of the things it teaches you, and like- it is a skill and it is a thing you have to practice, is quickly embodying different characters, an thinking about them going from that abstract- the abstract space of "here are the list of three things I know they care about that I wrote down during prep" to giving them a voice and stepping into their role. Um, I was such a worse player before I GM-ed. Like, in terms of just playing a character, I was *so* much worse. I've gotten so much better *through* GM-ing, which has made me - it goes back to what Keith was saying about being a fan of the character - has made me interested in how characters work in a different way. Because it's not just me with a different name, or it's not just, you know, a collection of traits. I'm seeing how my character is a gear in a larger story. And so I *really* mean it, like I know that it's tough to- to do it and like it is, uh, very intimidating to step into the GM role, but based on your love of this style of game, I think that there is like value in pushing yourself and doing that more and more, and that one of the things that you will see is, when stepping back into games where you're just playing a character, you will be better for it because you will have worked those muscles, you know? It is 100% a muscle to work.

KEITH: I have a real quick thing to add, um. Uh, especially on top of "it's a muscle to work" is, uh, I think there's a lot of really good practice about character work that comes from trying to, um, trying to react to something quickly, and trying to take those immediate first thoughts you have, because especially with characters you've played for a while, you might be following a recipe book when you have it by heart. And so it might be worth it to just, like, see what just comes out of your mouth, and maybe actually you already can do this.

AUSTIN: Right, right. Totally. Riley in the chat says, "yeah, no, I'm the only one in my friend group that's just as nervous about being a PC as a GM, so I always end up as the GM." I feel you. That is, you know, that- how I started too, honestly, was like, there was *one* GM in our group, or two GMs in our group, and they were basically doing very- not *similar* sorts of things, but they were both only providing a certain type of game, and there were lots of players who wanted this other thing, but none of us- including me! - but none of us (this is back in college) - but none of us wanted to be the GM at first, so then Art and I tried it on, and tried to co-GM games, and it was a mess. And we were bad. For *so* long. Then bit by bit it becomes- you start getting better, and the reason I got better and the reason I was attracted to it was the- the world-building stuff, the almost GM-less stuff of prepping a world and seeing all the- you know, seeing the clocks tick and seeing the gears turn.

Um, alright! This next question comes in from August and they say, "I've been GM-ing a game of Blades in the Dark for my roommate and several friends for two years now. It's going great, but my biggest struggle is keeping all of my notes together. I have a faction list in an Excel sheet, a dedicated notebook with clocks and heist notes, and other assorted prep and heist notes in Word documents. It is partly a mess because my note-taking has evolved over the years, but I also don't know how to streamline everything. I get nervous about forgetting details or accidentally retconning things I've said in the past because I don't have an efficient way to keep all of the salient points in front of me. This also makes my prep harder because sometimes, I have to search for things from months ago. Do you have any suggestions for this? Are there particular ways you organize notes when you have a lot of content to keep up with?"

Uh, in some ways, I'm the worst person to ask for this, because I feel like my notes are bad. I tried to do that thing this year that we talked- or last year, I guess, that we talked about at the top of last year, which was start doing a wiki. And I started doing that with Twilight Mirage, and I couldn't keep up with it, and I couldn't find- neither Scrivener nor the wiki- whatever the, um- I forget what the name of the site was that I was trying to use. God. I'm blanking on it. But I couldn't keep up with either of them because I didn't have the prep time to learn them well enough that they would end up streamlining the prep process. What they streamlined was recall, but the prep took way longer than what I traditionally did, and continue to do, which is straight-up just a combination of Google Docs and Google Spreadsheets? Or whatever the spreadsheet/Excel equivalent is on Google?

[Timestamp: 15:41]

KEITH: Sheets!

AUSTIN: Sheets! Google Sheets. They're smart sheets, you bring 'em to bed, they tell you how well you've slept, they send all your data to Google, yep, mm-hmm. [laughs]

JANINE: (under Austin) Give a lot of food there.

AUSTIN: TiddlyWiki, thank you to Wilfur. This is exactly what it was, it was TiddlyWiki. And I was like, "oh wow, this sounds cool." I still, in my heart of hearts, think I should try to do that for the next big season, and to start it doing now instead of start doing it once it's time. Do you know what I mean? And maybe

by starting early, when there's not that much information, it will end up being a thing I can keep up with, because that would help so much. I'm in the very lucky position of being able to have fans who've built a wiki for me to check, and we have the paid transcripts thing, so there have been lots of opportunities this season for me to be like "what the fuck did we say two years ago?"

And all of that is to say, like, to some extent we were the wrong group of people to ask. But on the other hand what I will say is for years what we did, or what I did, was I have a Google doc for a given season, a given campaign, that has everything from big picture ideas – like what the major themes are, what my major touchstones are, inspiration – but then very particular things, ranging from what I think the structure of the season will be, fronts in Dungeon World, factions in Blades in the Dark and related games – Forged in the Dark games – and then I build a doc for every arc individually. So for instance, y'know, whatever my – it's very funny 'cause like, for Dungeon World specifically, I have had the same number system for the last – every season. So, like, DW-7 is a document I have on my screen that is the home game that Spring of Heiron 15, 13, 11, et cetera were all part of that include things that were brought to the university, the different major characters, the names of the Moonlighters that Adaire talked to, what Rix and Roe are stat-ed out to be and what their goals are. And a lot of this doesn't get used but it's here, right. And so it's a very simple system, and in some ways it has become more effective for me because I can just know "okay, this is the document about the university game," and I know off the top of my head that DW-2 is boat party. Um, and I can just go to that if I have a question about boat party. It's super, super, super simple, and I'm not advocating for it as a universal solution, but it is one of those things where, like, instead of having three notebooks where I'd have to go look in my notebooks, having it all in one place has helped a great deal. And I imagine you could do this with Word also, and have a well-organised folder system – file system that would help that quite a bit. But I'm not the only GM here. I think everyone in this call has GMed a little bit. How did you all do it, and do you have any tips for it?

KEITH: I'm the real worst person to ask, so.

AUSTIN: Are you? Yeah.

DRE: [doubtful] Mmmm.

[AUSTIN laughs]

DRE: I don't know, I've got a story. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Wait, what's your story?

DRE: So when I was running my game of Blades in the Dark for friends, what I would do is I kept all of my stuff on the same legal pad. Like, you know, the yellow legal pads.

AUSTIN: [under Dre] The yellow legal pads, yeah.

DRE: I also buy legal pads to write my session notes in at work.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

[JANINE groans]

DRE: Because, you know, they're cheap, they're really easy. So, sometimes I take my session notes from work home with me, so I can put in notes and stuff like that after work. One day I was running a session, and I went to flip open the legal pad I had brought with me, and all I saw were notes about [Austin groans] CBT techniques and stuff like that. And I was like, "oh, okay." [laughs] So then I went into work, and in my office was totally my notepad with all of my dumb tabletop bullshit. [laughs]

JANINE: Mm.

AUSTIN: Amazing.

DRE: So I switched to doing everything digitally.

AUSTIN: That's how it happens. Um, real quick, Ice Cream Jones in the chat just linked to Scabard, have y'all seen this?

JANINE: No.

AUSTIN: This is cool as shit! I'm just gonna pull up – y'know what, I'll pull up their example campaign. That way I'm not showing other stuff on stream – I'm showing their specific example campaign. But it looks like a really cool wiki, basically, that you could build out using, just like – let me go to their homepage. It's a great sell on their front page because they're just like, "who created the magic item your PCs found? Who are the enemies of the king, and does he have a secret paramour? Who are the parents of the evil knight the PCs crossed swords with in the tavern, and where was he born?"

DRE: Damn.

AUSTIN: All of these are good questions that I don't often know. Yeah, this looks really cool. You know, I should note I once, back during early COUNTER/Weight, like before we started, I built a little Twine out just so I could get some key things about the setting and character connections in place, and that worked really well. But this actually feels like it would be way more fully featured for some of that stuff. This seems really cool. I'm going to look at this after this call and see if this is a thing we could – I could do – I could use. Hell yeah. Thank you so much, Lizzie. Any other answers that are not this specific thing that I can't help scrolling through now?

JANINE: I mean, I just use Scrivener, and I've had a good time with it. I don't have any complaints.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: I like it because it lets me have multiple panes open at a time, [AUSTIN: Right.] so I have everything organised by, like – y'know, I have categories for like, "here are just the rules," here are the basic - like, I just took screenshots of the tables from the rulebook for here are the stats for different

kinds of enemies, in broad strokes, that might come up. And different kinds of companions, in broad strokes, that might come up, and then I can kind of – you know, if I have an NPC I will just link to one of those tables and be like "they're in this neighbourhood," and then on the fly I'll be like – well, they're not dextrous – [AUSTIN: Yeah, yeah.] I mean, not quite enough that I can [???], whatever. But that's – I mean, it works well for me. You can also – you know, you can link to other sections, so I have all the things where it's like "okay, this character and this character here, there is a link that will take you to the page for that character. And that's where I've got – you know, I'll embed some stats, I will embed, like, here are the moves they like using, here's their sort of background."

AUSTIN: Right, right.

JANINE: It all just kind of works fine for me. It's not for everyone, but like, I don't really have complaints with it. I guess my only complaint is that, like, sometimes I'm just not very tidy with it, and I need to be a little bit tidier, but most of that tends to just be because I'm dividing scenes poorly. Like, I'm not making a good, um, distinction between where one scene ends and another begins. So sometimes I'll repeat myself, or there'll be a little bit of crossflow that way. But I don't know – the other thing is, Scrivener's not free. Which, y'know.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: Scrivener is relatively expensive. They do have a really good free trial, which is it's a 30-day trial, but it's like 30 days of use.

AUSTIN: Okay.

JANINE: So, if you – it only counts days where you start up the software, basically.

DRE: Interesting.

AUSTIN: That's cool, yeah.

JANINE: So rather than just being for a month it's just like – just, y'know, so that helps, but –

AUSTIN: Real quick, I really just wanna pour one for out Queen Anne, vampiress queen of the kingdom of Gordovia, who "was revived from her undead slumber by Xelsior Barwind in what sages note as one of Gordovia's greatest blunders." [KEITH laughs]

"Despite numerous hints that Queen Anne was a vampire, [DRE: Damn.] Xelsior removed a wooden dagger from her heart, instantly reviving her. Xelsior refused to swear her fealty, so he was murdered at her orders. Update: during the War of Sorrows, Queen Anne crucified Prince Harry, conquered Avila and declared herself Queen of Gordovia, using the invading undead forces of the Lich King as her army."

"Queen Anne was ultimately defeated during the Battle of Avila, but got away thanks to Getaway Boots" – which I'm gonna click on. "The Lich King was not so lucky, he ended up trapped at the center of

the Earth. UPDATE" – all caps, "UPDATE" – "Queen Anne fled eventually to Mortannia, where she now rules the undead army raised by the Lich King. She continues to send slavers around the world to capture new living bodies to add to her army of the undead."

She's in the "villains" folder, but also the "royals" folder, so, y'know.

JANINE: I'm gonna go ahead and say that this page is also a good example of why a lot of people get overwhelmed with taking notes, because –

AUSTIN: [cross] Oh yeah.

DRE: [cross] Mm-hm.

JANINE: - all this information is really good if you have, like, a three-year running campaign [AUSTIN: Uh-huh, yes.] where's there a really complicated – but, like, you don't need to know who the evil Queen's dad is and what kind of shoes she wears necessarily right out of the gate.

AUSTIN: [cross] You don't like the Getaway Boots? I love – here's what I love, is –

JANINE: Give yourself time to build those details in, don't plot out a lot.

AUSTIN: Yeah, I mean I think this all reflects an actual play, right?

JANINE: Yes. No, I'm just saying I think it's easy to look at stuff like this, or to look at other people's completed notes in general. Like, 'I need to have that all right out of the gate, right now.'

AUSTIN: [cross] Yes. Totally.

DRE: [cross] Oh, yeah, for sure.

JANINE: And it's like, no, no, no.

AUSTIN: [cross] And, *no*. I love the Getaway Boots so fucking much. I can feel the GM on the other side of these being like "ah, fuck, I can't believe they've won already. How do I get Queen Anne – she's supposed to be the villain for the entire campaign – ah, she has Getaway Boots! Yeah, you can't –"

JANINE: They're her ModCloth.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah, she got them from ModCloth.

JANINE: Vegan suede.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh. I really love this royal family tree, also, which – the whole thing here is just gigantic and has, like, a whole system of – [reading from the site] "character is a half-elf and a member of the red and

elf royal families, characters from the the imperial family and the red royal" – like, what a fucking amazingly huge, huge – like, family tree of all of the royals. This is not the game that we play. But –

KEITH: Yeah, this is not any sort of game I would play GM, either.

AUSTIN: We would never play this game, and yet the world of RPGs is massive and unique.

KEITH: I love that it's there! I might listen to that.

AUSTIN: I think I'd lose it! As someone who, y'know, regularly is like, "listen, we have 43 factions," looking at that family tree gave me the shakes. I can't – I can't keep up with it! We're gonna continue with this.

KEITH: What if you had no factions, but you had several family trees?

AUSTIN: Each one's a faction.

JANINE: I'd just boot up Crusader Kings at that point. [laughs]

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yes, exactly. You can play as, like, animals now in that. I'm gonna continue.

Jay writes in and says: "I have loved every game of Mobile Frame Zero: Firebrands. The way y'all play with characters and settings and make such dynamic stories which really draws me in. I'd really like to run this game, but one of the biggest reasons I think I like those games is they were act three conclusions. Shit was happening. What I'd like to know is: how does a group get to that point with Firebrands without having a months-long campaign for it to be a capstone to. What kinds of games would a group use to get to that place quickly?"

The number-one thing I wanna say about Firebrands is: it comes with a setting that is really interesting, and that you should play in that setting, because that setting is built not around conclusions but around things sparking up. It gives you the space – so I mean I guess what I'll say first and foremost is, like, in some ways we are not, again, the ideal people to answer this, because what we've done is hacked it to be about the end of a story. But, y'know, the game literally opens with the text "the Bantrawl system is not at war." Where, in fact, for us it's always just about to be at war, or is at war. And so, I think, one tip is to start with characters who are living their life peacefully, and start that game by showing them in a place where you can characterise them. I mean, the game actually opens with a thing that we don't do – haven't done in the past. Maybe we did with COUNTER / Weight's ending, but certainly not with Twilight Mirage. Where it encourages the first move of each game is a solitaire scene, which is just like "hey, here's who you are."

And my second tip – and then I don't have any other ones, I'm curious if other people do – is the thing that Keith said before, which is be a fan of your characters. Be willing to get them into trouble immediately, and be in love with them, right. The other big tip – one of the big principles of this game is to – I think the actual pitch on it is to - god, what's the exact framing? Ah, here it is. "Fall in love with your enemies, ally with your rivals, fight with your friends," right? You're here to create messy

entanglements, and so you need to be acting and playing with a sort of speed that is either built on the back of the presumed past relationships, where you can just straight up say, like, "oh, yeah, you and I used to date. We used to date. It happened offscreen. We don't need to give a long, detailed explanation of why we used to date, or how it fell apart, but we know it fell apart." Or be willing to move very quickly. Move with the pace of a film instead of moving with the pace of a long-running TV show. People fall in love way too quick in movies, but it's very useful, and so be willing to do that, for sure. Any other thoughts on this one, or any other thoughts on this style of one-shot – ways to bring a degree of drama and buy-in to one-shots? 'Cause I think it's a broader question, and something we've had to do with live games quite a bit, where it's like "oh shit, we don't know who these characters are. We've not been playing these characters for three years." And yet at the end of the Downfall game I was super invested in our little bee makeup artist. Y'know?

[Timestamp: 30:20]

KEITH: I love that.

JANINE: We also spent like an hour on character building. (cross) That helps.

AUSTIN: That's true, that's the true. The Hypha game we just did was similar for that, right?

JANINE: You can get really invested in an hour.

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally. I think that's an underrated way to do it. Um, any other thoughts on this one? We'll move by quickly. [pause] Alright! This one's from Adam, who asks a particular question about Masks, but I think it's a broader one too.

Adam says: "there's a basic move in Masks: The New Generation called Pierce the Mask, which is their move for getting information out of someone via spending hold on questions. This move is notoriously difficult to describe fictionally, since it's analysing people, so most often players will just say 'can I pierce the mask?', and roll. Which I'm fine with, but also I like thinking of different ways to describe that move. Can y'all think of interesting ways to describe that move? Also, can you think of interesting moves for the GM to make on a 6 or a less? I had the idea of giving them 1 Hold anyway for a question and giving them false information. Thank you."

The first thing I'll say is: never give them false information in the sense of, like – in a way that you've not marked as false. A great tip that came in from Felan Parker, who is a game academic, sent this into me years ago, and I've only used it once or twice since then, is that on a failed move like this one option is to say "alright, I'm giving you false information, and you can get 1XP if you act on it, because your character believes it." Incentivise – like, tell the player, make sure it's clear that it's false, but never, ever be like – especially in a game like Masks or any other Powered by the Apocalypse game, when they fail, make it clear that if you're giving them the "a-ha, you do get the answer you're looking for," that it is in fact false or that it's about to get them into trouble. Because there is a degree of respect and, uh – not honesty, but there is a degree to which you're in a contract with your players, right? You've kind of agreed to be playing the same game, and I think anytime as a player I've had a GM say "oh, you did this

bad thing" and I said "but I rolled before, and you said the answer was this," and they say "yes, but you failed that roll. You should have known better," is like [groans]. Just tell me that I believe it, and let me walk into the room on fire. Let me make that decision, 'cause I will. Trust your players to do that. But, as players, I'm curious – I think I ask this a lot to you all. I say "whoa, what's that look like? You say you want to Pierce the Mask, what's that look like?" How do you – what do you – how do you guys conceptualise that when I ask those questions?

KEITH: When we played Masks, I don't know if we ever used Pierce the Mask. Did we?

AUSTIN: I think we did.

JANINE: I think we did, a couple times.

KEITH: We had to – it sounds like a thing that we would've had to do, but I don't remember specifically doing it.

AUSTIN: Janine, do you remember?

JANINE: I don't remember it specifically, but I remember – I remember, like, it did come up.

KEITH: There was the time that we literally took the mask off of Mr E. Mask.

AUSTIN: Right, yes.

KEITH: Did we Pierce the Mask then?

AUSTIN: Um, maybe, maybe. But we definitely – at the very least you definitely Assessed the Situation, which is a similar-ish thing, right? Which is like, I'm still asking you "how are you looking into a situation and how is it shown on-screen?" so to speak. Or in Masks, and maybe this is part of my answer, is I often was like "what's the panel look like when your character realises X, Y, Z?" I think in any game leaning into that genre stuff is really useful, and in Masks specifically where it's doing comic books, it's like what does the character on the page do to show that they have Pierced the Mask? Because you don't need to show them, like – it doesn't need to be like "I stare at them with the heat of a thousand suns until they crack, and then I know what they intend to do." It just needs to be like, "alright, panel one is my character's face looking at them. Panel two is realising that there is a – that they've already, um, un - or they've already like, flipped the lock on their holster and they're getting ready to draw. And then panel three is me realising that they're going to draw the gun and then me acting first," or whatever, right? Like, you can – you can paint them the picture. And sometimes you can do it by asking – answering the question first, and then still making sure as a GM to be like "okay, pump the brakes: what's that look like?" Even if I tend to insist on having people paint me that picture first, you can flip it and be like "alright, here's the information, now how does that show up? How do you see that? You tell me how you see it." Y'know? Any other answers on this one? Or similar moves, it doesn't have to be this particular Masks move. Every game we play has some sort of gather information roll.

DRE: Reading the text for Pierce the Mask [AUSTIN: Yeah.] kinda – okay, my ADD medication has worn off, so I apologise if this gets ramble-y and weird.

AUSTIN: No worries.

DRE: [laughs] So this – this actually made me think about – on Friday and Saturday I went to trainings for, like, my continuing education credits for my therapy licensure. [AUSTIN: Mm-hm?] It was for a form of couples therapy called EFT, or Emotion-Focused Therapy. One of the first kind of stages and tasks that you have as a therapist in that form of therapy is, like, as people are kind of talking about the arguments, you're looking for cycles. Not only between the people, but how people's internal process works. [AUSTIN: Huh.] And so the trainer described these kind of, like, cues that we're looking for. He called it his handles. He's like, "you're looking for handles to kind of open a door and poke your head in and be like, 'okay, what's going on in here?'" A handle might look like "okay, as you're talking about, you know, this argument between you and your partner, I see you hunching over. When you get into these kinds of arguments, do you notice that your shoulders always get this tight? [AUSTIN: Huh.] Do you know your body language goes this certain way?' Or it might be a certain word. 'When you I heard you say like, y'know, when you guys get into a fight and the other person walks away, that you feel really lonely. Can you talk about what it's like for you when it's in that lonely place?" So, like, looking at this Pierce the Mask where it's, y'know, it's talking about looking at body language, their emotions, to get a read on who they are, [AUSTIN: Yeah.] that makes me think of, like, maybe you could ask, like, "what are you looking to tip you off here?" [AUSTIN: Right.] You know, it doesn't have to be a long thing of "oh, I saw that they did this, bla-bla-bla-blah." It could just be, like, "what are you looking for?"

AUSTIN: Right, right.

DRE: Are you getting tipped off by their body language, the look on their face, do they have something that gives them away? I don't know.

AUSTIN: Yeah, no, I think it's a great answer. I think that's a – yeah.

KEITH: And that can also even be something that already has happened. Something that the GM has already described [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] that then you're like "oh, that's an interesting thing that I could then use as my in to using Pierce the Mask."

AUSTIN: "Actually, when they were busting in the room, I noticed something else. While they were throwing the doors open, I saw something they had on them, or I saw they were talking to one person in their gang, or whatever it was, and I could intuit it from something they said" Y'know? Or something like that. That's a good one. And I think that's one that we don't use enough is, like – and I think this actually goes back to a previous question to some degree, too. Someone was saying – god, who even was it? August – they were saying – they were worried about retconning things or forgetting details. The thing that I like - one of the reasons I like Blades in the Dark is it encourages flashbacks. Every game has flashbacks. We just do it. You can just do a flashback at any point, and say "oh, the reason you're able to do this is because flashbacks." Blades in the Dark and Forged in the Dark games that have flashbacks encourage it and mechanise it in a way, but like, stories have flashbacks already. I just saw - I just saw

Glass, I was just saying, and that's a movie that ends with some flashbacks in the same way that Unbreakable did. Superhero movies do this all the time. Comics do this all the time, right? This is the Ozymandias, like, "I already did it thirty minutes ago thing," right? You're allowed to do that as players. You're allowed to say "well, before I came in here," bla-bla-bla. And the reason you're allowed to is because you already succeeded on the roll. What you're not allowed to do is say "wait, hands up, no they couldn't have gotten through that door because I barricaded it actually." Like, "what? did you? When?" "Well, before? Let me roll for it." Like, ehh. But if you're like, "okay, I want to roll for this thing, and can we rewind by two seconds to when they busted down the door and I saw something – I saw that he said something into his communicator." Like, yeah, that seems fair. Be willing to do that stuff, and as a GM be willing to roll with the punches, I think. Janine, you did this a lot with Signet. Signet is a big Pierce the Veil, or Pierce the Mask person, y'know?

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: And I think I was, like, pretty severe in my demanding of putting that onscreen. Do you have any tips on this before we move on?

JANINE: Hmm, I think… Uh, mm. It's one of those things where it's like, I think my big tip is also that like – is just – I'm struggling to phrase this properly, is – I mean, sometimes it's okay to just say, like, "I want to look at this more closely." [AUSTIN: Yeah.] It doesn't always – if you're always, like, pressuring yourself to make everything a big moment, even if the thing you're doing in the shot is just, like, squinting to read something small, or whatever. [AUSTIN: [laughs] Right.] Y'know, like, sometimes it's going to be a big thing. Sometimes it's just going to be a character taking the time to do something. [AUSTIN: Yeah.] Which I think is why people fall back on just reading the move name. So it's, y'know, it's okay to just be, like, they just want to read something closely, [AUSTIN: Yeah.] just want to – to look at the back of the paper or something.

I think also, regarding the way to make interesting moves on a 6, um – I think it's worth also considering that, like, you don't want to give player's false information. In general, you do not want to give players leads that will make them resent you as a GM, or like – y'know, that's not me saying "be extraordinarily kind to your players and never give them challenges." That's me saying, like, "when you give players false information because you are the GM it is carrying weight that that information wouldn't [AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.] to real people in that situation." Do you know what I mean?

AUSTIN: Yep, yep.

JANINE: You are – you are the – it sounds so bad – you're like the god of that world, and you've said this thing is – you've implied this thing is true. And that will – I mean, because your players trust you, if your players trust you more than you trust them, they are gonna resent you. I think a better way to think of it, in terms of - if you don't want to incentivize – if you don't want to go the way of incentivizing using false information, consider that characters can have different things they see as important in a moment. [AUSTIN: Yeah.] If you're interrogating someone and you roll badly, they don't necessarily – maybe they're not in a position to be like "oh, it's at the – whatever. This totally wrong building that you weren't actually looking at," whatever. It can be, like, they have a different set of priorities to your player

characters. The thing they identify as important is maybe not the thing that you identify or they identify as important. Being willing to, like – y'know, I guess – I guess, there's like – the 10 roll is you point the camera directly at the thing they want.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: The 7 to 9 is you point it vaguely in that area. Like you have a wider shot of that, where the thing they want is kind of there but there's other stuff too. And the 6 or less is like you turn the camera to the side or something. It's still [AUSTIN: Yeah.] – you're not lying about that thing, you're not turning the gold into fucking whatever. You're not changing that shot, you're just not looking directly at it.

AUSTIN: The other thing I want to add here is, like, when they get a – when you get a 6 or under – when the player gets a 6 or under – the GM makes a move as hard as they want, [JANINE: Yeah.] which does not mean – does not necessarily – like to be clear, I don't mean, like, take damage, right?

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: But what I do mean is, it doesn't even have to be about the information. It can be – and this is Masks, specifically – shift your Danger higher. This person is really getting under your skin as you're trying to interrogate them, right? "Take Afraid because they've revealed the truth to you, and you could tell them the truth, but it shakes you to your core. You see something in their eyes, and you realise they are really dangerous." You can say "take a -1 forward on a move." All of that stuff – like, everything is at your disposal there. Maybe you're trying to Pierce the Veil with somebody and you end up revealing something about yourself or revealing that, like, where your allies are, or it takes too long for you to Pierce the Veil and the villain gets to advance a clock, so to speak. There's all sorts of other things you can do with these moves where the – you as the GM – anytime someone fails is an opportunity for you to draw a line between that failure and the advancement of something that the player characters – is in opposition to the player characters. And obviously you want to be flexible in that, because what you want to do is encourage them to do those moves, and not to, like, not want to investigate stuff, which can totally happen. I think games like Call of Cthulu are really, really rough around this, because that's a game where every time you roll to investigate something you truly are risking your character's life, because learning things in that game can be very dangerous to you. It turns out Cthulu is not something you want to actually learn about. And so – and so, like, you want to make sure as a GM that you are kind of sprinkling in different degrees of what failure can look like – and that's, yeah – I mean, to Janine's point, like, sometimes that can just be, like, you get the region instead of getting the house, y'know? You know what neighbourhood it's in, but by the time you get to that neighbourhood, well, the place is already on fire.

[Timestamp: 45:21]

AUSTIN: Alright, let's keep moving. This is a double-header, but I think it's worth tying them together. One's from VA and one is from Hella, but it was actually signed Hella Impatient, so I think there's a pun. "This might be too general a question, but what do you folks have – uh, do you folks have any advice about in-depth worldbuilding?" Or, "depth in worldbuilding. When I'm writing, I usually have a tendency

to either focus on a small detail to the detriment of progressing, usually figuring out exactly what is grown and eaten in an area, or gloss over things that end up being important: it's a magical crystal that powers everything. How do you find your best" – uh, sorry – "how have you best found a balance between these when creating Hieron and Twilight Mirage."

It's ironic that you say those two things [laughs] because I think one of those started with no prep, and one of them started with all of the prep there could be and continued that way. [Janine laughs]

And then Hella Impatient asks: "recently I've been thinking about worldbuilding and different approaches to it. Most of the time I simply like to have my players name different aspects of the world, such as a body of water or a town. Then I'll drop a basic map of the world, and as my players say things or fail moves I fill in that map. However, I know many people prefer to make the world beforehand, particularly with other games. So my question is: which do you prefer? Beforehand, or running into it full-tilt?"

Like, apologies for my terrible centrism here, but I do think that there is a balance to strike. There is, ah – there is a [sighs] – it also depends on the game, but, but. If I could go back and do a little bit more prep ahead of Hieron starting, I would. I just didn't know what it would be, you know what I mean? I thought I was gonna run, like, a game for six weeks or something, and now it's been four years. And if I could go back and scale back on the Twilight Mirage stuff, I would do that too. I think the key is to be player-first in this, which is a thing I did not do with Twilight Mirage after a point. Like, I think we started there, but then I was like "okay, I have these big ideas," and I think it shows. And I think eventually what I did is got back on track, and I think that helped. And with Hieron, ironically, I kind of went the other way, which is I started with very little prep, leaned really hard into players guiding the world – I think the pirate – the zombie pirate ship is the best example of that working out really well – but then it took me a while to realise what my bigger picture story and world were as the GM. And I think I caught it just in time. I think like, Marielda is where I – in-between Season One and Marielda is where I figured some of that stuff out. Um, and I think maybe my best advice is to err on the side of Hieron here. Which is: start with a blank map, fill in that map with big ideas the way we did with Hieron, and when you sense it is the moment to bring out your own markers and begin kind of filling things in, or maybe bring your own paints and begin painting things in, take that opportunity. And I think that there's – to some degree it is about timing and about – I guess, to continue that metaphor, right, it's like I would rather have the canvass with a few shapes on it and slowly fill that in, then start by covering it up and – or start by filling it with stuff, and then realising half way through that I have to cover it up and start fresh, you know? That layer is already on there. How about for y'all? I know Janine, your Dragon Age game took place in a very – an open space in the world of Dragon Age that gave you some of that, but -

JANINE: [cross]: Kind of, yeah –

AUSTIN: - Also had some of that pre-built stuff, obviously.

JANINE: Yeah, so I set it in a location that had basically only been briefly touched on in the comics, [AUSTIN: Mmm.] in the Free Marches. Like, the Free Marches are gold if you are trying to play the

Dragon Age tabletop RPG [Austin laughs] or if you are playing an RPG that you want to set in that thing, because the Free Marches have a little bit of everything.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: So there's a lot of room to just kind of fuck around, especially if you stay away from the big known cities. Like Kirkwall, obviously.

AUSTIN: Right, right, right.

JANINE: So, y'know, I set that campaign – or at least the start of that campaign has been in Hercinia, which is a coastal town. And I sort of, for that, looked at some broad strokes of, like, here's a map of ancient Carthage, and here are bits of that that I think are relevant. Here's this coastal town in Italy that I think is also relevant to what I'm trying to here, [AUSTIN: Right.] but for me a big part of building that world was to do the thing that, um – that I think recognise and like Dragon Age for, which is, like, put faces to everything.

AUSTIN: Mmm.

JANINE: So I didn't really want to think of it just in terms of like, "okay, here are the broad strokes. Here is what their trade is, here is who their local" – I just realised now, I don't have a leader of Hercinia on my – [Austin laughs] I don't know if they have a viscount or – it hasn't come up. But I know, like – I know who works at the tavern, [AUSTIN: Right.] and I know that she's related to – like, the owner of the tavern – or the waitress at the tavern is related to the sort of odds and ends vendor in the market, and that I basically thought of "what are the different areas of this town and then what are the faces that I'm attaching to them? Who is the first templar that they're going to deal with at The Circle? Who is – y'know, this a coastal town, this is the Free Marches, so there's going to be a division between" – well, I mean, it's in any town in a fucking medieval thing – "there's going to be a division between the nobles and the peasants, and here's where the elves live, and here's who the local hot shit mercenaries are." And like, all of these things come from –

AUSTIN: [over Janine] Yeah, I think about those – you described those Qunari mercenaries – is it Qunari mercenary women?

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Which is like –

JANINE: I call them the Grey Mares.

AUSTIN: So good. And, um, okay, that means there is mercenary work here.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And you started there, partially because I think that it's cool to have, like, a crew called the Grey Mare who are rad Qunari women mercenaries. But also, like you just said, you know you care about characters as the faces for big picture things, [JANINE: Mm.] and my guess is, like, you knew your players and know that that's also what they're interested in.

JANINE: Yeah. [laughing] I surveyed them before we started!

AUSTIN: Right, totally, totally.

JANINE: But, like, that's – a big part of it is – is just this idea of, like, once you have those faces then you can sort of make – you can – I mean it's kind of like refining and then expanding, and then refining, and refining again. You can – once you have faces, you can sort of figure things out about that world, about how that character moves around and what you can infer about their surroundings from those movements. Like, who do the mercenaries work for? How do they do that work? Like, those things can evolve a lot more naturally [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] when you are thinking about, like – not just, like, "how do people in general do blank?" It's "how do Sarah and Ellenore do blank?"

AUSTIN: Right. I'll add, briefly, sometimes it is okay for there to be a magical crystal that powers everything.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And I know that that's kind of handwave-y, but what I really mean is: think about the core themes of whatever your campaign is, and think about "theme" really broadly here. I don't only mean, like, y'know, "we could have made them look like anything, we made them look like us." I also mean "oh, this is gonna be a season or a campaign about getting into high-stakes hijinks. Oh, this is gonna be a campaign about the rigor of military training. Oh, this is gonna be a campaign about high adventure on the seven seas." If your game is about high adventure on the seven seas, it is okay for there to be a magical crystal that powers everything on the wizard ship. If your campaign is instead about the rigors of actual seamanship, then maybe you want to think harder about how the boats in that setting work, y'know? Or, if your campaign is interested in, y'know, factional warfare, then think about how having different ships and how they have different means of power can help represent those different factions. But you probably, in that game, don't really need to dig deep into the particulars of – of, y'know – how the rigging works on your vessels, maybe, right? Think about the – again, I use cameras a lot because it's a useful metaphor – but think about where the camera is. What is the camera showing the players and the audience? The players are the audience, and so are you as the GM actually, right?

Where – or, to extent the kind of movie metaphor: where did you spend money on good props, right? Which were – where did you really reach out to wed a workshop and be like, "yo, we have got to get extremely cool magic crystals that power everything." Or did you go, like, [whispering, mock surreptitiously] "just take that thing from Lord of the Rings and just paint it a different colour, it's okay, we don't need to – no one will look that close at it." Um, because for instance, you think about, like, the super distinctive Blade Runner gun, right? Like, that gun is way more distinctive than the cop uniforms in that movie. That gun is way more distinctive than, y'know, what the drinks look like at the bar. Because

violence is super important for Blade Runner. The fact that this cop has a gun you will remember the look of: that is part of where that prop budget went. The architecture is very important for that film, so they built these really intense, huge dioramas to do, y'know, practical effects and fly-throughs and stuff like that. That stuff is what was important for the filmmakers in terms of communicating something important about that world, and so that is where the attention was spent. So think about that with your worldbuilding. There are plenty of things that have come up in all of the Friends at the Table campaigns where we have not got too specific with it. I even think about something like – that this can even be stuff that seems key. You think about the mechs in the back half of Twilight Mirage. Everyone had a distinct mech. But we didn't, like, put them on camera that much because, with a few exceptions, right – like, I think about the big Brighton finale – or not finale, but arc - that was Keith, you – Dre, you, and Sylvia[1], was like "oh, the mechs are really here," because this was an episode – or an arc – about violence. This is an arc about turning yourself into a weapon, or being weaponised, or being hit by weapons, [laughs] depending on which character you were.

KEITH: Yeah, it was – it was really all three of those.

AUSTIN: Yeah, it really was. And so it's like, we have to define these. We have to really shape them. Whereas Fourteen Fifteen, like – if you are at the pusher level update and saw all of the notes we have on it, like, Jack and I came up with a really cool mech for Fourteen Fifteen. I think it's on screen once, and we didn't pause the action to hyper-describe it, or to force it into sequences, because it wasn't what was key to Fourteen Fifteen at that point, y'know? And so I think that ends up being another thing. Think about what matters to the characters and to the story, and try to let that be your guide as to where you fill in what degree of detail. Um… Alright.

Next question comes in from Connor: "I have a quick question" – this is a quick one - "about a behind-the-scenes thing – "are you on camera with each other? I find it easier to connect and read people when I can see them and they aren't just a voice in the ether. Was just wondering if you can all see each other when recording?"

The answer is no, actually. We used to, when we first started this show. Keith and Dre, that was just season one, right?

KEITH: Yeah.

DRE: I think so.

AUSTIN: I don't know why it stopped, but –

KEITH: [over Austin] Even – maybe not even all of season one.

AUSTIN: No.

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[1] The name in the audio recording is no longer in use, hence the audio/transcript discrepancy.

KEITH: I actually recently brought up starting it again.

AUSTIN: Yeah, it's a thing that I have mixed feelings about, because on one hand – so I do it – so what I'll say is I do it for Waypoint Radio. And it helps a lot for Waypoint Radio, because it is a – that is a show where we are – we often are not all doing the same thing, in the sense of: we haven't all played the same game. We haven't all – y'know, maybe Rob is talking about an intense strategy game, and being able to see his face and signal that I have something to add will prevent him from monologuing, or I will be prevented from monologuing on some, like, bullshit, y'know, open-world game anecdote that I'm telling for thirty-two minutes, [Dre laughs] um, because I can see that Patrick is bored. And that helps me try to "oh, right, let me, like, set this up to talk to somebody else." Waypoint Radio would be a much worse podcast if we didn't do cameras. But with Friends at the Table one of the things that I've found is that we tend to enough be on the same page. And I know that it's also just a case that, like, some people don't want to do it, and for me as the GM and a host, like, okay! I have to respect that. I'm not – I'm not – I am not the god-king. Like, as much as you're the god as the GM, you're also not, right? You're the host and are supposed to make the play session as comfortable for people as possible. So if people don't want to be on camera, they shouldn't be on camera. I will say that it's super interesting to see the rise of kind of Twitch actual plays. Like, obviously there are a billion of them now, and so many of them just wouldn't work as a live show without that camera stuff, because – partially because, I think, you just – part of why it was successful is seeing people and seeing people getting excited and all that. But also, one of the things I've learned from doing them and being on stuff like Roll Play is there's often groups that don't have a natural rapport or a history of playing with each other. And that is where I find it the most useful, because when I am playing with someone who I've never played with before, or who I may even have a natural absence of chemistry with, [laughs softly] being able to read someone's face helps a great deal. We did the Tales from the Loop game – I was on Adam's Tales from the Loop game – with a bunch of people who I had never played a game with before. And that game was really good, and would have been way weaker if it was just audio, because I just didn't know any of the people I played with, and so that helped a great deal, for sure. Um –

[Timestamp: 59:57]

KEITH: One thing that also helps with – and I also know this from personal experience – is I – two things: one, I am not good at paying attention to things.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh.

KEITH: So being able to see people helps me, um, stay focused.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

KEITH: And the other thing is I also interrupt a lot. And being able to see people helps me know when they want to talk.

AUSTIN: Right, right.

KEITH: So those are two other reasons why, like –

AUSTIN: Yeah. Nora says "people in my groups have probably seen me literally leap out of the way of the camera when we start a new Roll20, and I haven't turned broadcast video or worse off yet." Totally. One of the reasons I wanted to say this is just, like, I think that there's an increasing expectation that people should be on camera, and it is my real position that, like, you can do good online role-playing without being on camera. You can do good online role-playing as a mix between voice and text. Like, if you are listening to this and are like "oh, I would love to do what they do except I don't want to be on voice, I don't want to be on camera," you can find a group that does that, and it will – you will still be able to tell a great story and have a good time. That should be on everyone's table and on, like, your GM – or you as a GM, if you're listening, and you're like "I want everyone to be on camera." Please, be open to the idea that not everyone is comfortable doing that. It is super important, especially as you're first starting and people are building confidence, but even if you've known them for years: if they just don't want to do it , find ways to work with them, y'know?

JANINE: Um, the group that I run – we play on Roll20, and whose on voice kind of varies every week. And I'm happy with that. I make a point of – there's sometimes an apologetic tone – like, it's fine. Like, everyone has different circumstances. We have players who aren't comfortable on voice at all. We have players who have computers in their, like, bedroom, and have a spouse who might be trying to sleep while we're playing [AUSTIN: Right, right.] and, like, that's also a thing. Or maybe their dog is barking and they don't want to distract us. Or, like - there are myriad reasons why you might not want to – never mind being on camera, but being on voice. And I think, on the one hand I am more – I am more used to playing games on voice. I think it's quicker, and it can be a little easier to read people's tones, [AUSTIN: Yeah.] and it can be easier, also, for people to express more complex thoughts and actions than if they're typing things out and everyone's waiting to hear what they're gonna say.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: I think there's some pressure there that can be difficult. But at the same time, like, if you are a group of people who are happy to accommodate each other, then it's fine. It shouldn't keep you out. It's not gonna be everyone's thing, but like, it's worth making room for people no matter what their comfort with those systems is. And if that comfort changes from week-to-week,

AUSTIN: Yeah. Totally. The other thing for me is when I do text RP, I get in my own head and, like, I want to write a perfect response.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And so, like you said partially it's like "oh, I wanna go fast," but the other thing that happens is, like, "ahem! I am going to write a moving [laughs] description of my character." [Dre laughs] And it's like, this is boring for everyone else. This is not – this is for me. Or, alternatively, that's okay, and just like, that's the game you're doing, and everyone's onboard, you know?

JANINE: [cross] Yeah. Um –

AUSTIN: As always, have that conversation.

JANINE: I think actually the biggest hurdle that there has been so far from having a mix of players using voice and text is that when they don't agree on what the group should do.

AUSTIN: Mm, yeah.

JANINE: As a GM it can be very hard to figure out, because sometimes it will feel like there's agreement, [AUSTIN: Right.] and it's only because someone has changed their mind but hasn't typed it out yet, so we end up kind of, like, taking one step forward and having to take a step back again. [AUSTIN: Right.] And – so you need to be extra, extra clear about, like, do you all agree that this is what's going on now? If you don't agree, this is a scene we need to have.

AUSTIN: (cross) This is the moment, yeah.

JANINE: But, like – y'know, the first session we had was rough in this way, 'cause it was like, every group wanted to – a a couple groups wanted to go the chantry - or a couple of people wanted to go to the chantry and a couple of people wanted to go to the market, and some people were confused which group they were in when we split up, and there was no sense of alternating. So, yeah, it's – this is not really about cameras at this point [laughs], but do you know what I mean?

AUSTIN: No, but I – yeah, I know what you mean, I know what you mean.

JANINE: To be careful about stuff.

AUSTIN: Alright, one more question. This one comes in from Jared:

"Hey friends, I have a question about sticking to your guns. As a GM, I've been trying to make it feel like each important scene has stakes for the players. I want it to be possible for the players to fail, or lose something important, or both. And I believe that having the possibility of players losing things is important to getting them invested into a conflict – or in a conflict. However, in practice, whenever I DM, I end up pulling my punches, whether intentionally by hesitating when they get a bad roll and not wanting to give as bad a result as I could, or unintentionally when I forget what could be at stake in the scene and don't know what consequences to enact. Austin, as a DM who's very good at having all of you scenes have real, tangible stakes," which I don't know is true – "is there a way you make sure you follow through on your scene's stakes, and not back down when it matters?"

I have like seven answers for this, but I think the biggest and most important one is a meta answer, which is, like: what are the degrees of stakes at play in your game? I am guessing, based on your fandom of this podcast, and the idea that you think that I'm doing well, that you are not trying to run a simulationist game. Which is to say, you are not trying to say "here is the world as it really works, and the players are but cogs or, you know, pinballs in the machine being bounced around. And yes, they have velocity and force behind them, but if they go down into the gutter, they are going into the gutter, and they will lose. Because that is what the dice – the dice have spoken." The games that we tend to play are conversations, and they're stories. And stories exist inside of genres, and genres have different

relationships to failure. Failure in some genres can mean death, and in others can mean a broken heart or a missed connection. And in some genres the latter is felt much worse than death or, or physical pain, right? It is a key point that, like, a romantic failure, or a political failure, or a slip of a tongue that reveals a secret, could be felt as a much worse thing than simply a soldier dying off in the distance of war. In another work, the soldier dying off in the distance of war is the mostly harshly felt thing of all. The first thing to do is to, as a GM and as a player – to have the conversation about what types of stakes matter to you, and to set the guidelines, in a sense, for yourself as a storyteller about when you really want to make them feel it. In Twilight Mirage, the only time that I feel like combat failure was meant to be painful was when characters they – people cared about were involved. Again, I think the Brighton story is a really good example of that, where it was, like, the people whose lives at stake and the people whose lives were at risk of being taken were characters the players cared about, or were the players themselves. In early parts – in lots of other fights throughout Twilight Mirage – I think about the one where Janine's, uh – Signet, Tender, and Fourteen were going in Privign station, and there's just that fucking great moment where Tender's legs break. And, like, the jumpy legs – the spring legs don't work right, and she kind of goes careening into the sky, and [to Janine] a drone catches you, and there's lots of failure there, but I pulled a lot of punches there in a sense, right? I mean, I guess I did. Also, I guess, Fourteen died.

JANINE: (over Austin) You also killed – yeah, I was gonna say. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Fourteen dies there. Yeah, that's fair. That's fair.

JANINE: I was gonna say that Fourteen –

AUSTIN: (over Janine) But also, but also, Fourteen is a special case, 'cause I knew Fourteen lives, right?

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: You didn't die there. Tender didn't die there. Fourteen dies 'cause I, as the GM, know that this is an opportunity to advance the playbook of that character, because that character would continue to live as a character. And, I guess, sorry for brief spoilers for Twilight Mirage that I stumbled into. The, the – those stakes are - in that story were - it was not gonna be whether or not the player characters lived through that stuff. And so having a good understanding – whereas in COUNTER/Weight, those stakes were always on the table. In the Sprawl, you are, y'know – you are the pinball, and the world is the pinball machine. And so I had to underscore those stakes there in a much different way. So I think that's the first step to getting this right, for sure. Any thoughts about this from the player side around – around good stakes, or stakes that make you feel invested? I guess that's my question: it's like, when do you feel invested because of good stakes or interesting stakes?

KEITH: Um, I don't have an answer to that, [AUSTIN: Okay.] but I do have a different thing that I wanted to say about what we were just talking about. Which is that, like, you don't have to… you don't have to always be feeling like you're – I mean, this is exactly what just happened with Austin describing stuff. You don't always have to be feeling like you're keeping stakes at the front of your mind and pulling no punches, because it only takes a few things [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] to really stick in people's minds. Like, it –

you don't always have to be going as hard as maybe in retrospect you thought that you should, because, y'know, that is exhausting.

AUSTIN: For a lot – for everyone involved. Or it is when it's like – if all you're doing is thinking of the top level stakes being "how can this person's life be as bad as possible?" y'know?

KEITH: Yeah, yeah. But even if, like, in retrospect you're, y'know – you come off of a game and you're like "oh, I could have – I could have done something more impactful in these two spots, or even in more spots." But over the course of a campaign, there's only really a handful of broad-strokes things anyway. Like, 'cause that's just how stories get – it's how we think about stories that are in the rearview, is a handful of broad strokes, unless you're actively talking about it. So, it's like, as long as you're – as long as you're focusing on, um – as long as you're focusing on this question and trying to do the thing, I don't think that, like, missing a few beats is going to put your players to sleep. And, if anything, trying to hit every beat is going to be exhausting for you and then, maybe.

AUSTIN: For me, the other – maybe a practical thing here, too, is to straight-up write out a list of potential bad consequences. For me, I often do that based on a given arc, or a given mission, or adventure or whatever, where it's like -alright, I – so, to talk about the – there's a – I won't give specifics, I don't wanna spoil specific things. Now I'm, like, very self-conscious about it, um, [laughing softly] because I failed that roll and I spoiled something, and now I've taken a – now I'm afraid. I got the "afraid" condition, so I'm gonna roll poorly. The – you can think of a situation where it's like, "okay, this is set in a ballroom, and" – here's a – I'll spoil a small thing, which is the first adventure of the Rosemarrow party – the Winter – the Museum party, where, like, I knew – I knew that the curtains in the Rosemarrow museum, and the entire set piece there, could catch fire. Right? Like, I had that pre-written down somewhere. I knew that players could get locked inside of a vault. I knew that one potential failure was that there would be violence between the Ordennans and the Gnolls. I knew that one of the potential things that didn't happen here was related to the stars. And I had a list of those things on hand so I could refer to a scale of potential complications of failed rolls. Mother Glory appearing, angry and ready to stomp down a hallway, was something that I knew was a possibility ahead of time.

Certain games give you lots of great tools for this. The Sprawl – everyone should read The Sprawl, everyone should read Dungeon World. Like, those are, I – people should probably read Apocalypse World, too, but those two games have given me as a GM more tools in my toolbox than anything else. Dungeon World, partially because its section on GMing are really strong, and the GM principles are things you can bring to any game. The Sprawl, because the way it conceptualises factions – not factions – not just factions – factions and threats requires you, or encourages you, to prep for potential outcomes. When a corporation's clock ticks, it does something. And that can be activating a threat, it can be them putting out a warrant for the arrest of the party, it can be them, y'know, deploying a superweapon or a computer virus. All the things that happened in COUNTER/Weight: almost all of those were things that I prepped because I understood the ways in which a corporation would potentially respond, and it's the same thing with threats in that game. And having that, even if you go off what you've written already – even if you're like "um, I've written the level 3 response should be that they assassins or whatever." Maybe you don't want to send assassins. You know in your back pocket that

at some point they can send the assassins out. You know what types of things they have in their back pocket.

It's the same thing with building a location. Like, I think – I mean, I guess, full disclosure, I'm about to mention Hitman, and Janine, you write for Hitman now – but playing Hitman (2016) was, like, revelatory for me in designing spaces and missions, because I thought about all the ways my Hitman runs go wrong. [laughs] Ways I was seen, uh – escalations also, specifically, where it's like new things I have to deal with, and rules I have to abide by, ways in which I was caught, or the ways in which, like, I'm dragging a body through a parking lot and someone turns the corner, I get caught by a camera. All of those things, and thinking about those spaces and obstacles, helped me conceptualise ways in which players might fail in a way that makes the failure sting, but which, especially in Hitman, is not a dead end, right? When you get caught by a camera in Hitman or someone compromises one of your disguises, it doesn't fail you. It's not Splinter Cell, right? It's not, like, "and then you start the level over." It's "okay, how the fuck do I deal with this?" And that is the thing I want to - I really want to breathe into every game I run, and I promise you players will feel that. You know, you don't need to – you don't need to knock them down to 0HP for them to remember mistakes.

[Timestamp: 1:15:33]

JANINE: Yeah, depriving a player of a plan that they're invested in, or, like, putting an unexpected roadblock in their way does feel like a tangible stake. Like, [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] the thing I am still the most sore about is that I know what a dam isn't, but Adaire doesn't know what a dam is.

AUSTIN: (over Janine) Uh-huh, I knew you were gonna say that. She doesn't know about dams!

JANINE: That – that's a thing that I recognise makes sense. I'm sure I could not build a successful dam, but –

AUSTIN: Mm-hm. I let you roll – I let you roll for it, at least!

JANINE: I know! I know - yes, yes, you totally – you let me roll, and I failed that roll. And, like – but that's – I mean, that's stakes. Like, there was a thing that I wanted and I did not get what I wanted, and no one had to die for that to really stick in my craw.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Right.

JANINE: That was just a moment of, like, you know – I mean – I guess the real – the real thing in that moment is: the thing that was the most important to me was Adaire being a smartass [AUSTIN: Right.] who figured everything out, [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] and I didn't get to be the smartass who figured everything out.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: The thing I was – I was actually gonna say before that, though – before I thought of that – was, um, I feel like I – I feel like someone should also just say that, like – don't feel bad if you as a GM want to hold certain things sacred.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: If it feels bad to you to, like, kill off a character's love interest, you don't have to. Like, if you – if the idea of doing that, like, makes you feel bad about the that story that you are all trying to tell, or you know that maybe the player will not take it, um – as just kind of a part of the thing, like – I feel like not everything has to be on the table. Um, it – and it's like, it's -

AUSTIN: Mm-hm. And I think it speaks back to that big idea, which is, like, what types of stakes are on the table, based on what you want to do?

JANINE: Yeah. But that idea of not backing down when it matters. Like, it's [sighs] –

AUSTIN: I will say the other thing there is – and this is not a thing that's come up in this – for us – but in college it super did, which is the one thing to be careful of there is applying different degrees, of, um – is pulling punches differently for different players.

JANINE: Yes.

AUSTIN: On one hand, I think you're right to be like "hey, can this player take it? Is this a thing the player really doesn't want to have happen, and another player wouldn't mind?" But you're not a mind reader. And players at the table will – could absolutely see favouritism, or be frustrated by simple inconsistency in the degree of results, especially if the guns that you've shown – the barrels of the guns that you've shown – have not been particularly clear.

Or – and this has definitely happened for us before – I think about Fero, the animals disappearing in Winter, right – is, like, I showed that barrel seven weeks ago, you know? And I showed it once, because you only failed a roll once, and if I could redo Winter what I would do is give you extra – I mean, I guess I showed it once before that, too, but it was very brief, 'cause it was, like, in the very intro – but a situation where I could show that barrel more, and more, and more, so that when the eventual – when the gun was fired, eventually, based on the roll – that was set up better, right. And – whereas, other players – whereas, to contrast that – the Lem plant situation where, like, that plant was all over the game, over and over and over again. It was - those stakes were extremely clear. And so, even though both of them had dice rolls and both of them had very, you know – had rules that were sketched out before the game started that year, one of them got enough camera time that the stakes were when they were inevitably felt at the end. Like, Lem knew exactly what that plant was by the end of it, and it wasn't a big fucking deal. Whereas the Fero thing – one, I mean the scale was just different. But two, it – the stakes weren't completely clear ahead of time. And so, even though I was not pulling punches on either of them, there was a world in which those things look completely different, you know? Or feel different to the player because the degree to which there is clarity on what the stakes are is just not enough.

KEITH: Although, you know, not to – I don't want to take away from the point, but – if – if you're – I feel like as - I was - I feel like I was on board with the…

AUSTIN: Sure, sure, sure.

KEITH: With the stakes from that, and I think that all it's done is create a lot of fun turmoil for Fero that [AUSTIN: (laughs) Yes.] – that is, like – literally everything that Fero is doing right now is, like, born out of that still.

AUSTIN: Sure. Right, right. But, you know, there's a world in which I was wrong about how – like, in my mind, I was like, "oh, and Keith will roll with this," and you did, but I am not a mind reader. You know what I mean? Which is why I think it's better practice to make those stakes very clear as early as possible, because it's not supposed to be – I think it goes back to that first question that we had – [KEITH: Mm-hm.] or not the first question, but the earlier question about the Pierce the Mask thing, where it's like, "make the stakes clear to your players." And then – and then, once the stakes are clear, if they commit to doing it, that's on them to some extent, you know what I mean?

KEITH: Yeah. I guess that's, like, the really great thing about having a game that you really – that we're, like, everybody's like really on the same page where, like, you know. There is – there's times when I've played games where it's like, and this is how I started playing Dungeons and Dragons, too, where it's like "okay, here's the GM, and they have the book, and they are complicating things, and then the players are working through it." Versus, you know, I think a lot of the best times we've had are, like, "oh, the players are also – not just complicating things for themselves, but complicating the world and each other and the GM all together."

AUSTIN: Right. Yeah. Again, we keep coming back to that Brighton game but, like, the final hour and a half – the final episode of that Brighton game [KEITH: Yeah.] in Twilight Mirage everyone was just like – the engine was just all the way turned up [Keith laughs] and, like, yo, everyone was like, "yo, I'm gonna complicate your situation by throwing my body into it. Just throw me into the fucking clockwork gears. It's just gonna get messy and, like, I'm gonna – my priorities are going to completely intersect with your priorities in a way that means that neither of us – neither of us may get what we want out of this."

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And – and I think that it's a very mature and very difficult play to get to, where you're like – I mean, go listen – if you, you know – Jared says "I don't pull punches," go back and listen to that arc, and listen to me beg Keith [Keith cackles] to take a different route. "Yo, Keith! You under – Keith", [groans] that whole arc was me – the whole end of that arc was just being terrified. And then the same thing with Even at the end of it. [groans] So, so, so – I mean, and then, and then – I mean, I think maybe that's the best thing, is just like – if you give your players room to really care about their characters, they are the ones who are going to want more severe stakes. Jack de Quidt is maybe the king – or the sovereign of this, right? Is, like, "please, fuck me up, fam. I have a good idea for how this could go worse for me." So – so yeah. Any final thoughts on this? This is our last question. Alright. Oh, I heard a mouth make a sound.

[Janine laughs]

KEITH: Not my mouth. Not this mouth!

JANINE: Not mine!

DRE: Not this mouth!

AUSTIN: Alright, no mouths are making sound.

DRE: Ghost mouth.

AUSTIN: A ghost mouth. Ghost, do you have anything to add? [wails]

KEITH: [in a deep voice] Well…

AUSTIN: Okay.

DRE: [laughs] Oh, god, it's the ghost of Flangers!

AUSTIN: [laughing] Oh no, the ghost of Flanger is here!

>KEITH (as Flanger): As someone with an incorporeal body, it is difficult to put myself in danger.

AUSTIN: Great.

>KEITH (as Flanger): I'm really interested in exploring emotional stakes.

AUSTIN: Oh, okay! I can see that! I got that! Mm.

>KEITH: (as Flanger): Mmmmmmmm…

AUSTIN: Um… [laughs] Trevor the Knight, in the chat says,

>"Me: no fear

>Jack: gets very excited.

>Me: one fear"

[Janine laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah. Uh-huh. I mean, I think that, like, that's the other thing for Twilight Mirage is: go back and listen to the final Grand and Fourteen arc as a game in which the players became very interested in stakes, to the degree that we had a forty-minute conversation just about stakes. And that is, like – I am so blessed to have players interested in stakes in that way, 'cause I know as a player – me? My stakes are "I wanna win! I wanna do the win!" And that's how I was for so many years. And so, I am again very, very

lucky. Alright. That is going to do it for us today. As always, you can send your questions to tipsatthetable@gmail.com. We got some really good ones we couldn't get to today, obviously, but we didn't want to go for seven hours, so we instead only went for one and a half. [Dre laughs] You can send your questions, again, to tipsatthetable@gmail.com, and you can continue to support the show at friendsatthetable.cash. Quick preview: um, I'd like to do another live game in the next week or two, hopefully. We have our Lacuna – our Lacuna / ??? game, a little hacking in there – not, like, it's not cyberpunk, like I hacked Lacuna to add in something else – and I'm really happy with how that game turned out. Janine, Keith, y'all were both on it, and you were both great.

KEITH: I thought that that started dropping already?

AUSTIN: No, that hasn't come out yet.

KEITH: Oh, wow.

AUSTIN: We haven't recorded intros yet, I have to figure out what intros are, and Jack still needs to do music for it. So, once we do that, those will start dropping.

KEITH: That was really fun. It took me a little bit to, like, figure out what the game was, [AUSTIN: Yeah.] but after – after we did, I really loved it.

AUSTIN: (over Keith) I almost mentioned that, because there was a – there was a number of scenes there where we did the thing of, like, "okay, we're not gonna – we can't redefine what the stakes are – not the stakes, but the – the Pierce the Mask question." There are moments there, which we don't have to get into, but where multiple players were rolling. And you'll know it when you listen to it – where we just kind of go like "alright, I'm not gonna ask you to reframe this scene every time you roll dice, because we're just escalating a certain thing, we're not – new action isn't happening with each of these dice rolls."

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So always pay attention to that, too, 'cause like – "hey, do you need to do this, or is this something based on the way the move is written, or the rules are written, where this is just kind of a background thing that's happening?" That can be totally okay. Um, so that game –

KEITH: That's also –

AUSTIN: Go ahead.

KEITH: That's a game where the, sort of last – I guess I would call it the last… act, I guess? Or maybe the back third? Is something where, like, I – I struggled specifically with, like, feeling like I was pulling a punch, but ended up [AUSTIN: Right. No -] also feeling like it was the – the thing – it felt like it was narratively a thing that made sense, but also, like – like, at some point "why are you – why are you worried about pulling punches? Why are you punching here?" You know?

AUSTIN: Right. Which ended up, to me, feeling like – we can do a – we are going to do something after this drops where we talk about all of Bluff City and stuff – but it felt very Bluff City, the outcome of all that stuff, is what I will say without spoiling anything. And then Janine threw the biggest punch at the end. Oh my god! [Janine and Keith laugh] Cannot wait!

JANINE: Yeah, holding punches, what are y'all talking about?

AUSTIN: [laughing] Cannot wait for people to hear that shit, oh my god! [Dre laughs] Fuck! Um, alright, any other big things? Um… ba-ba-ba, ba-pa-ba. That's a song.

KEITH: I could go for some buffet right now.

AUSTIN: I – Jesus Christ, we're gonna – I'm gonna hang up before we spoil this episode.

[Janine and Keith laugh]

AUSTIN: That's gonna do it for us! Catch us in the future. Have a good one, everybody.

KEITH: Did we finish doing an outro? Did we interrupt the outro?

AUSTIN: That's it, I just did it. Peace.