Transcriber: MaxXM#5418

[00:00:00] Intro

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

JANINE: Hey, I'm Janine Hawkins. I'm @bleatingheart on Twitter.

AUSTIN: And Art Martinez-Tebbel.

ART: Hey, you can find me @atebbel.

AUSTIN: How's everyone doing today? This Saturday evening? When we're recording?

ART: [crosstalk] Great. I almost hit "Update Discord", not realizing it would end the call. [**JANINE** laughs]

[**ART** and **AUSTIN** exchange muffled crosstalk]

JANINE: [crosstalk] They gotta do something about the psychological impact of that button, because I almost do that all of the time.

AUSTIN: They should make [**ART:** Yeah!] it a different color if you're on a call, maybe? You know, like a light grey or something, so…

JANINE: [crosstalk] They– How about they just hide it when you're on a call?

ART: Yeah, when do I– When is my Discord [chuckles] so out of date that it needs to be updated mid-call?

JANINE: When you're in a call you need to get out of.

AUSTIN: Yeah. "Aw, I gotta go. I gotta–" [laughs] "–update Discord. Sorry!"

ART: [laughs] Gotta Update Discord!

JANINE: [as if falling down a well] "Oh, no, I hit the update button, sorry guys, I gotta go, byeeeee…"

AUSTIN: "Bye-bye-bye-bye-bye-bye-bye. Oh, it's not done updating. It's– I'm on my phone. I can't call in. Bye."

JANINE: "It's a long update. Watch out."

AUSTIN: Yeah. "Oh, I bluescreened. Don't wor–"

JANINE: [crosstalk] "Maybe wait a day before you get this update." [chuckles]

AUSTIN: [chuckles] "Yeah, sit on this one. This one's no good." Um… Alright.

JANINE: Lying! [**ART** chuckles]

AUSTIN: [laughs] That's what we're advocating for [**JANINE** laughs] here, at Tips at the Table! It's an even– I know we say be honest to your friends–

JANINE: [crosstalk] Yeah. Famously about transparency [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] and being direct, but also [chuckles] what if you lied to everyone on Discord all the time?

AUSTIN: Ohh, we all have the impulse.

ART: [crosstalk] But if you ever don't wanna be talking to someone, then it's, fucking… no rules.

AUSTIN: Get out! [**JANINE:** Yeah.] Oh, god. Yeah. Yeah. Thinking about all the times in my life I have not wanted to talk to someone, and all of the ways in which I've grown as a person by learning how to just say, "I don't have time today," or, "I'm not in– I can't– I don't have the time to have this conversation right now," [**JANINE:** Yeah.] and no matter how hard that is– or, not even just the time, but the energy. It's hard.

Anyway. Our first question, which now I hope is not [**JANINE** laughs] entirely super relevant to what we said [laughs] because we're just gonna sound like assholes.

[00:02:06] Question One: Miriam

AUSTIN: Miriam says–

> I sometimes find while playing– I'm usually a player, not a GM– that I accidentally skip steps when I'm describing–

AUSTIN: Or, sorry–

> –when I'm speaking and forget to fully explain important details of what my character is doing, or assume a situation has changed the way I intended it to when it hasn't, in part because I failed to make my intentions clear. It sometimes takes a while to realize I've made this mistake, or that I've been misunderstood, and at that point other story beats have unfolded based on other people's perceptions of what I meant.
>
> I usually go along with these things because I don't want to break the flow of storytelling, or to make it seem like I'm cheating, or want to get special privileges to get my characters out of trouble. I don't. I love getting my characters into trouble, but it's frustrating when it's because my brain got ahead of my mouth, not because of conscious choices I was making or dice.

How do you decide to argue your case when you've been misunderstood at the table versus when too much has built on your lack of clarity in speaking? Do you have advice for being more clear– about making it more clear what your characters are doing in the first place?

AUSTIN: This is funny, because we actually just had a situation like this in an episode that's not out yet, in which I think we remedied it pretty quickly. Both Janine and Art were there. Janine, it was one of your thing– It was a thing with your character where I misunderstood what your intent– or, maybe I understood what your intention was but the table writ large maybe didn't? But I think we got–

JANINE: [crosstalk] Yeah, I was gonna say, this is– This is such a huge thing for me. [**AUSTIN:** Oh, 100%. Yes.] This is a thing that happens to me constantly, and also is one of my– even away from tabletop RPGS– is one of my greatest fears.

AUSTIN: Being misunderstood, in terms of– [**JANINE:** Yes.] Yeah. Uh-huh! Same.

JANINE: [crosstalk] Explaining myself, and then realizing I didn't explain myself right.

AUSTIN: Me, in tears–

JANINE: [crosstalk] Or– Yeah. I–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] –in the kitchen, arguing with my mom for ten years. [**JANINE:** Yeah.] All of– and each time, it's me being like, "You don't understand the thing I'm trying to say." [chuckles]

JANINE: And you never know if the thing is that someone didn't understand you, or if the thing is that they understood you and they have [**AUSTIN:** Right.] made a pivot on their own, for whatever reason. And you've misunderstood that part of it. [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh!] Like, the whole… [sighs] Yeah.

AUSTIN: How have you found… or, have you found that you've adjusted, in terms of roleplay, being– finding some technique to, kind of, preempt that frustration in any way?

JANINE: For me, a big part of it has been– whenever I feel like an action is going to be important– like, there are some things where it kinda doesn't matter? Or, you know, things where it doesn't matter as much if I say I went left, and then [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] I actually meant I go farther left than you thought I meant, and [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] whatever. We can hash that out.

But if it's a really important action, or a thing that I know– that I can feel that I'm invested– and I think that's the important part, is feeling your own level of investment in the action, because that's going to affect how much you're willing to compromise if you are misunderstood after the fact [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] and how much you might have to backtrack, and how much you might wanna just let it go, or whatever.

But if you feel that it's a thing that's important to you, the thing that I tend to do is, before it's my turn, or even while it's my turn– sort of, in the very early stages of it– I'll buy a little time by being like, "Umm…" And I'll be writing down my notes of, like, "Here are the five steps of this action I

wanna do." Or, like, "Here are the five components of it. I wanna throw this thing…" [**AUSTIN** chuckles] "...and say this line, and then run that way," or whatever.

And I'll try and, like– bullet point– really get those things down, so that I can go down that list as I'm explaining what I'm doing, and make sure that I've included each of those components. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.]

For the misunderstanding thing, I feel like it's… you know, it doesn't actually happen too much to us, and because of the way our table is and what we do, it's pretty easy to be like, "Oh, sorry, sorry. I actually meant blah-blah-blah," and to kind of course-correct that way. I think if it's a thing you're running into a lot, where you're being misunderstood, you might want to talk to your GM about… not– about, you know, the–

You know the whole "active listening" thing, of when someone tells you something, you sort of half-repeat it back to them? [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.]

ART: Yes. I do understand that active listening is when you half-repeat something back to someone. [**ART** and **JANINE** laugh]

JANINE: But you might– You know what I'm saying then, right?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I do! Yeah! Yeah! Totally.

JANINE: [crosstalk] You might wanna have a talk with your GM that's like, "Hey, I've been feeling a little weird about this. When I do an action, can you kind of… not repeat it back to me, but sort of frame it how you're going to frame it, and I can be like, 'Yes, that's what I'm doing,' or…" It doesn't have to feel… shoe-horned? I think you could do that in a way that's just like narrating the story as you would anyway.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Totally. I've gotten– I think– My guess is, if you did a quantitative analysis of Friends at the Table transcripts over the last two years, you would find– Actually, post-Twilight Mirage. Twilight Mirage is probably the period at which I started learning to do this more.

So I'd say Spring forward, a phrase you would hear– you'll hear me say in and around– either immediately before or in the moments after saying, "What do you do," is, "What's your intention here?" I almost always bring it up [**JANINE:** Mhm…] when people are trying to decide what to roll– what skill to roll, what move to use, whatever it is–

And in some cases, this is not… this does not match the rules of the game. There are plenty of games that say, "I want you to roll the physical– the material action that you're doing, not something tied to the outcome that you're pursuing," but I find– and this is, like… This is not new. This is indie– a 15-year-old indie game thing, right –of, like–

Talk to your players, and talk to– you know, everyone at the table should talk about what the intended outcome of a success looks like, right? Or, you know, even, sometimes, what a failure looks like, ahead of time. What is on the table?

But I know– I feel like, Art, you and I do this a lot– or, again, I think we just did it in a recent Sangfielle recording, where I was like, "Okay, what are you– What's the thing you're looking to achieve here, and then we'll work backwards from that–" [**ART:** Mhm.] "–to the dice you're rolling," and in the process of giving you the space to do that, it's often the case that a player actually realizes what they intend and then actually adjusts what the action they started to say was, or something like that.

So I think maybe it might be worth talking to your GM about that, and saying, "Hey, if you're ever unclear with what my intention might be, play it safe and ask." You know? And, again, I think Janine's totally right, that it's the big st– The big character beats are more important to get that right with than, "Did you mean left or west?" You know? "On the map," or whatever. [**JANINE:** Yeah.] [**ART** chuckles]

Because that stuff doesn't– with exception, with some exception– rarely means, "This is who my character is," but the difference between, "I'm trying to knock this person out," and, "I'm trying to kill this person," or… "I'm trying to convince this person because they mean a lot to me," and, "I'm trying to convince this person because I disagree with their ideology," are big. Those are vast differences, you know? So… [**JANINE:** Yeah.] So, yeah.

Art, I don't know– You know, like I said, I feel like we just did this recently. I don't know if you have any perspective on this, or if we have a very unique relationship, in the sense that we've now been playing games together like this for a very long time–

ART: [crosstalk] Like, almost half our lives.

AUSTIN: Yeah. [**JANINE** laughs] I mean, this is– This is the real shit now. The– I– We– I'm on a call with people I've been roleplaying with [laughs] half my life! [**JANINE** laughs] Which is a lot to think about!

ART: Yeah. Especially, you know, I mean… Definitely half the life, if you don't count the parts where you can't talk. [**AUSTIN** cackles]

AUSTIN: Yes! Correct!

ART: Where you're, like, physically incapable of carrying on a game like this.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yeah, three-year-old Austin was not rolling up to the table [laughs] trying to figure out how to run a game.

ART: But I guess, part of this for me is that "getting in trouble because my brain got ahead of my mouth" is one of the most frequent ways I get into trouble in real life? So, like… [**AUSTIN** chuckles] [**JANINE:** Yeah…] I don't find that out of place in a game. If a character talked too much, got out of line, and is getting in trouble, it's like, "Oh, yeah. Here's this again."

AUSTIN: [laughs] "Yeah, I sure should've paused and worked through exactly what I was saying ahead of time here too, huh?" [**JANINE** chuckles] That's also, just–

ART: [crosstalk] But it's, like– [**AUSTIN:** Go ahead.] If it wasn't this, though… I mean, if I was– If it was something really serious, I'd make us take it again, and if I was in a more casual setting and was like, "Oh, I don't like this," I'd make it roll– I'd make it roll back. I don't think it's cheating. I don't think it's, like– I think you can always say, "Hey, this isn't… Can we– Can we back this up–" [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] "–a couple minutes?"

And, like, don't do it all the time, you know? I guess the– Part of it is knowing when to pick your… not battles, because I don't think it should be a battle, but… [**AUSTIN:** Totally.] When it's like, "Oh, shit. This is important. I wanna back up to make sure everything's clear," do it. And when it's like, "Oh. Well, that's not exactly what I intended, but this is fun," do that, too.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I'll say, going back to the thing that, like– What can you do about it, besides ask your GM to be a little more inquisitive about your intention?

You can– You can– I think one of the things Janine hit was laying out, during the kind of down-beat where the camera isn't on you, so to speak, what you want to do, and opening it with an intention statement where you just say, like, "Okay. What I wanna do is convince this person of blank. To do that, I'm doing blank." –I think will help clear things a little bit?

There is a tradeoff here, which is– I think a lot of the high that we chase when doing role playing games is to step away from– is that bleed effect, is that crossover effect, of, like, "I'm embodying a character. It's really exciting to just, kind of, speak as the character."

And to pull the camera away from the character you're embodying for a moment can be jarring, or might not give you that same degree of, like– that spike of emotional, you know, energy that comes with saying, "Fuck you, actually," in-character, to someone else, or confessing your love, or even just saying, "Okay, what I do is I sneak across the catwalk, and I jump down on this person and knock them out," or whatever.

That, kind of, like– "Slow down. My intention is blank," or, "What I wanna do here is blank…" Can I– I get that that's a trade-off, but I also think that, if you practice that style of play, it will also end up giving you some of that joy, and some of that feeling, if that's a thing you're concerned about.

And it will help prevent this style of misinterpretation, because, if you're more straightforward with– or, more direct with your intentions, you'll end up hitting a better batting average, so to speak? You might not get that home run of The Feast of Petina– everyone is just all the way in their characters at all times– but you'll also avoid the rare occasions that there is the, like, big breakdown of– "Oh, wait. The last ten minutes shouldn't have happened because I thought X and you thought Y, and now we're in a situation that doesn't make sense to either of us."

The big e– There was a big example in PARTIZAN, right? Which was the… the arc that took place in a big cemetery had one of these, where there just, like [**ART:** Hmm.] some elements of what was happening were not clear between players, GM, and even Between players, in terms of what the state of play was, and next thing you know, we're deep into some wild [laughs] shit! [**JANINE:** Yeah.]

And I think we rolled with it pretty well, and I think everyone kind of said, "Well, we don't wanna rewind things 40 minutes– or, 30 minutes, or whatever. We like the situation we're in. It kind of undercuts the characters a little bit, in the fact that we would wind up here, because I think our characters would have thought through this a little bit more, but let's roll with it and see if we get to somewhere that we like."

And I think that's a situation that, like– That was less about intention and more about needing to juggle a whole lot of information that was hard to communicate, even with aides like a map, and tokens, and stuff. [**JANINE**: Yeah.] So… Because, like [**ART**: Mhm.] they had a timeline involved. They had a bunch of other shit that was just, like, a tough… I still like that episode a lot, but I often think about what I could've done better there to present that information.

JANINE: I just wanna add– There's also a fact– There's a factor in here of, like… I think a piece of writing advice that's really really good for beginners, and really really bad for intermediate and advanced writers who hold onto it [**AUSTIN**: Mmmm-hm.] is "show, don't tell"? Where we all want to show, you know, our character's sadness– like, the effect of a character's emotion, like sadness or whatever, or– you know, bitterness, or all that. But when you're– Sorry, my cat– [laughs]

AUSTIN: Your cat is currently showing her emotional…

JANINE: She was showing and telling. [**AUSTIN**: Uh-huh.] But, you know, you don't necessarily want to just say, "My character is sad right now, so…" But you shouldn't be afraid to do that?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You should not.

JANINE: [crosstalk] Like, you shouldn't be afraid to just say… you know, "She feels really betrayed," or, like, "He feels alone," or, you know… things like that, because you can let other players decide if they're picking up on that, or whatever. Like, people are still… You know, it doesn't have to be like the character is saying it out loud. [**AUSTIN**: Yeah.] They're not saying, "I am sad." But, you know, you telling is different [**AUSTIN**: Totally.] and helpful.

AUSTIN: And this is– We are not doing short fiction. [**JANINE**: No.] We're not doing prose. We're not doing… For all of our use of cinematic language, this is not a TV show, or an anime. [laughs] This is actual play!

JANINE: [crosstalk] Everything made up on the spot [**AUSTIN**: Totally!] while people wait for you to finish your sentence! You can't hold yourself to the standard of, like, Hugo Award-winning fiction!

AUSTIN: First of all… we [loses it] should be Hugo [**ART**: Yeah!] Award-winning fiction! [**JANINE** laughs] Second of all, I genuinely think that this is a difference in genre, not in terms of genre fiction– in terms of, like, sci-fi or fantasy– but in terms of… or, medium might be the better word here. But I– I– Part of what…

I really think that part of what actual play is is showing the process– is seeing the skeleton– is talking through it. I actually– There was just this piece that went up about Friends at the Table

that was very flattering, that went up on discoverpods.com by Ryan Stevens, and in it Ryan writes– I'm just gonna find this thing that is, like, the most flattering thing that anyone's ever said about the way we run our show. Maybe not the most, but it's up there.

"The podcast has a distinctly Brechtian flavor to it at times, where the last thing on anyone's minds, outside of Walker's scripted intros, is immersion. The priority of "critical world-building" is key here: the players are trying to be critical and conscious of the stories that they tell…" I'm gonna jump ahead a little bit here, because I don't wanna, fuckin, toot our own horn too much.

"...but the players need to keep one foot in reality as they devise each move and consider, for example, what moments of sudden violence might mean in the larger story's context." "The emotional depth doesn't come from fictional characters, but the real-world investment the players have in said characters."

We don't pretend that the– that there is not a… that there is not labor going on, that there is not work happening into telling these stories. We don't let the stories exist as fully-formed final products on a shelf. You can totally see what we build here. And I– This is kind of what "Brechtian" means?

Bertolt Brecht was a playwright and philosopher who… one of– I'd say if you want to summarize what Brechtian theater is, it's like theater that reminds you that it's theater– that it's a material thing– that it's a thing that is produced and part of the world, and is not a sort of… It is not just entertainment that you can absorb passively.

It's something that is very clearly being actively made in front of you, and so when we leave in the bit where we go back and forth over what dice to roll, or what the character's intention is, I'm doing that because I think that's part of what good roleplaying games are.

And so, what Janine said is 100% right. Saying that your character is sad is not a shortcut. You're not failing because you're saying, like, "Oh, my character's brow dips and I look away." You might also say that! I'm happy to have you describe that. In fact, it's great to do both of those things.

For all of the, sort of, pacing issues that early Twilight Mirage had, one of the best things about using *The Veil* was the ways in which it got us close to character interiority and allowed us to talk through, in excruciating [chuckles] detail, where they were at in explicit terms. [**JANINE:** Yeah.] And that's not the best thing for every game, or even every moment of a session. I like getting into the flow, especially around high action sequences where we are just– where the action does get kinetic, and there's a back and forth.

I think about the fight with a character in a library, towards the end of Spring in Heiron. That was this, like [snapping] "Boom, boom, boom!" And I like getting there, but even the fact that we can get there is based on the sort of previous work we do lingering and talking through things in this more direct way, so… Yeah, Janine, thank you for– That is like– I didn't even about that part of this until you mentioned the [**JANINE:** Mhm.] "show, don't tell" thing, right? It is exactly like 101– A great 101 tip that then falls apart–

JANINE: [crosstalk] Yeah. It's such a good rule when you're just learning to tell a story, but once you know how stories fundamentally work, it's a bad thing to let it dominate you. It sort of stops meaning anything. [chuckles] [**AUSTIN:** Yeah, totally.] Like, it… Yeah.

AUSTIN: Well, part of it, too, is… There's a point at which your ability to interpret what's happening on the page or on the screen is conditioned enough to understand "this character is sad" through their depiction, and, at that point, that line between showing and telling gets very blurry, and I think you end up seeing this [**JANINE:** Mhm.] in reviews of things a lot, where you'll see someone say that there wasn't a lot of… you know.

Things were melodramatic, right? Melodrama is the "tell, don't show" of showing, and it's why a lot of people recoil when you watch something that has high melodrama, because they don't like that, you know? [**JANINE:** Yeah.]

ART: Did you watch *Tenet*?

AUSTIN: I didn't yet. I need to. [chuckles] Because I– [**ART:** Alright.] Because I've heard– What– Go ahead. What do you– What do you– Is this, like, a big spoiler? Is it a…

ART: [crosstalk] No, it's.. I mean, it's… It's, like– It's just a– It's a– It's a– It's a tangent, but it's… That movie. That movie is what they mean when they say "show, don't tell". It doesn't mean what people use "show, don't tell" to mean.

AUSTIN: This is a compliment for *Tenet*?

ART: No. Nope. [**AUSTIN** and **JANINE** laugh] This is an insult. [**AUSTIN:** Okay!] *Tenet* will tell you something, show you an example of a thing they just told you, and then that thing isn't important for the rest of this [**AUSTIN** laughs] like, two hour and 40 minute movie. And, like, I didn't need to be told OR shown that! [**JANINE** chuckles]

AUSTIN: So, you're saying it sh–

ART: [crosstalk] I get it. You can make shit go backwards. You're very clever. [**AUSTIN** laughs]

AUSTIN: So I should watch it, then? That's…

ART: I mean– I think Christopher Nolan's always interesting [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] but this is not the best part of interesting. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah, fair.] Jessica walked out of it, and we were watching it in our living room.

AUSTIN: Wow! [**JANINE** laughs] Well, that's an easy walk out. That's a low… [**JANINE:** Yeah…]

ART: We got through, like, an hour and a half, and just, like, "I'm gonna go take a bath. I'm not doing this anymore." [**JANINE** laughs]

AUSTIN: Well, that's also– See, that's what I'm saying! Like, when a bath is on the table… I'd walk out of a lot of movies [**JANINE:** Yeah…] if I could walk out of the movie and into a bath. [chuckles]

JANINE: Versus just kicking around in a theater lobby for another hour?

AUSTIN: Yeah, while you're waiting for your– the rest of your crew to finish up?

ART: Well, they just– A bunch of theaters just went out of business in LA. I'll see if I can get a group of investors [**AUSTIN** chuckles] for this new bath/theater concept you're pitching.

JANINE: [laughs] [slick with sarcasm] Yeah, that's the Covid concept we all need.

AUSTIN: I was gonna say! [laughs]

ART: Individual baths! I'm not doing a group bath.

AUSTIN: Is it open air, or are we in little rooms?

ART: I think little rooms? I think [**AUSTIN:** Hmm.] the downstairs theaters, you convert into little individual bath cubicles.

AUSTIN: Ventilate– Ventilated? They have to be.

ART: [crosstalk] Yeah, I mean… [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] I'm gonna listen to what the city tells me to do with my bath cubicles.

JANINE: I think they're gonna tell you not to have them. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah, I think so! [laughs] Alright…

ART: Well, I'm gonna tell those fat cats down in city hall what I think of their rules!

[00:23:32] Question Two: Brendan

AUSTIN: This one comes in from Brendan, who says–

> I have been very lucky to have a number of terrific players in my home game over the past few years. More than a couple of them are great roleplayers– folks who really know how to embody a character and engage in the world in interesting ways. I have another player who really clearly aspires to that same level of proficiency, but winds up having difficulty connecting with the ball, even when I tee it up for him.
>
> He's always excited to play outsiders– character archetypes who exist outside of the established systems and cultures– except that he winds up pretty stuck whenever he asks him stuff like, "What does your character think about X?" Or, "Have you ever encountered something like this?" There's always a clear desire to bridge that gap, but a real difficulty in making the synapses fire even when the table is providing leading questions like, "Maybe it's Y, or something like Z."
>
> I know he wants to really participate in creative storytelling in that way, but it usually feels like he arrives at the table with an archetype, but a difficult time thinking about anything

else past that. Any tips on how to encourage or cultivate this type of roleplaying so that he and the rest of the table can wind up better for it?

AUSTIN: This is a tough one.

ART: [crosstalk] This is a… This is a tough one.

AUSTIN: And I also, just– I do wanna say… I would caution against the perspective that this is… "proficiency", or "synapses firing". Overstate the goal here, which– I think that you have a very good goal in mind, Brendan. I'm not, like, dunking on you here, but I…

Me reading this, if I was the person you're describing, this would not be– those– the framing it, in that way, would not necessarily encourage me to feel comfortable to continue exploring it in that way, and I want to make sure that you're spending the time thinking about the ways in which framing it in that way, almost… unintentionally, is, potentially, one of the hurdles that this player has to get over– that there is a "proficiency" difference between you… or, between the rest of the table and this player.

I– It's hard to find the w– I know what you mean, right? That the– Most of the players are playing in a certain mode, and are doing it with practice and with little effort? Where it seems to be very hard for this other player. But framing it like a hill that's being climbed can emphasize the difficulty for that player in a way that can put them off.

And I think about this. Going back to when I was college playing games with people, whenever there was a new player, the more that it felt like the rest of the table, like– "Oh, well, just do this! It's simple–" the easier, and the more likely, it was for them to step away from the table and never come back to it. Right?

So I just wanna start there. And again I'm not dissing you, but I do wanna zero in on those sorts of, often involuntary, ways in which we end up framing a thing that we're working towards.

Beyond that, though, it sounds like you're doing the right thing, which is continuing to tee things up with simple questions, and to continue to offer leading questions and suggestions. Janine and Art, I'm curious if there was any… if, historically for y'all, there was ever anything that kind of helped click this sort of play– this style of play that I think we like to do a lot– into place more strongly.

ART: …Um… [**JANINE:** …Um…] I mean, I don't know that it's anything other than practice, right? Like… [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] You do [**JANINE:** I mean…] this other thing long enough and then it's not fun anymore. [**AUSTIN** and **JANINE** chuckle]

JANINE: I think there's also a degree of it that's, like… [sighs] The mentioning that this player likes playing outsiders [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] is the thing that sticks out to me the most, because there are different kinds of outsiders, right? [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] Adaire is an outsider, but Adaire isn't coming to a table with an empty basket, so to speak. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] If you… You have to… [chuckles]

You know, if you imagine the connections that a character has as, like, something you'd put in a basket– balls? I don't know– [laughs] [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh?] you can have an outsider who still has a full basket. And if you come to the table with an empty basket, you don't have any… balls… to play… necessarily– You have to– Whatever you're doing with that character, you have to come up with on the spot. You don't have anything existing to draw from. [**AUSTIN:** Right.]

So, you know, Adaire… I think Adaire is also the character where I often had the most moments of, like, "I don't know what she thinks of this, because she doesn't wanna be here." [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] She had the most moments of that. But also, she still had… balls in her… basket. [laughs] It's such a bad metaphor! [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh!] [**ART** laughs]

But, you know, she still had, like, "Here is how she feels about Velas." [**AUSTIN:** Right.] "Here's how she feels about her family. Here are these existing relationships that she has with these characters, and, more– just as importantly, these existing relationships that she's had with people in her past who remind her of characters that she's currently with." Like, she didn't have a pre-existing relationship with Hadrian, but Hadrian reminded her of church people who had fucked her over in the past [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] and she did not like that.

So, like, that was the– you know. So you can play an outsider, but you almost have to do more work when you do to make sure [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] that you still are coming to the table with things that you can put into play. Because, again, if you come with nothing, then everything that you do you're going to have to create on the spot, which is ten times harder. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Totally. Which– Which– Maybe one of the suggestions here could be doing a little more work in your session zero around setting up pre-existing connections between PCs, but also between characters and the world. [**JANINE:** Mhm.]

There is a classic– you know, now decades old– technique for situating a character in the world quickly called a three-by-three-by-three, which I think is something that's overkill because of how many NPCs you end up with. But it's three allies, three contacts, and three enemies, or something like that. And if you come up with those, that's a lot of character hooks for a GM to play with.

And I'm not advocating the three-by-three-by-three specifically, but if you talk to this player and say, "Okay, you're an outsider. Who's a person who is important in your life? What's an organization that you belonged to, or want to belong to?" And you can help provide these things. You can give multiple choice options, or you can say, "Hey, these are the places of power," or, "Here are the institutions that you grew up around. Which one of these did you find yourself naturally growing closer to in your youth?" Or something like that.

That sort of thing can start to give the player a little bit more of a material collection of [**JANINE:** Yeah.] feelings about who they are, for sure. Janine, that's the work that you did with Adaire, right? By the time Adaire showed up [**JANINE:** Yeah.] you'd already thought through all of what her history had been– or, not all of, but enough of what her history had been for us to have those quick touchstones. You know?

JANINE: I think it's so rare to have an outsider character who is actually outside of everything. Like…

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yeah, it's very hard to be that, period.

JANINE: [crosstalk] Even… Yeah. I mean, you can also– You can also look at Fero as an example of an outsider who is outside of a lot of things, but also still has nature, still has… like, a whole facet of things…

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I mean, still has a sister in Rosemarrow who [**JANINE:** Yeah!] we met, right?

JANINE: Yeah. Exactly. Adaire– you know, outside of conventional society, but also part of thie– networks of thieves, and having connections and ins and things like that, where, like… Yeah, you know… I'm even sitting here right now trying to think of characters from literature who are quote-unquote "outsiders" who are true, pure outsiders– who, like, have no other anything that brings them in. And it, like… [**AUSTIN:** It's– It's– It's…] it's hard.

ART: Like Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.

AUSTIN: Or… what's-her-face. Dorothy, right? In *The Wizard of Oz*. Except that, again, literally the thing that happens with her is she's seeing projections of her real– of people from her actual life. [**JANINE:** Yeah.] Right?

JANINE: And also the Wizard is from [**AUSTIN:** Right. Yes.] where she was from [**AUSTIN:** Yeah. Yeah. Yes.] basically, also. Yeah.

AUSTIN: But you know what I'm saying, right? That that– [**JANINE:** Mhm.] But that goes to speak towards it, right? Which is, like– You can't get more outside than, "I've shown up in a fantasy world where no one here knows me," and yet [**JANINE:** Yeah.] even there, there are still thematic and personal connections and reflections that ground the character.

JANINE: Being an outsider, sort of by necessity, draws your eye to the connections that do exist. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm, mhm.] Like, it becomes– And, you know, for some reason *Inuyasha* comes to mind, in the fact that Kagome looks like… Kikyo? Or something?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Kikyo. Yeah. Uh-huh. As someone currently rewatching [**JANINE** chuckles] *Inuyasha*… [**JANINE:** So, it's–] I've not watched it in a few weeks, but–

JANINE: Being an outsider almost makes those things more important.

ART: [crosstalk] You haven't rewatched all of *Inuyasha* in a few weeks?

AUSTIN: No, I've not managed to– [laughs] Yeah! [**ART** laughs] That's what I mean, yeah. It's been a few weeks since I– [laughs]

ART: [crosstalk] "It's been a few weeks since I've watched all of *Inuyasha*."

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] [**JANINE** chuckles] All 150 [**ART:** Really?] episodes, or whatever. But yes.

JANINE: [crosstalk] 151.

ART: And I also think, like… Ugh! This is a hard piece of advice to give, because I sort of have to beg the question a little bit, but are you sure that what they want [**AUSTIN:** Hmm…] is to be more like the rest of the group? Are you sure they don't just wanna be the cool outsider? [**AUSTIN** chuckles] Because, like, some people wanna do that, and that's fine for them.

I think [**JANINE:** That's true…] of that episode of *The Venture Bros.*, where they're coming back from some costume contest and they're all dressed as *Star Wars* characters, except Hank Venture is Batman? [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] And they're like, "We didn't win the contest because of you," and then his dad's like, "And last year we were Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, and Batman." [**AUSTIN** chuckles] "And the year before we were–" and there was something else. And it's like–

Sometimes, you just have someone who wants to be Batman every time, and, like…

AUSTIN: It is what it is!

ART: Just let them be Batman. [**AUSTIN:** Right, right.] Yeah!

AUSTIN: Which, again, I think speaks to what the goals of the table are. At the end of the day, if the player is saying, "I want to be doing blank, but I'm not able to do blank," then I get it [**ART:** Yeah.] you know? But…

It's hard, because I think we come out here with very particular goals in mind for what we want to achieve at the table, for our main campaigns, especially, and for Bluff City, and I think it can often be heard as– or, felt as judgment on other sorts of tables or something? And that's just not the case. I don't think you need 100% thematic and playstyle coherency to have a good time with your friends telling stories and playing games. And so… [**ART:** Yeah.]

That– And, again, the reason I say that here is, like, even if this player is saying this, but is playing a different way, it might be worth talking to them and saying, like, "It's okay if you don't wanna play that way. If you wanna, like, hang out and kick down the door–" [**JANINE:** Yeah…] "–when it's time for that part of the game to happen, and just soak it in a little bit, and call your shots– find the moments where you wanna step up to the plate, and you find something to hook into? Don't worry about it so much. Don't feel like you're fucking it up for other people."

JANINE: Yeah, they might just feel guilty about the fact that they're playing differently. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm. Yeah.] Because it– especially– I don't know what this person's experience level is, but it might, to them, feel like they're playing wrong or something, because everyone else is playing differently than them, and maybe this is the way that they're comfortable playing? And they don't really… Sometimes, it can be hard to unpack things that you actually feel bad about versus things that you socially feel bad about. You know?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Yeah. Totally.

ART: Although, I will say, I am judging the table. I saw a tweet today of someone who was like, "When I'm running a game and I'm a dragon, I flap around and move around the table and get

real close to my players' faces and make breathing noises," [**AUSTIN** laughs] and I'm like, "Please. Do not–"

JANINE: Oh, my god! [laughs]

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Never! No!

ART: [crosstalk] "–do this! To me!"

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Absolutely not! Yeah, I wanna be clear. [**JANINE** sighs] What I'm not saying is there's… [**ART** chuckles] You know– there are no rules at the table. No rules, just right. There absolutely are! [laughs] But I wanna make sure that I don't– we don't project that ours is the only way. I guess if you–

ART: [crosstalk] Pre-Covid, no. [**AUSTIN** laughs] Post-Covid, definitely not. [**AUSTIN:** Ohhhh…]

JANINE: I'm just picturing this person, like, climbing on the table, just, like, on all fours, roaring at people and knocking over the DM screen… [**AUSTIN:** Yeah. Uh-huh.] Great.

ART: I mean, it was a thread that started about, "When is it appropriate to use counterspells at your table as a DM," and it's like– so I'm already in a thread that I have no business in. I have no–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Uh-huh. This is not going– [**JANINE** laughs] Yeah.

ART: [crosstalk] I have no interest in this content.

AUSTIN: I mean, listen. I spent an hour last week reading about how geometry in *Fifth Edition* isn't euclideon? That if you're targeting something flying… Let's say there's seven– ten tiles away and five tiles up, it is just ten tiles away. It's only ever– [**ART:** Woah!] Yeah, uh-huh! [**JANINE** laughs] Until it gets to 11 tiles up, it's ten tiles away. If it gets to 11, then it's 11 tiles away because that's the furthest number.

And the– I read a bunch of threads about this, and watched a video about this. It's not a game I play! And it doesn't work in my mind, because if I'm playing a game in which I'm supposed to care about tile distance, part of me thinks, "If I'm on a griffon, I should be able to fucking fly up and get away from these archers and not have to go that far–" I– Anyway. It doesn't fucking make–

ART: [crosstalk] I would love to see the 3D model that shows the range…

AUSTIN: It doesn't. I just doesn't work. You just don't count up. You just don't count up! It doesn't matter. This doesn't matter! This is my point– is, like you, I often [**JANINE** laughs] read threads that don't matter to me, at all.

ART: The things that says about gravity in *D&D* are vast–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I know! I don't– It's very weird. And it used to not be like this. There used to be a different rule for this, and when we– [conspiratorial] When we were playing *D&D* [laughs]

you counted diagonals different. Now diagonals are also just… the– whatever. You can count a diagonal move as if it's one thing, so also going diagonally doesn't actually line up for the amount of distance it–

It doesn't matter! This is not a dig at *D&D*. This is not me saying that this is why I don't like *Fifth Edition*. [laughs] I just– It is– It is a fun thing to wrap your– to try to wrap your head around, whatever your complaints are, how the fuck do they understand and do geometry in any game that has geometry as a focus.

ART: Does that mean you could theoretically shoot further by just moving due sideways?

AUSTIN: …Probably? Wait, what do you mean?

ART: Like, if I'm trying to shoot something that's north of me [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] and it's out of my range [**AUSTIN:** Huh.] can I get there faster by moving–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] On the diagonal.

ART: –by moving– Yeah. Do I get there faster by moving northeast than I do by moving north? [**AUSTIN:** Yes. Yes.] Like, the closest distance between [**AUSTIN:** 100%] two lines in *D&D* now is by bisecting the hypotenuse?

AUSTIN: That is correct, I believe. Which is also not wrong in many video games, in which you move faster in the diagonal pretty much all the time– or, it's similar in nature to that sort of strange thing that happens in a lot of first person games. I don't remember why that is. I don't make video games for a living. So, I don't have to.

ART: Yeah, but, like, a video game is fake in a way that [laughs] *D&D* isn't fake.

AUSTIN: Erhmmmm… Uhhhhhh… [laughs]

ART: [crosstalk] Well, hold– Well, hold on! [laughs] A *D&D* grid is in front of me in a way that a… [**AUSTIN:** Yes. Well–] A video game is [**AUSTIN:** Wait!] doing a lot of things [**AUSTIN:** Right.] behind the scenes.

AUSTIN: Behind the– Right. Behind the curtain where the wizard is. [laughs] [**ART:** Right.] We wrapped back around to that. Anyway, I hope that that was useful, Brendan. This next one–

ART: [crosstalk] Up until the end, it maybe was. [**AUSTIN** and **JANINE** laugh]

[00:40:00] Question Three: N

AUSTIN: This next thing comes in from N, who says–

I hope you're doing well. The *Ground Itself* episodes–

ART: [crosstalk] Hey, thanks!

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Yeah!

> The *Ground Itself* episodes have just aired, and I've always really liked the small-scale worldbuilding/storytelling episodes. It's something I've wanted to bring into my own games as a bit of a primer before we get into the main game we're playing, and to help the players get more involved.
>
> I'm curious on if the group has a preference on *Quiet Year* versus *Ground Itself* since you've now finished a full game of it, or do you think that they have different applications? Thanks for all the work you do to entertain us and create great content. Thank you.

AUSTIN: I'll put it to y'all here. I mean, we've played one game of *Ground Itself*, and a very idiosyncratic game at that, I would say, based on– [laughs] [**JANINE:** Mhmmmmm.] based on the time scale that we played at, so I do think that we have a– Maybe it's a little bit hard for us to just, like, lay it out, you know? Or to even be confident in our perspectives, but I think it's different applications. That's my gut.

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: I don't know how y'all feel, having played it. I know, Janine, you're a big *Quiet Year* person, historically.

JANINE: I mean… [sighs] Yes, and I also– So, I like *Quiet Year* a lot. I… It's a good game, but also I think there's only so many times you can play it. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] And I think I've maybe neared my limit on it [laughs] because I've played it… [**AUSTIN:** Sure.] You know, I've played it for Friends at the Table stuff. I have played it for, you know, non-recorded games and stuff with other people, and… It's a good game, and… You know, the prompts are open enough that it's not repetitive, necessarily? But I do just kind of feel like I've reached my limit with it. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.]

That said, I– the thing that I really, really missed about *The Quiet Year* when we were playing *Ground Itself* is that there is much less active map drawing [laughs] [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] in *Ground Itself*. It's not really [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] part of the game.

And I missed that, both because I think it helps you get a lot of detail [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] into the world– to physically have it all there and have it all represented, and be able to think, like, "Well, maybe in the future, they would've founded a school on this spot where this thing happened," and blah-blah-blah– but also, in terms of remembering what happened. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.]

I do not remember very much from the *Ground Itself* games, which I feel quite bad about, because I'm much better with visual stuff than with listening only. So a lot of things– [laughs] There were a lot of things that, like, when those episodes came out, I was like, "Wow, I don't remember this happening at all!" [chuckles] [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] And that– You know. So, it's…

As much as I can say, "Sure, applications are gonna be different," I think it's also different depending on the group that you're with? Like, if you have a group that really really favors visual

[**AUSTIN:** Yeah. Yeah.] stuff, then that makes *Quiet Year* an easier pick, for me, than *Ground Itself*. I mean, I guess you could also amp up the map drawing with *Ground Itself*. Like, you could do that…

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yeah, you could say at the end of… Yeah, you totally could, right?

JANINE: [crosstalk] …but it's not as– It's not built-in, in the way that it is for *Quiet Year*, really.

AUSTIN: Right, right. Yeah, I think the other thing, there, is that you're just talking about a different sense of scale. I mean, you could theoretically play *The Quiet Year* and say, "Hey, we're gonna do– Each season is going to be a decade," or something, right? [**JANINE:** Yeah.] But with…

But there's a natural limit, which is– you can't… Or, there's an indirect limit, or a soft cap, right, to it, which is that the resource scarcities have to stay conceivable and coherent based on how big those time jumps are. So, like… if you have a water scarcity–

JANINE: [crosstalk] If you can't farm for 10 years [**AUSTIN:** Right! Right.] people are gonna leave.

AUSTIN: People are gonna leave! Exactly. There's going to be a response to that. That's why that– That's why it's a quiet Year, right? You're looking at a snapshot of a place over the course of– of a place in a bad way, you know? A place that is struggling to make do. Not just facing out– you know, external crises, but internal threats and internal problems and lacks as well, whereas *Ground Itself* does not explicitly require you to be a struggling community or something like that, right?

There are issues, just like any community, but again– *The Ground Itself* could be a game about a family in a house, or it could be about a planet in a galactic empire, right? The scale really is that flexible, and so if you're looking for that sort of flexibility, that's a great place to– And the other thing is that– and again, we didn't see this, but– *Ground Itself*, one, moves backwards and forwards in time. You can play where you jump forward 100 years and then backward 600 years. That's part of the way that game works.

But also, we're talking about hundreds of years where we're not only talking about a particular community– I said community before, and that's wrong. We're talking about a place. We're talking about the Ground Itself. Whereas *The Quiet Year* is about a community that's trying to survive, *Ground Itself* is about a space that changes over time.

Our game happened to be about a community because of the fact that we ended up with days– and very limited days– but if we'd ended up with decades? Hundreds of years? We would have gone back to– We would have started with mountains and frogs [laughs] and, you know… things…

JANINE: [crosstalk] The two… [laughs]

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] The two things!

ART: [crosstalk] The two things from hundreds of years ago!

JANINE: [crosstalk] The two things you start with!

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yes. Yeah. This is– I'm just doing–

JANINE: [crosstalk] Mountains and frogs.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] –the Dan Riker… "Before there was anything! Before even there were frogs hopping around, there was just grass. There was no life."

JANINE: [crosstalk] You're telling me that frogs came from rocks?

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yes! Exactly! That is–

ART: [crosstalk] When the Earthmother gave birth to all the frogs…

AUSTIN: Right! Exactly! Don't spoil– this is– And that's where Ribbidon, Frog God of Wealth came from! [**ART** laughs] That– But yeah. That– It's just, it has a different use case, and so think about which of those things you want. And those are not– these are not the only worldbuilding games, right? We looked, also, at… Um… Uhhh… *Did Something Say–*

ART: [crosstalk] *Street Magic*.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] *Did Someone Say Street Magic?* Right? Or *Did You Say Street Magic?*

ART: *Something Called Street Magic?*

AUSTIN: *I'm Sorry–*

JANINE: [crosstalk] I think it's *Did Someone Say Street Magic?*

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] *I'm Sorry Did You Say Street Magic?* Which we liked a lot, but I think it didn't– I really wanted something that had the– [laughs] the potential to zoom out a little bit more in time, which we just didn't get. And that was not as neighborhood-focused, because it wasn't gonna be a… I still think we could've used it, and we will use it for something, at some point, because I think it's really cool.

And there's also another one that I looked at that I liked a lot… God, I'm just not gonna find it. There's just not a chance that I can dig through my stuff, because nothing I have is in anything like good order right now on my PC. But there's another… There's another *Quiet Year*-esque thing that I looked at and really liked the look of… God. I think I know which folder it's in…

ART: [crosstalk] But like, if I had come to you from the future, right before we started recording the worldbuilding episode, and said, "Austin, we're gonna roll the dice for time in this, and it's gonna be, like," whatever it is. "Four days." [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh…] [**JANINE** chuckles] Would you have switched games?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I would've been like, "That sounds sick! Let's do it!" [**JANINE** and **ART** laugh] *Twilight Song* and *Midnight Signal*, which are also games I looked at for this, both of which are mapmaking games with… very clearly are drawing on *A Quiet Year* but with different… different vibes, I guess I would say?

Twilight– or, *Midnight Song* is a kind of strange… They call it "pastoral weird horror", so again, you can see why maybe I almost thought about that one. And *Twilight Song* is about an immortal narrator living among humans in a time of change, wonder, and quiet loss, which also seems dope, and I would like to play that at some point. So. There's a lot out there. You know.

Go to itch.io and look around at various worldbuilding games, because there's truly a billion things out there that are worth peeking at, and could give you a better fit than even what you might have thought, you know? –than one of these two games. So… I'm now just scrolling through the worldbuilding tag on itch. [**JANINE** chuckles] Good stuff. Alright.

ART: I mean, *The Quiet Year* has this very special place, that if you told me, "Art, you have to go to Christmas this year, and you have to run a game–" [**AUSTIN:** Mmm.] "–for your inlaws," *Quiet Year* is on that short list, right?

JANINE: It's *Quiet Year*. It's *Fiasco*.

ART: Yeah. It's like– [**AUSTIN** and **JANINE:** Yeah.] And I wouldn't say *Ground Itself* is. It's just a little– And, like, there's something to the wonderful simplicity there, you know?

AUSTIN: Yeah. The… I guess you still get the cards in *Ground Itself*, so you still get that. I think there's maybe a little more buy-in up top from *Ground Itself*, in terms of needing to answer those core questions. That could be harder for a group that maybe hasn't done it before. Anyway. I like both of those games a lot. I wouldn't trade one for the– I wouldn't say I'd only wanna play one of them forever, you know? One or the other. [**JANINE:** Yeah.] Definitely.

[00:49:37] Question Four: Finn

AUSTIN: Finn writes in, and says–

> I'm a novice GM, and I'm currently running a *Scum and Villainy* campaign. My players are very interested in the interpersonal skills, like Sway and Consort. So far, I've found it easy to set up combat encounters or physical obstacles, and much more difficult to plan and execute on social challenges. Do you have any advice for a GM trying to create situations for players to use those interpersonal skills?

AUSTIN: If you're playing *Scum and Villainy*, then they can use those skills on anything, because when you prep a Forged in the Dark score, you're not prepping a combat encounter, you're prepping a clock that they need to figure out a way to clear. Now, obviously the debate– the session in which [chuckles] they're going to try to win the debate so that they can– [laughs] they can gain access to the vault at the basement of the debate hall is a different situation than the "they're trying to breach the walls and have a big fight" episode, but…

Go listen to the Chasmata Quarry arc [laughs] of PARTIZAN [**ART** chuckles] in which I prepped the hardest straight-up "we're gonna have a big fight" adventure we could think of– I could think of, and did none of that, and instead did a game entirely about Consort, and Sway, and Investigation, and sneaking around, and scamming your way into places.

Because, in Forged in the Dark games, your players can always try to advance a clock in order to bypass an obstacle using any skill they have, so long as they can justify that use, or even if they– even if they– if it's a real longshot, you just adjust the Effect, right? But it doesn't– But they can still roll it. You know, maybe it's a Limited Effect to try to talk your way past the guard, or get a– get a– using a– maybe using a disguise increases the Effect, and so they can do that.

But that's also why, at the beginning of a *Scum and Villainy* mission, in the same way that the top of a *Blades* score or a mission in *Beam Saber*, the players determine what the, kind of, mode of egress is.

They– You determine the type of mission it is, or the type of score it is– whatever your, kind of, opening act is– and they would choose a social thing. And it can be your job to say, "Oh, if you guys did social, here's a good idea. Here's a way that you could– There's a party happening next door." And maybe you work your way through that party, and that's how you get there.

That's also my other answer to this, is– If they– If you want a way for them to use their personal skills like Sway and Consort, and you're doing a *Scum and Villainy*, think about all the ways in which there could be a big party being held some– [laughs] somewhere next to whatever their objective is. [**ART** laughs]

Put their objectives in social spaces– or, near social spaces, and allow maneuvering through those social spaces as part of what the obstacles are [**ART** chuckles] right? I'm not kidding. Because it's fun to [**JANINE:** Yeah!] crash through a party. It's fun to have to talk your way through a marketplace.

ART: No, but because [**JANINE:** God…] it's *Scum and Villainy*, I'm like, "What if Luke and Obi-Wan and Han went to the Death Star Ball, and…"

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] [laughs] Yes! [**ART** laughs] That would've been sick! Are you kidding me? And they–

ART: [crosstalk] Had to cut in on the dance between Darth Vader and Princess Leia to…

AUSTIN: Listen. Han… When they are in the Death Star, and Han picks up the fucking microphone and is like, "Yeah, everything's clear here, don't worry about it–" That's using Sway! [laughs] He does sway [**JANINE:** You're– [laughs]] his way through there!

JANINE: [crosstalk] But– Okay, so also…

ART: [crosstalk] He fails that roll, Austin.

AUSTIN: I know, but he tried. [chuckles]

JANINE: [crosstalk] Y'all are just describing Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, right? [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] Which is the mission where you go to– you get invited to that big ball at the… Winter Palace? In–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] That sounds right.

JANINE: [crosstalk] –Halamshiral, with Empress Celene, to stop an assassination, and you have to balance your time doing social activities and doing spy activities, because there's that meter that's ticking down if you're doing [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] non-social shit, because people are like, "Where the fuck did that person go?"

Yeah, I mean, absolutely put people in social spaces. And the other thing I would say is, like– There are a lot of people in the world that you can't just pull a sword on [**AUSTIN:** Totally.] and have things go cool. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Like, there are people where you have to engage with them socially.

This is– That's more of a thing for if you have players who aren't eager to use Sway and Consort, but if you have players who are chomping at the bit to use Sway and Consort– Yeah. Just [chuckles] put them in a room. Put them in a party, in a crowd, in a merchant fucking grain market– Like, anything. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] And I– I imagine it could work quite well.

AUSTIN: The other thing is, really, what is their long-term goal here, right? And what are the ways in which you can shift the campaign towards social situations, and social progress, instead of combat encounters, right? Let's talk about *Star Wars*. *Scum and Villainy* is a *Star Wars* game, right? It's *Star Wars*-esque. I don't wanna get anyone sued. Allegedly, it's– [chuckles] You could do a *Star Wars* game…

JANINE: [crosstalk] I feel tricked right now. I… [**AUSTIN** laughs]

AUSTIN: Got you.

ART: Austin [**JANINE** laughs] taking money from Big *Star Wars* [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] and then ratting out the fan projects. [**JANINE** and **AUSTIN** cackle]

AUSTIN: [blusters] I did not get paid for that story! That money went to charity! Um… The–The–

ART: Taking the tax write-off [**AUSTIN** laughs] from Big *Star Wars*. [**JANINE** laughs]

AUSTIN: The thing that I was gonna say is, like– The version of the original *Star Wars* trilogy we get is about guerilla warfare, and also spiritual warfare? [laughs] And becoming a Jedi Knight, and being a smuggler.

But there's another version of that game that is– or, that story, in which you're following members of the Rebel Alliance trying to build the Rebel Alliance. Trying to convince… you know, various warlords and former senators to join their cause and throw in. There are, in the EU especially, stories in something like *Star Wars* where everything hinges on being able to convince someone to throw in with you, right?

ART: Well, like, Luke couldn't have gone to Dagobah and fought people until Yoda started training him.

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Yes. Absolutely, right? But– [snorts]

ART: Or, I mean, I guess in *Scum and Villainy* you could. [laughs] "I'm gonna go there–" [**AUSTIN** laughs] "–and beat up animals until Yoda stops me." [**AUSTIN** laughs and claps]

AUSTIN: But, of course! That's the– Yeah. Uh-huh! Yeah. Whatever you… Your NPCs don't have to, like, do whatever the player wants because they got through the obstacles, but… Yeah. That's extremely– [laughs] sounds extremely funny.

But yeah, that is the thing, right? There are… You can tell that story– a different perspective of that story– so if their goal is to overthrow an empire, then have them focus on the bits of turning parts of that empire against them, or put them up against a foe who, like Janine said, you can't just draw a sword on them. You can't just pull a gun on them and win that fight.

Killing that person doesn't get you the win. Convincing them or scheming them into misappropriating their troops, or shutting down a system that they need to shut down for the rest of the armada to fly in– Whatever it is, give them that sort of a task, and that'll go a long way in letting them do it.

But also, just encourage them to do it, even when it seems like… when– even if it seems like you're queueing up a big fight sequence. If they seem like they wanna be able to Sway and Consort their way through it…

JANINE: [crosstalk] "This recruit looks green. He looks a little nervous–" [**AUSTIN:** Yep.] "–about this fight."

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Totally. I bet… Yeah.

JANINE: [crosstalk] That, to me… I hear that as the player and then I'm like, "Oh, I should just talk him down. He's just a kid." [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Especially if they're like, "Hey, is there anyone here who looks blah-blah-blah," say yeah! Say yes. You know? [laughs] So that's– that's– I hope that that helps. I think we have one more. I think that that's true.

[00:57:27] Question Five: Adam

AUSTIN: This comes in from Adam, who says–

> I've been playing *D&D* with a new group for about three months. All of the players have good rapport with each other and we all have a fair understanding of our characters' backgrounds and drives, but at our last session we ended up in a fairly low-stakes situation that could put my character at odds with the rest of the party.

The specifics aren't too important, but in summary: Our party was found– Our party found a location that several players want to establish as an in-game base, and they wanna pool resources to improve it. I realize there's not really a mechanic in *D&D* for this, but that's besides the point.

ART: I want anyone writing in to know that you could lie to us about what the mechanics of *D&D* are [**AUSTIN** chuckles] and we will believe you.

AUSTIN: We will absolutely believe you.

Everyone, myself included–

JANINE: [crosstalk] I hear *D&D* is *Star Wars*.

AUSTIN: That's what I've [laughs] heard.

Everyone, myself included, was enthusiastic about this idea. The problem is my in-game character as I've written them would not be interested in base-building or settling in one place. How do I go about approaching this potential issue with my DM or the other players in my group? Also, do y'all have any advice for moving forward in a campaign if your character's motivations don't line up with what the party wants to do?

AUSTIN: Have either of you felt like that in any of our games or other games before? I feel like it's happened a couple times but…

ART: [crosstalk] No, because I have an internal philosophy of making…

AUSTIN: You just make it work?

ART: [crosstalk] …making my character care about the thing. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] But it doesn't work for everyone. It's just, like… You know, I've been in– You know, it happens to everyone in their life, where it's like, "I'm doing a thing that I don't believe in, that isn't what I would do…" I mean not in, like, "don't believe in", like, ethically, but…

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Sometimes, though.

ART: [crosstalk] "This isn't my–" Yeah, but it isn't like… "This isn't my favorite thing to do. This isn't what I want to be doing, but I'm doing it because either I think it will get me to the next thing, or it's because it's what my friends are doing–" [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] "–or whatever."

And it's just, like– Figure out that thing, and then just get yourself to the next place? Because, for good or for ill, this person– this character isn't a real person, and if you end up really making them do something they regret, they don't have to really live with it. [**AUSTIN** laughs]

AUSTIN: I will say… I think it's an opportunity to address that narrative tension in a really fun way. That means that you can say, "Hey, I'd really love to play an adventure while we're doing all this that is about getting my character onboard." This goes back to what Janine said before about being willing to tell and not just show. You're allowed to say to your table, "I want to play a session where we do this."

That is not forbidden [**AUSTIN** chuckles] you know? That is not a corny thing to do. Coming to a table and being like, "My character doesn't believe in this, but I, the player, want to get them to a place where they do. Can we figure out a story to tell that would get them bought-in in this way, even if just a little bit?"

Because that is, again, what happens in writers' rooms, where you're telling a story and you realize, "Oh, wait a second. This character wouldn't be down with this." And then, suddenly, it can be one of the most productive and interesting parts of a story when the outsider gets bought-in, and the steps that need to happen in order to do that.

And, again, that could happen from y'all literally sitting down and saying, "Okay, well, what would they need in order to be brought in?" And then you think about it, and you go, "Well, I think maybe if there was some sort of, like… If you could convince my character of this, this, and this, or promise them that, or if they saw an occasion like this?" You know, something like that, and then you can play that situation out.

And maybe it doesn't even end up with– Maybe you finish and you're like, "You know what? I'm still not bought in," and then you have that second question that you've asked, which is, "What do you do if you're still not lined up?" I think that's a different question, to some degree. Janine, have you felt like this at any point?

JANINE: Yeah. I think the… I think, again, I can go back to Adaire on this one, right, where I think about… I guess vague Heiron spoilers? Not like spoiler-ass spoilers, but plot beats. You know… Especially before the end of… Oh my god, seasons. Wint… No. The end of… Autumn?

AUSTIN: The end of Winter.

JANINE: I got… The…

ART: [crosstalk] Okay, Adaire wasn't in Autumn.

JANINE: [crosstalk] I'm thinking it– I'm thinking about, like, after moth people… You know–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] That's still Winter. Yeah.

JANINE: Yeah. Okay, okay. Right. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Winter. Right. [chuckles] [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] Look, there's a lot of seasons. There's several.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I get it! I get it, yeah. [**ART:** Yeah.] Mhm.

JANINE: So I think about Adaire with the moth people and stuff, and with Rosemarrow, and her interests in community in that situation were primarily, like, "Well, I don't want to be a red flag that people notice–" [**AUSTIN:** Hmm…] "–step one. Step two, I want to maintain existing connections. Step three, I wanna build new connections. And…" You know.

So, everything she does is governed by trying to not get too much heat, and trying to have resources– amass resources for herself. And then you get her in Aubade, where she has everything she wants and can live comfortably, and is totally miserable about it, because

something– because, you know, she's realized, like, "Wait, this doesn't– It's not fair that I get this and other people, who aren't here, are still scraping–" [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] "–together shit."

And that's the part that makes her going to the settlement afterwards make sense. [**AUSTIN:** Right.] Like, that's the part– That's the component that makes her more community-minded when she has to be part of a community. And connecting those two things, figuring out… figuring out– Because, obviously, I didn't plan for that [**AUSTIN:** No, no.] but that was one of those things that helped that form together.

The other thing that helped was Rix and Roe– [**AUSTIN:** Hmm.] was seeing, "There are people in this community who remind me of myself, at a vulnerable point in my life, when– a point when I would say, maybe, things went bad," [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] and being able to have an effect on them– like, finding something you can have an effect on.

A big part of this question, I think, is the fact that they want– that other players want to pool their resources to improve it, and I'm wondering if the– if Adam's character doesn't want to pool their resources, which, again, is a thing I can relate to, because Adaire, I don't think, would have wanted to chip in financially [**AUSTIN:** Sure…] necessarily. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.]

But, again, the trick there would be, like… Well, even if she's still greedy, and is still hoarding for whatever reason, because she's not bought-in on that level, where are the levels where she does buy in? [**AUSTIN:** Right.] Like, is the level that she's bought-in because she cares about this other character in the party, and this other character in the party– This is very important to them, so does she put forth an effort to try and keep that person happy? Or, like, any number of things.

You have to, sort of, just expand outward and not look at the immediate situation as much.

AUSTIN: Hmm. No, I think that makes perfect sense, for sure. To that second question of, like, "What do you do if you just– there is a pretty firm difference?" I'm so keen on players stepping away and playing a new character for a little bit. [**ART:** Mhm.] [**JANINE:** Sure, yeah!] Let that character– Let that character bounce, right?

We did it in PARTIZAN, right? We had a character effectively retire halfway through the season, and the player started playing a new character. And partly, that's because of the way *Beam Saber* was set up, which allowed us to do that in a mechanical way, but you don't have to do it that way, right? And I know *D&D* does not, as far as I know– again, you could lie to me and say that this is the case, that *Fifth Edition* does have this and I just don't know about it– but that style of retirement mechanic…

But you could do that. You could say, "My character leaves. My character feels like–" And not on bad terms! Just like, "Hey, I'll be around, you know? I'm not someone who sticks around," and you could revisit them! Maybe there's a moment down the line– you know, six games from now– where they happen to be in the same town as this character of yours, but you could roll a different character for a little while, and even do check-ins on that other character. "Hey, what's that other character up to?"

There's nothing stopping you from doing that, except conventional wisdom about the way that *D&D* and tabletop games are supposed to work, which is everyone has [**JANINE:** Yeah.] one character… Which isn't even– That's, like, not even–

JANINE: [crosstalk] You play as them until they die. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: You play as them until they die, right? But, you know…

ART: Yeah, I was gonna say that *D&D* has– does retirement like *Blade Runner*.

AUSTIN: Yeah! [laughs] Exactly! [**JANINE** laughs] Right. Yes! So, yeah. So give yourself some space–

JANINE: [crosstalk] Cameos are so fun, too.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yeah, are you kidding me?

JANINE: [crosstalk] Like… When you get to have a character come back–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, that rules!

JANINE: [crosstalk] Oh, that feels so good. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] And also, the other side of that, right, is that if you put this character, kind of, in cold storage as your–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] On ice. Yeah. Uh-huh. [laughs]

JANINE: [crosstalk] On ice. Uh-huh!

AUSTIN: With the fishes.

JANINE: With the intention of coming back to them, or maybe not coming back to them, you can play a really, really risky character [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] in the interim that you wouldn't normally play, because you have this character you're already attached to. And when you bring them back, you can totally MacGuffin why they come back. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah, right.]

Like, it doesn't have to be something that has happened on screen or something. It could be… It could be anything. It could be that they need something from the group, or it could be that they found out about some other threat and they're worried. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] It could be that they missed people. It could be any number of reasons. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.]

And in that interim, while that stuff is, sort of, going in the background, you can play this character who's doing shit you would not normally dare do, because you don't wanna [chuckles] lose your character [**AUSTIN:** Totally.] et cetera. And that can be really freeing.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I do also… I– I– I do get that we often feel like we have a looser relationship, maybe, with our own characters than what is the norm, or like…

JANINE: Yeah, we don't play the same character for years, in most cases. [**AUSTIN:** Right, totally.] Like, in some cases yeah, but…

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] But even there, we're taking breaks, right?

JANINE: [crosstalk] …you know. If someone's had a *D&D* character for five years…

AUSTIN: Yeah. That's understandably a distinct [**JANINE:** Yeah.] thing than what we do, right? So… [**JANINE:** Yeah.]

ART: I mean, I would be more excited to step away [laughs] from a character [**AUSTIN:** Same.] [**JANINE** chuckles] I've been playing for five years. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] I…

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] There's nothing…

ART: [crosstalk] I get itchy at the end of one of our seasons.

AUSTIN: I just finished writing a short story for the *Beam Saber* book, and [**ART:** Oooh.] finishing that was like being able to turn off part of my brain? When I closed the last tab in the *Beam Saber* browser in my brain? You know what I mean? [**ART** and **JANINE** chuckle] And it's like– "Oh, now it– PARTIZAN is finally over now."

That's not a PARTIZAN story. That's a *Beam Saber* setting story, but nevertheless, thinking about the ways mechs move, and how to do interesting visual storytelling with that sort of space– even though I'm not talking about rulesets. I'm thinking about that in a genre space–

Yeah, being able to step away [laughs] from that– that part of my brain for a little while is very exciting to me. I'm still very excited to get back to returning to that world– you know, whenever we get there– but it feels good to be able to retire that part of my brain for a little while, you know? Until it comes out of retirement in a big, dramatic [chuckles] return.

Alright. Any other thoughts here, or should we just wrap up? I've already hit the button…

ART: [crosstalk] I think that's it.

JANINE: [crosstalk] Good luck. Have fun. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Yeah, good luck and have fun! Have fun with it. I do hope it works out. You can send your questions to tipsatthetable@gmail.com. A couple short things–

One is thank you to everyone who filled out that survey. If you haven't done it yet, I think the link is still up. It's on the Patreon. We are going to restructure stuff sometime in the near future. I'm still working through all of those responses. [laughs] There were a lot of responses, as you might guess, and they were widely, overwhelming positive, and I'm grateful– so grateful for your support. We're all super grateful for your support. And your willing to let us be flexible with this stuff.

You know, I think our long-term goal is to get to a place where we can consistently hit everything we do every month, and also, just, like… We answered a lot of questions with Tips at the Table, for instance [laughs] [**JANINE** chuckles] and we would have to repeat– we would end up repeating ourselves, or, like, "Wait, did– Have we already answered this question?" Or we'd just end up with a situation where it's like– it feels like we could maybe do other stuff in that space.

I'm not saying Tips at the Table is over, to be clear. We have various ideas about what we're doing, but, like– and some sort of Q&A, or behind the scenes, or something, would still be part of it– but do expect, in the near future, for us to rework stuff in some way.

I'll say, up– very clearly, like, Bluff City isn't going anywhere. In fact, Jack is finishing up a song for the next Bluff City arc. We're gonna finish recording that arc this coming week. The rest of that arc is already recorded. We have, like, hours and hours of this next game, which I'm super excited for people to hear. It's been a fucking blast. Like, all-time Bluff City NPCs already out there.

So that's one thing. What else? There was something else I wanted to say… but now I forget what it is. I'm sure it's not that import– Oh! Uhhhhh… If you ordered [laughs] an Aria Joie t-shirt, my understanding– Art, correct me if I'm wrong– is that those exist now.

ART: Yeah. I've seen one [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] in front of a box that I've been assured contains more.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] –is other ones. Yeah. [laughs] [**ART:** Yeah.] [**JANINE** laughs] Now, I don't have the box. I haven't opened the box to look inside, because I believe, if I did, what would happen is those silly snakes would ju– you know what I mean? [laughs] Like, would pop out [**ART:** Uh-huh. Yeah.] at my face?

JANINE: Was there a current newspaper in frame in that photo?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] There was not. You know what?

ART: [crosstalk] No, but that joke is in the email. [all laugh]

AUSTIN: Is it? I don't– [**JANINE:** Ehhhh…]

ART: Yeah. The email from the Fangamer person was like, "Here's a picture of the shirt. I'm sorry I didn't put today's newspaper in it." [**AUSTIN** and **JANINE** laugh] [**JANINE** sighs]

AUSTIN: Well, I'm glad that the Fangamer people understand…

JANINE: I'm sure they're as frustrated [chuckles] as I am.

AUSTIN: Dakota, in the chat, says, "It's delivering. I got a tracking number and everything." That makes me think [**JANINE:** Nice.] it's real. I didn't get a fucking [laughs and coughs] tracking number yet!

ART: I haven't seen a fan with one yet. And yeah, we haven't– we haven't seen a damn thing. It's been really frustrating to see people on–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I haven't gotten any of this merch yet. Yeah. [**JANINE:** Eh.]

ART: [crosstalk] Yeah, people on Twitter in, like, boat party shirts, PARTIZAN, and it's like, "Didn't I spend a lot of time working on this–" [**JANINE** laughs] "–to not have one?" [**AUSTIN** laughs]

AUSTIN: I wanted the PARTIZAN hoodie for the fall and winter, and now that's gone. I guess we'll get the boat party shirt in time for boat party season, so that's something, you know? [**ART:** Yes.]

JANINE: Oh, the boat party's planned this year?

AUSTIN: Big boat party sea– Yeah, we're real– [laughs] we're real hard on that.

ART: This is really the year for a boat party.

AUSTIN: Do we have a boat?

JANINE: Everyone just on an individual canoe [**ART:** [muffled] Yeah.] scattered across the land, you mean?

ART: [muffled] …boat.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: Sounds great.

AUSTIN: This is your backup plan from your theater bath [laughs] situation. [**JANINE** laughs]

ART: Yeah! Um, it's like a drive-in, but it's boats.

AUSTIN: –but it's… boats!

ART: [crosstalk] And, if you're bored, just go for a swim!

AUSTIN: Just go for it. Have fun. [**JANINE** chuckles] God, I feel like there was one other thing I wanted to say here, but I guess it's fine. I guess– Don't worry about it. I'm sure it wasn't a big deal. I appreciate everyone listening to Sangfielle, enjoying Sangfielle, doing fanart and talking about it, and everything else. It's been… It's always a good– It's always great to see the response to the beginning of a season. Neither of your characters have debuted yet, so… [**JANINE:** No.]

ART: [crosstalk] No, but I came up with the most frivolous god I could possibly come up with, and now it's in like a hundred people's display names on Twitter. [**AUSTIN** laughs] It's bizarre. [**JANINE** laughs]

AUSTIN: That's true. God, we got a good god coming up. I cannot wait!

JANINE: Oh, man. [**AUSTIN:** God!] I can't remember his name but I love him. He's…

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] He's great! [**ART:** Yeah.]

JANINE: [crosstalk] …so exciting! [laughs]

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] He's good. I have his name written down somewhere. He's fantastic. And that's, like… five weeks away, or something, unfortunately [**JANINE** chuckles] but… Just to tease– just to tease people. Alright.

ART: [crosstalk] See you in June!

AUSTIN: God. [**JANINE** laughs] This is the thing about making this show, is– that's so tough, is we… it's a new system, which means pacing is impossible to predict. I wanna say that the other side's game was only two recordings, but it's still so long that it's gonna end up being, I think, four episodes total before we even get to y'all. But also, like, we did four episodes before we even got to *Heart*, right? So…

And I expect that'll change as we continue, and as I get better at prepping and anticipating how long a delve is, and all that other stuff, so… I think everything we have recorded– Excuse me. Everything we have recorded rules. I'm excited for people to hear it all, so look forward to all that stuff as we continue Sangfielle. Thank you to everyone for listening. That's gonna do it for us. We should go to time.is.

JANINE: Is it not Bat Day anymore? It stopped saying Bat Day.

AUSTIN: It did stop…

ART: [crosstalk] It showed up for a second and disappeared.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, it did for a second and disappeared. Yeah, that's weird. [**JANINE** sighs] Huh. The bats hid. Five seconds?

JANINE: Sure.

[pause]

[three nearly simultaneous claps]

AUSTIN: Alright. Have a good night everybody. Bye-bye-bye.

JANINE: Bye!

[pause]

AUSTIN: Clear.