

Tips at the Table 28: Prewritten Conquests (October 2019)

Transcriber: @robotchangeling

Austin: Welcome to Tips at the Table, an RPG fo— oop. An RPG podcast focused on critical questions, hopefully smart answers, and fun interaction between good friends. I am your host, Austin Walker. Joining me today, Art Martinez-Tebbel.

Art: Hey, hi. You can find me on Twitter @atebbel. And I've been listening to a podcast this week—

Austin: [intrigued] Oh.

Art: Sponsored by a different podcast that is just branded WeWork content? [**Austin** chuckles] And it's from like over the summer, so it's really surreal now, because I bet like, they're not sponsoring podcasts anymore.

Austin: I bet not. Also joining us, Jack de Quidt?

Jack: Hi. My name's Jack, you can find me on Twitter @notquitereal or buy any of the music featured on the show at notquitereal.bandcamp.com. The Bluff City premiere theme went up this afternoon.

Austin: Ooh!

Jack: So you can get it there.

Austin: That is exciting. It's a great song. Also joining us: Janine Hawkins?

Janine: Hey. I'm Janine Hawkins. I'm @bleatingheart on Twitter. I've been playing The Sims Realm of Magic all month.

Austin: True.

Janine: And Thursday's the last day I'm doing it, so maybe I should have mentioned it sooner. [**Austin** and **Jack** laugh]

Austin: I don't know— when would you would have, though? I don't know that we did...were you on a previous Tips? You probably should have been—

Janine: I don't know. It doesn't matter.

Austin: At some point, yeah.

Janine: That's on my YouTube.

Austin: You know what would have been sick?

Janine: It's dot bleatingheart on YouTube. Yeah?

Austin: Is if either of your super mystical characters from the previously released Road to Season 6 games would have broken the fourth wall like the witches they were, [chuckles] spoken to the listener and said "Go to youtube.com/bleatingheart [**Jack** laughs] for a Sims magic livestream."

Jack: A premonition.

Austin: [chuckles] Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Janine: I just realized I do have like a weird sort of ram-headed ghost thing, so.

Austin: Mmm.

Janine: It kinda happened the other way, sort of.

Austin: Mm-hmm! For people who haven't been, people should go listen to the Road to PARTIZAN stuff that's in the main feed. I would say definitely do it if you're caught up on COUNTER/Weight and Twilight Mirage. This is the most, like, for true fans only stuff that we've done.

Jack: True gamers.

Austin: True gamers only. Because it's filled with like cool references to the stuff from Twilight Mirage and from COUNTER/Weight. It is very much the bridge between those series and the upcoming PARTIZAN. I'm not saying you couldn't listen to it without listening to those other ones first, but I don't know that you'd get as much about— get as much from it. This week is one of my favorite episodes we did during that livestream series, which is a game of Ech0 and From Dusk 'til Midnight [Note: actually called Dusk to Midnight]. Two fantastic little games that we played. We played a full Ech0 game and we played like half of a From Dusk 'til Midnight game. And some of my favorite characters that we've ever [**Austin** and Jack chuckle] played into a microphone. So, look forward to that. We should get into the Tips at the Table questions.

Jack: Let's do it.

Austin: As always, if you have questions, you can send them to tipsatthetable@gmail.com. First one comes in from Jay, who says:

"I've been playing in a game of The Sprawl for about two and a half years now. We've all enjoyed this game very much. However, a recent plot revelation has kind of ruined the entire game for a lot of our group. Specifically, it was revealed that the entire cyberpunk city that we live in is just an elaborate computer simulation. We, the players, and a small group of three or so NPCs are the only 'real' people in the entire city. That could be good plot development. But that's not really the story we as players have been interested in telling up to this point. For us, this is a game very much about making a place for oneself in the middle of an uncaring system. We've all worked very hard to make a place that is our own in this city. For example, I'm playing a Fixer, and now the dozens of names I've added to my contacts list over the years are just...gone. They've never mattered. As is my character's mechanical relevance: all of my skills are about finding people—people who no longer exist. All of us players have been really disappointed by this turn of events. How do I either speak to our GM about this issue or learn to enjoy this game again, now that it's something so different than what I signed up for?"

Austin: I am gonna start with Jack and Janine here, 'cause both of you had such strong reactions to this. [chuckles]

Jack: Yeah, we had pretty... [chuckles] We had pretty strong responses to this.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: I found it...I found this question to be really upsetting, in terms of what is being described sounds so...sounds like such a blow [Austin: mm-hmm] to have to experience as a player. Especially because of the way that Jay describes it as kind of ruining the game for a lot of the group. Especially since they'd been enjoying it so much. There's a very kind of distinct feeling... [chuckles] and I remember this from like playing games on the playground when I was a kid and playing tabletop games in other groups, where a game takes a turn and the joy or the excitement of playing is kind of sapped out of it, very easily feeling? It's as though a transformation has occurred and it's not the thing you thought you were playing. And I think for that reason, I found this question... [chuckles] I found this question really upsetting. I think that learning to enjoy the game is a big ask, and it might be something that you feel like you need to do in order to kind of maintain, sort of like, the sanctity of the table. But I really think that something like this is worth talking to other players and talking to your GM about, because what it represents to me is a kind of failure of understanding or failure of communication by your GM about what the story that you're interested in telling is. I don't know if that seems accurate to others. But it feels like there's been a big mistake here—

Austin: Yes.

Jack: Made by the GM.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: And I think that that is something that it is worth addressing, [Austin makes amused sound] rather than saying, “Well, I hope the game kind of gets better again?”

Austin: Yeah, no. I think that it is so important, at this point, to have that conversation. Janine, before I weigh in, again, you definitely had a similar reaction. I don't know if you have anything else to add, here.

Janine: Yeah. I think...I second everything Jack said, but also the thing I want to follow up with is: who...it's hard to know, because we don't have the full like context here, but who's saying that the characters don't matter now?

Austin: Right, yeah, totally.

Janine: Like, is... 'cause, you know, the whole “everything is a simulation, and we're the only real people, so nothing matters,” like, does nothing matter because you've been removed from that simulation, simulation's been shut down? Does nothing matter because you've been given ways to interact with the simulation outside of the framework you've been using before? Does nothing matter because...you know, the most obvious comparison here is The Matrix, but like the thing with the storytelling in The Matrix is, once Neo unplugs from the matrix he keeps going back in? And keeps interacting with it? And it's not a thing where like once he's unplugged he's just out forever. So if that's the story that's being told, then like, [chuckles] yeah, I fuckin' get it, nothing you've done matters. Like, it must feel really shitty, because everything you have been building, you are just kind of back at square one, in a sense. And have built your character around, you're back at square one. But, if you are still interacting with that simulation, who's deciding that those things don't matter? Because like, we've had on our show—

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: We've had situations where we've had meaningful interactions with characters who are not real and do not matter. [chuckles] Technically.

Austin: Or, who don't...who, by the laws of society, or the kind of laws of traditional fiction, you'd be like, “Oh, well that's not a real person.”

Janine: Yes.

Austin: “That's a robot or an automaton or a projection or...you know, an illusion, or...”

Janine: I think of Signet with that like summoned Blooming. I think it was Blooming, right?

Austin: Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah, totally.

Jack: Mmm! Oh, yeah.

Austin: That's a fantastic moment, yeah.

Janine: Where like, Signet treated that apparition like they didn't matter.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Janine: Because she was very much in her head of just like, she knew what she had done to will this thing into being and whatever.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: But, at the same time, by the end of that interaction, it was like, no, this is different. Like, this isn't just an idea made sort of semi-flesh. Like, there's more to this. So it's, I guess, if you feel like you've had all of that stuff pulled away from you, I'm curious— you know, again, it's one of those things of just like, is there a way to reframe it? Is there a way to...again, like, you should totally talk to the GM about like, does this stuff— like, where do these abilities that you have, where do these connections that you've made, where does the story and this world that you've grown attached to fit in in the context of "well, now it's all fake."

Austin: Right.

Janine: Quote, unquote, "fake".

Austin: I'm so curious about the context, because the world...there's a version of this where it's like, that world still exists, and you as the character and the player go, "And those people are still important to me."

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: "And I don't care that they are an algorithm, they are people." And you insist— you know, and talk to your GM. And then you insist, like, hey, my character is deciding to continue to care for those people and continue to make a world for them or a space for them. But, if the world is like, "And the simulation is off, now, and you actually live in a post-apocalypse, and there's no way to get back to those people," then that is such a more dire situation that feels like—like we said at the jump—a big misreading from the GM about what y'all were interested in. And that, to me, is why it's so important to have that conversation with the GM, is because if you don't get good practices in place, [chuckles] there's a good chance that a similar mistake might happen in the future. A similar, you know, disconnect between what you as the players

are interested in and what they as the GM are interested in, without a moment of conversation around it. You know, in the chat, here, now, someone had said...Bilby in the chat said, "I get the GM's position. As a GM, pulling a great twist is so satisfying when it hits. But games are a group matter, et cetera." And I definitely— you know, we have had some big changes in every season we've done.

Jack: [chuckles] Mm-hmm.

Austin: Or, I guess, especially COUNTER/Weight and Twilight Mirage, and especially Twilight Mirage, where we went, "Okay, the second half of this season is going to feel substantially different." But the process of doing that was not a surprise? The process of that switch was like: me having an idea, me bringing the production team on board as stakeholders, then— [hesitates] I say stake— hmm. [**Jack** chuckles] I'm revealing something about my history in media, here, which is: anytime someone outside makes a decision about a thing without the stakeholders being involved in that decision, [**Jack** laughs] people are going to be pissed. [chuckles] And so, yeah, like, I think...you look at the Twilight Mirage stuff, I came to everyone eventually, and I was like— not even eventually, well before we did the mid-season finale of that game. And I said, "Hey, I have this idea. I think I want to switch systems. I think I want to do that along with changing the game and the genre a little bit, and go from being really introspective and kind of more slowly paced and much more metaphysical and high-concept, to something a little more, you know, grimy and Star Wars Destiny-like, more actiony, more focused on kind of smaller story bites than big ideas." And that conversation happened, and then when it happened in the game, everyone was at least prepared for it. At least interested in how can we make this my best version of that thing. And, I guess, if you're a GM listening, my advice to you is: if you have one of these big ideas, do not value the joy you have of like—

Jack: Yes.

Austin: "Aha, you've activated my fucking trap card," more than the joy that comes from collaborating with your friends on a story. Like, be excited to bring them in the moment you have the idea. And I know that that's anxiety-inducing, because you have to pitch them an idea, and there's a chance that they'll be like, "No, we're really just interested in continuing the cyberpunk game that we've done." But having that conversation is the best way that you can ensure the joy of everyone at the table and the comfort of everyone at the table. Because now you've put your players— I know this is not— the "you" in question probably isn't listening to this. But the, you know, generic GM who has a big twist idea, if you're gonna do something that so firmly dismisses or ignores the investment that your players have made in who their characters are, both fictionally and mechanically, you have to bring them in, and it should be...it not only is part of your responsibility as a GM, but it is something where you should cultivate a table presence that makes that part of the enjoyment for you, is coming to the conclusion of what that thing looks like, instead of it just being on your shoulders. Art, it sounded like you had something else, also.

Jack: Art just reappeared.

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: Oh, did Art lose connection?

Art: I did. Am I back?

Austin: Ope. Uh, yes, tentatively. [chuckles]

Jack: Kind of. [chuckles]

Austin: Kind of. [**Janine** makes amused sound] Uh, it sounded like you had something, though.

Art: Um...well, I think that might have been the sound of me disconnecting.

Austin: Mmm.

Art: And, of course, I missed anything that was said while I was gone, so if I'm just repeating something that's already been said, just interrupt me at any time.

Austin: Okay. [**Janine** chuckles]

Art: But one of my favorite Simpsons moments is when there's that big hole. Anyone know what I'm talk— um, they're like digging for a treasure that isn't really there, and they find like the box being like, "We've tricked you, there's no treasure." And they say that like, they're gonna keep digging. And then they cut to like much much later, and there's a really big, big hole. [**Austin** chuckles] And they realize they've been tricked, and then Chief Wiggum says to, I think, Otto, who's digging, "No, dig up, stupid." [**Austin** chuckles] 'Cause they're trying to dig out of this giant hole now. And I think that like you have to remember that you can— in this situation, you can definitely dig up.

Austin: Mmm. Mm-hmm.

Art: You can fix this by going through, not by necessarily being out. Not by like, rewinding. And I think there might be some good gameplay in like finding out that things about this were false.

Austin: Yeah. Yeah.

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Jack: It's so dangerous, though. And like, twists...twists deployed incautiously can be so dangerous for this reason, where like if...even if the GM is like, "No, no, no, that wasn't real.

That wasn't real. They are all real people," the bubble has been broken. Like, a Rubicon has been crossed. And I think this is why Art saying, "Go through rather than rewind"...I mean, I'm trying to think about how I would feel, **[Janine: yeah]** if the GM was just like, "No, actually, I didn't mean that. They are real. **[chuckles]** Don't worry about it."

[0:15:12]

Austin: Well, I guess, for me it's like...if I did a thing, and everyone was unhappy with it, I would gen...and like, we had a talk about it. I wouldn't mind being like, "Let's throw it out. You know what? It's not that important. Like, we— let's—"

Jack: But it would have happened.

Austin: But it didn't, no, because—

Jack: Like, there's no way it won't shape the—

Austin: Of course. Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course.

Jack: There's no way it won't shape the play and the feel of it.

Austin: It will shape the play and the feel of it, and it will sting for the first like three sessions. And I bet seven sessions in, when this person has **[Jack chuckles]** like, reshaped the campaign towards what the player flags are and they've developed new things and they've come to a new understanding of trust, I...I don't think... **[chuckles]** And maybe this is like betraying some—betraying the role of the GM for me, or like, betraying canon or whatever—I don't give a fuck. Like, I don't care about what we already said, **[Jack chuckles]** if we could say something better instead. Delete it! Like, games are weird, because they're not like fiction. You're right, like the words were already said. You're always playing forward. But in the same way that if we're playing a card game and you make a misplay, and you go, "Oh, can I take that back?" and I'll go, "Yeah, of course," like, we're not playing competitively in this moment. I want to open up that possibility space for collaborative storytelling.

Like, it's the same thing...I'm working on this comic right now, right, with Evan. And you have no idea how many times we go like, "Wait a second. That thing that we said in plot in beat one doesn't work anymore." Like, we have to go change that, even though we made that decision and we were firm about it three weeks ago. And, I wish the table presence could be more like that for RPGs and less like the hard-and-fast rules of chess. And that doesn't mean that... **[sighs]** For me, like, I think that I can draw the line between "You didn't take damage and you didn't die three weeks ago," from this, which is such a mismatch between player interest and fictional outcomes. I think there's a big difference between that and like, "Oh, you know what, don't worry about it. You didn't take damage," if that makes sense? Like, I think you can retain the quote, unquote, "sanctity" of gameplay rules, without necessarily feeling like you're stuck in

whatever decision happened last s— especially last session. You know what I mean? I don't know, it's— obviously it is up to the players.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: I get the argument that you're saying. I get the point of like...

Jack: Well, I mean... [sighs]

Austin: It did happen.

Jack: I'm not talking about sanctity, so much. I'm not talking about the like, "We have to play by the rules." I think I feel similarly to you, in the sense that like, we really don't. Like, if this is something we feel uncomfortable about. I think the position I'm coming at it from is that, as a player...and what we're talking about is like a radical redefinition of our characters' relationships to the world, done kind of without consultation or conversation with us? I would feel like there had been a breach of trust.

Austin: Oh, absolutely!

Jack: That would be much harder to regain than a few sessions, I think. [chuckles]

Austin: But, at that point, I don't think digging through works either. Like, at that point, I don't know that sticking...if I was the player in that scenario, sticking with that GM who was like, "Well, [clicks tongue dismissively] I'm not gonna undo it."

Jack: [laughs] Yeah.

Austin: "But if you care about it, I guess I'll start letting you back in the simulation." Like...

Jack: This is where a bigger conversation needs to be had, right?

Austin: Exactly. Right, well, and the conversation has to also be between the players in terms of what they do want. Because if the bulk of the table's like, "Well, let's make the best of what already happened," then yeah, that is what they should do. But I don't want— I wouldn't want someone thinking that that's the most they could ask for. Do you know what I mean?

Jack: Right. Yeah.

Austin: I think it should be in the conversation at least, to say, "Hey, let's throw out the end of that session. Because it didn't happen. It isn't real." And that, again, is something that the table can arrive at, even if it makes...I mean, again, it's like, whose comfort matters most, here? And I definitely understand the idea of like...I don't know. For me, it would be really hard to continue

this game, you know, at all. And I think, [chuckles] Art can attest to have been in games like this with me in college, where the GM was more interested in telling their story than in following what the players wanted. And it's just like, at some point, you have to either be willing to take that leap of faith and trust and say what you want. Because that is part of that leap of faith, right? Is like...it isn't just...

I think, again, in college, the thing I would have done would have been not said anything...uh, sorry. Said something quietly under my breath to my friends who were [chuckles] also in the game, about how I was bummed about how the game was going. But then tried to make the best of it. And that's the worst possible solution. I think the best possible solution is everything that everyone has said already, which is like, have that conversation with the GM. But part of, I think, the leap of faith and trust is like, if you think that that's a reparable relationship, you should not feel like beholden to what has already happened, if the rest of the table is similarly interested in just like hitting the rewind button. But, again, different tables and different priorities. I don't...I would not be mad if this person wrote back in and was like, "Hey, we talked about it, and we figured out a way to go forward, where, you know, it's true." But also, again, it's definitely what works for y'all.

Janine: I think it's also worth underscoring here that like, a big part of reading players and sort of figuring out what their flags are and sort of moving stories in directions that appeal to everyone is looking at their moves.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Because the moves that people take are really good indication of both what they think is necessary for the story you're telling, which is a good way to see if everyone thinks they're telling the same kind of story.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: But also to, you know, see where people want their character to go. So if you have a player who is taking a bunch of moves that are about interacting with characters, [**Austin** makes amused sound] and then your play is "all these characters are computer programs" or whatever, you need to have some... [chuckles] You need to have another play after that that will help them not feel like they wasted all their moves as Jay does.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Or like that they even wasted their entire character arc, which Jay clearly feels like is the case.

Austin: I— yeah, and I definitely think like...god, it's so fucked up, because I feel like there's a way in which this GM could have sold them on it, you know what I mean? Could have brought them in. Where it's like, hey—

Janine: Part of me wonders if it was like, if that was— again, this is why I look at this question, and I'm so curious about the context. Because this almost feels like— I could so clearly imagine someone being like, this is their end-of-session twist.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Of just like... [dramatic narration] “And then the world flickers, [**Austin:** uh huh] and it turns off. And you're in a room, and it's a server room.” or— [**Austin** chuckles] This is me— I don't fuckin' know.

Austin: Yeah, yeah.

Janine: I'm not good at this.

Austin: But I get what you're saying. Yeah.

Janine: But it's so easy to imagine like, that's the end of the session, the person goes home or they go and they talk to their friends a little bit and then they send this email in, and, 'cause...

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: We don't know where it goes.

Austin: Yeah, yeah.

Janine: Like, maybe they do have something in mind, maybe it does go somewhere, but...

Austin: I'm sure they have something in mind. You know, as the person— reading this, I'm like, “Oh, and then they're gonna get filtered into a whole new social situation, where the Fixer builds— you know, creates new relationships with new NPCs.” But, again, you have to prime your players [**Janine:** yeah] for that sort of big switch, right? Like, again—

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: I think about the Twilight Mirage stuff, where it was like...I think, Art, your character was going towards a...both Art and Janine. Both of your characters were going towards like more social. We definitely— your character specifically became a person who knew people, and it was like, well, you're gonna have to know all new people. You're gonna have to— it's gonna be all about creating new relationships going forward. So it's not out of the question that the Fixer's

moveset here could continue to be relevant, but though the rolodex certainly would not be. [chuckles] Right? Like the established group of people would be limited, even in the sort of like compatibilist version where they both go in the system and stay out a little bit, or whatever. But, yeah, I think we're really all talking around the biggest thing is, for me it's like: why did the GM want to leave? What is the thing that the GM was like, "Um, let's change. Let's— no, this is fake. This is all fake." Why do they think it's Fake, with a capital F, this stuff doesn't matter? How is that signaled? And then, importantly, just like, what...what is it about— was that supposed to be the end of a season? Was that supposed to be the end of like a...what made the GM want to make that move, and how do you rectify that against what sounds like a group of players who are like, "No, we're into it! It's two and a half years!" You know? [chuckles]

Art: Yeah, two and a half years— this might be him trying to quit, you know?

Austin: Yeah. But at that point, just say, like, "Hey, let's wrap it up." Like, I know that's tough. But it can be really...you know us. I like to end games. [chuckles] I like to end stories. And I think you have so much more fun being like, "Hey, I think I want to wrap this up. I think my tenure as GM is wrapping up. Maybe someone else can pick it up. Or, we can have like a really cool finale." Though I think also the finale of like, "and none of it was real," [chuckles] would fuckin' suck, so. [Janine chuckles]

Art: Yeah, this is like the GM equivalent of ghosting. It's like instead of just not answering calls, it's like, "Welp, no one was real. Bye."

Austin: [chuckles] Yeah. Yeah. Exactly. Alright, let's keep moving. Good luck on this, Jay. Like, seriously. I hope that this turns around. Let us know. [chuckles] Please talk to your GM. If the GM is listening, please talk to your players. If you're a GM who has a big twist planned, and it's like this big, please look at your character sheets and be like, "Wait a second. Uh oh. [chuckles] This doesn't— this is not what they want. Let me talk to them about it." This comes in from Nick, who writes:

"I love how the two Consulting Detective games in Hieron turned out, and I'm planning on running a murder mystery in a Forged in the Dark system soon, myself. But I'm a little worried at how easily mystery stories can fall apart or become frustrating for players if they misinterpret—or just miss—evidence and clues. Do you have any tips for running a mystery that's satisfying for players?"

Austin: I have like a handful of tips here that I hope are helpful for you. And they're not necessarily things that were exactly true for the Consulting Detective games? But were...are at least...especially in the Rosemerrow one. And then, more generally, when we've done mystery stuff since then, basically true. Which is: you don't need...the game doesn't exist. There is not a particular piece of evidence in a particular room. There are pieces of evidence you need them to find, and connections that exist between people and their motives. But you can produce evidence wherever you need that evidence to show up, and so what I've always done is kind of

had like priority number one, “they need to find this” evidence. And I put that in a number of places. If there is like a map, where they’re exploring a map, I put that style of, “Hey, here are the key players in this mystery” in a number of places where they’re most likely to go to, or even where they will necessarily go to, because it’s a chokepoint, because it’s a place they have to pass through, because it’s an NPC that I *know* because of the way I sell the NPC they will want to talk to that NPC. [chuckles] And I spend extra time on that stuff. And, you know, obviously some of it gets wasted anyway, but along the way, what you do is you go, like, “Alright, here’s one piece of evidence, and this is super important, so that can show up in ten places. Or that can show up...I’ll keep that on a sideboard, so whenever they succeed at a roll, if they haven’t gotten it yet, I can call this and pull this in.” Because you’re not actually creating an actual crime scene, what you’re creating is a sort of crime logic that’s unfolding.

The second thing is that you don’t need to know what happened—what you believe happened can change. Not to the degree that it undercuts what they’ve already discovered, but the opposite. Which is: if they find solutions that you think are more interesting than what you’ve already written down, if they find connections—as long as it doesn’t invalidate something else that has been established, you should feel free to let them run with that. And, barring it being a more interesting thing where like you give them the alternate read or the alternate dilemma and force them to choose, it is okay for them to have solved it in a way different than what you suspected. If that’s the tone of the game especially, right? I think the Rosemerrow detective and the...I think, actually, the Rosemerrow detective story versus the Velas detective story are so distinct in this way, where the Velas story had a very clear bad actor that was lined up to be discovered and someone that they were manipulating. The Rosemerrow thing was like, even when you figure this out, it will be impossible...or it will be very hard to deliver justice on the person who is actually responsible for this. And that was intentional and meant to, you know, actually communicate something about the state of the world.

And those— like, if your game is interested mostly in “I want to give my players the experience of discovery and of mystery solving,” you should feel comfortable making the decisions that betray your prep in favor of supporting the decisions that they make. Misinterpretations are allowed to be interpretations. And it does take some quick thinking, or multiple sessions [chuckles] and rewriting, to do that. But like, trust your ability to do that, and give yourself the time to do that. I’m curious from players’ side, is there anything here from the frustration side that could be useful to call out, in terms of making that stuff clear? I don’t think that Nick is actually like doing a Consulting Detective thing, so stuff about like...movement points, is [chuckles] probably not that important? But more generally, in terms of mystery storytelling stuff.

Janine: The thing I’ll say—and this might be a little controversial. The best tabletop crime kind of exploring intrigue-y stories that I’ve experienced have happened in *The Quiet Year*.

Austin: Sure. Yeah.

Janine: The ones that are most memorable to me— they are always the simplest and shortest, and they are a small part of other stuff.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Janine: But every time I've played The Quiet Year, basically, there has been something like that. And I remember those so much more clearly, and often a lot more fondly, than I remember the more complicated crime story things, because...I think because it forces that degree of adaptability that you were sort of talking about. Of like, there isn't a set answer, in that case.

Austin: Yeah.

[0:30:09]

Janine: It is very much just like, you find your way to the answer by random happenstance, whether you're actively pursuing it or not, in a lot of cases. Like, the answer kind of almost finds you based on the cards that get drawn and whatnot. And I find that a lot more interesting, a lot more satisfying, and a lot less frustrating.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: In general. Just because it doesn't feel...because it doesn't feel like everything hinges on me getting **[Austin chuckles softly]** a perfect ten in every fuckin'...in every fucking way. It feels like it doesn't rely on me really catching everything that's thrown my way. Because that's a kind of pressure that...some people really respond well to, but I can find that very frustrating. **[chuckles]**

Austin: Yeah, fair. I definitely think, on that note, too, if you're playing this with a Forged in the Dark system, do not rely on your primary evidence to only show up for dice rolls. If you go listen to the Rosemerrow game—obviously we were playing Dungeon World and not a Forged in the Dark game, but there were things that people got just by going to a place. They got extra stuff if they rolled well, but what you have to allow for is that they walk into the room and fail every roll. And that if it's minor information there, maybe they don't get some color, but like, for the mystery not to fall apart, it should not be tied to a successful— like, it's also just not how Powered by the Apocalypse games work. In the same way that if you come to a door and it's locked and there's no stress and you're a thief—if there's no, rather, risk, there's no exterior risk—let the thief open the fuckin' door. **[chuckles]** In the same way, if you're like being admitted to a crime scene and you're here to study the crime scene, and you're like detectives or you're competent at examining a crime scene, and there's no immediate threat, give them stuff, and let them ask questions. And then if they want extra stuff that maybe they don't have questions for, let them roll. But don't necessarily hide all that stuff behind dice rolls, because you just don't know. You might get the worst possible outcome, of just like failure, failure, failure. **[chuckles]** And that can be tough, you know?

Janine: The worst feeling would be, like, getting to the end of the mystery and realizing you don't have the shit you need to solve it, like you don't have the right answer, and then the GM is just like, "Well, you shoulda asked if there were any footprints in the snow outside the bar."

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Yeah. Fuck off.

Jack: Like, the equivalent of pixel hunting, right?

Austin: Yes. Yes. Yeah.

Janine: [laughs] Yes.

Austin: I mean, I've—

Art: Ugh. No, that is the worst.

Austin: That is the worst. [**Janine** chuckles] Were you ever in any Call of Cthulhu games with me, Art?

Art: Yeah, uh huh.

Austin: 'Cause those were always that. A hundred percent that style of thing.

Jack: Where it's just like, "But you didn't look under the desk!" and it's like, come on! [chuckles]

Austin: [groan of frustration]

Art: Well, and that—

Jack: But I think—

Art: Call of Cthulhu lends itself to bad stuff like that.

Austin: It sure does.

Art: Like, "If you don't have a point in driving, you don't know how to drive," and like... [**Jack** laughs]

Austin: Oh my god. [**Janine** makes incredulous sound] What a fuckin' disaster game. I love that GM. That GM was very— is a good friend of mine. Shoutouts to Anthony. [laughs] Yes.

Art: Yeah, Anthony didn't write that game.

Austin: No, exactly. He did love it and want to run it all the time, though, so. [chuckles] Matthew— or, sorry, not Matthew, sorry. Matthias, in the chat, notes that Gather Information rolls in Blades in the Dark and Forged in the Dark games, a 1 to 3 is still adequate. It's never— if you Gather Information and get a 1 to 3 in Forged in the Dark, it's never nothing. It's always at least something. And so yeah, that actually does make this maybe a little bit easier. I'm gonna keep moving. This comes in from Riley, who says:

“For the past couple of months, I've been working on a game inspired by the TV show Black Sails. It's a show about the golden age of piracy, focused on the interpersonal relationships and motivations of an ensemble cast, as well as how they interact with larger forces that rule their lives. It's a very good show, and I highly recommend it, by the way. [Austin and Art chuckle] Anyways, after a—

Austin: Uh, that's— we're gonna— we need a check from the Black Sails company. Alright, great. Also, I'm gonna write down “The Black Sails Company” as a great name for a Season 6 faction. [chuckles]

“Anyways, after a million different iterations of the mechanics of the game, I finally settled on a quasi-Belonging Outside Belonging hack, which focuses on how characters feel about each other's actions. I'm pretty confident about the base mechanic now, but that means I've reached the point where I have to start thinking about character creation stuff. I like the idea of there being playbooks, somewhat, in the Belonging Outside Belonging style, but I have trouble figuring out how to figure out—

Austin: Sorry. “I have trouble—” yeah. [chuckles]

“I have trouble figuring out how to figure out archetypes on which to base playbooks like that. So my question is: when you're playing games, what interests you about the playbooks in them? I know you haven't played a ton of Belonging Outside Belonging games—though I would love to hear a continuation of that Dream Askew game from one thousand years ago—and Forged in the Dark/Powered by the Apocalypse games aren't exactly the same, but what about those playbooks helps to inform who your character is, especially with regard to their goals/motivations, the way they see the world, and their interpersonal relationships? How would you make playbooks/playbook moves different and interesting in a setting where there isn't necessarily any magic or sci-fi?”

Austin: I'm gonna leave this all up to y'all, [Jack groans] since you're the players who pick playbooks and have literally been going through this with PARTIZAN in the last couple months.

Art: I feel so unqualified to answer this question, because like, I've done—for this thing of ours—I've done like one character completely defined by a playbook, which I picked because I didn't get the two playbooks I wanted to get going into the first session.

Austin: Wait, which is that?

Art: Oh, I went into the first Hieron game being like, "I wanna be the Wizard or the Fighter, but I'm not gonna pick—I wanna pick last."

Austin: Wow. Wow! [**Janine** chuckles]

Jack: So good.

Austin: You know, that was a very Hadrian thing of you to do, so.

Jack: Yeah, it turns out that you accidentally found Hadrian straight away.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Art: Yeah. And then the other ones have just been like, well, I'm gonna do a thing, and then we're just gonna make something fit, like. Especially because in COUNTER/Weight we sort of got playbooks later, and in...

Austin: Right, yeah.

Art: Twilight Mirage, it was just like...I had like this idea, it was like, well, I'm gonna wedge this into whatever—

Austin: The closest.

Art: Playbook I need to.

Austin: Yeah.

Art: Both times.

Austin: Yeah.

Art: And, you know, for PARTIZAN, I don't want to give too much of that away right now. I kind of did the same thing. I had a full on idea, and then we're like, well, what works with this?

Austin: Which—

Art: So.

Austin: What were you looking...when you say, though, when you were like, “Well, what fits?” in that scenario, what is it that you ended up— what ended up resonating from those various playbooks in terms of like, “Yeah, this connects.” Is that about just like, having moves that line up with sequences you want to play? Does it line up with like character traits that you hope to embody? Stuff like that?

Art: I think it’s often little things. Like, I knew I wanted to be whatever the hell Grand Magnificent started out as when I saw that I could make work— you can make something that causes humanity harm, I was like, “I am doing that. [Austin laughs] That is what I want. I want to make a mech so beautiful that it hurts your ability to be a human.” [Jack chuckles]

Austin: Yeah, well. Well. That happens!

Art: Yeah, and it went great!

Austin: Mm-hmm!

Art: And then...I mean, for PARTIZAN, it was— I mean, you pitched the playbook to me for PARTIZAN, it was like, yeah, that works.

Austin: Well, it’s funny, 'cause in PARTIZAN— which, we’re not gonna say playbooks, yet. I mean, if y’all want to say playbooks, I’m not gonna stop you. But it was very much a situation— and, in fact, Janine, when we get to you, maybe we have to have a talk about whether or not you want to say it, because there is definitely an interesting story for yours. [Janine chuckles] But, Art, we actually thought you were gonna do a different thing, [Art: mmm] because we were tied to one particular move that was about a thing your character could do. Where like, oh, we have this idea in your head of like, you want to be a character who can do *blank*. Well, this move on this playbook lets you do *blank*, but then later I’d seen some other stuff, and I was like, “Oh, actually, based on what you’ve told me about your character, maybe this is more you.” And we’ll see how it goes, right? The funny thing is like, I don’t fuckin’ know how it’s gonna go.

Art: Well we’re still planning to do that first thing, it’s just like, I have to come up with narrative reasons not to do it until I get the move.

Austin: Until you get the move, yeah. Oh, or— yeah, yeah.

Art: Like— yeah.

Austin: I have some thoughts on this, too. We’ll talk after this call about that. But yes.

Art: Sure, yeah.

Austin: Uh, Jack and Janine.

Jack: I think I'm very similar to Art in this regard, in that like, I...I have a very nebulous sense of the character before I think about the playbook. It definitely goes that way around. Although, I think if we were like, all in the same room, and we were sitting around a table opening a new tabletop game for the first time...I would be much more ready to pick a playbook, you know, from scratch, [**Austin:** yeah] rather than going into it with a character. I'd be like, "Oh, you know what? Okay, I'll play a wizard this time." or like, "Let's see how that's gonna feel." But, definitely when we're making the show, I am like...here are the questions I'm interested in asking, and here are the scenes I'm so broadly interested in seeing. What in these playbooks appeals to me? And I think, like Art's talking about, it's very frequently a move. Or, in the case of Forged in the Dark games, talking about equipment and items and things. Where, if I have a picture of the character in my head, and I'm like, what's in their bag? [**Austin** and **Art** chuckle] And then I look at the playbooks, and I go like, "Oh, right, it looks like it's more like this or it's more like that." And then there's always a fun process, where you find that...the fact that the Hitchcocks can't Prowl was not done on purpose, but as soon as we saw that in the character sheet, it became funnier and funnier. [chuckles] And so there's an aspect to which the...once I know roughly the type of character I play and that leads me to a playbook, I will definitely be like, oh, now the playbook is gonna start informing what this character is like, in like a slightly different way.

Austin: Yeah. Totally. I think the Hitchcocks were also interesting— well, the most interesting thing for me, was when we switched to [**Jack:** mm-hmm!] Scum and Villainy, and you had— you're like, "Oh, I love this move!" and it was about no one being able to lie to you.

Jack: Yeah. [chuckles]

Austin: And I was like, "Yeah...Jack, this is the same playbook between the Hitchcocks and Fourteen Fifteen."

Jack: And Fourteen, yeah.

Austin: But you ended up playing them both so differently, which was so interesting to me. I mean, obviously so, so, so, so differently. And they're not the same playbook, obviously. Scum and Villainy is a different game than Blades in the Dark, but there's some overlap with moves and kind of archetypes. And it was so fascinating to me that that move stuck out to you both times without it being— for completely different reasons.

Jack: [simultaneously] For completely different reasons!

Austin: Yes, exactly.

Jack: Yeah. With Hitchcock it's like, I want to be able to tell when someone is lying to me, because [imitating sneaky bastard] I am like a sneaky bastard, who's like...and, you know, it's the like, sparkling Disney male lead, who is just like, "No, I do not believe this is true," and like tumbles further and further into problems. And with Fourteen, it was a character who is like, desperately trying to grasp onto any which way the Twilight Mirage is moving and sort of trying to guide it or help it out. And so being like, "you'll be able to tell when someone is lying to you," there was so much more pragmatic than Hitchcock's like, "It'll be really cool if I can spot a liar!" [Jack and Art chuckle]

Austin: Yeah. Yeah. Which, again, I think does underscore the fact that like, you were looking for something that connected to your goals and motivations.

Jack: Yeah. That spoke to the character, yeah.

Austin: Yeah, yeah, totally. Janine, I'm curious for you, because I feel like some of your choices have been so, like...bold? In terms of what those characters are, especially with like Signet's initial playbook, was like...so important in delimiting who Signet was?

Janine: I mean...

Austin: But even more generally, I'm curious. Because we've had lots of talks about the attractiveness of moves and stuff like that.

Janine: I honestly think...I've been thinking about it, and I think I'm kind of the same as Art and Jack, here, where like, I...playbooks are kind of the last thing I think about when I'm putting a character together? Like, sometimes...it's always—I always walk into it with a sort of concept of like, I wanna play a fancy space pope lady [Austin chuckles] with a...you know, with like a crown and a bunch of mummified hands that don't come up ever.

Austin: Mm-hmm. If there had been a mummified hand move, then it would have probably come up.

Janine: [laughs] I know. I would've taken it. [Art chuckles] And like, you know, I will always enter into it with that sort of basic idea, and then I try and find the playbook or the class or the whatever that fits that idea the best, or fits the idea of what I think that character does in the world and how they interact with it and how they behave the best. And of course, from there, that playbook will then affect how that character develops further. Like, because of course the Onomastic playbook had a huge impact on Signet and like, you know, The Veil really makes the class—at least in the Onomastic's case, the class felt very integral to that character. It didn't feel as...you know, I often think that Adaire could be a lot of different classes. I don't think there's that much about her that feels rooted in the Thief. But to me, Signet is—

Austin: Uh, except, wait, one second. Stabbing motherfuckers in the back for a ton of damage.
[**Austin** and **Jack** chuckle]

Janine: Yeah, but that's kind of like...that's like a...that was like a late...

Austin: Yes.

Janine: That was kind of a late-game...

Austin: [doubtful] Ehh.

Janine: Mid- to late-game twist. Like, she was...Adaire was never supposed to be good at fighting? It just kind of like happened.

Austin: It did kind of just happen. I know. I get what you're saying. I do get that. [**Janine** laughs]
But I do think like that ends up—

Janine: So—

Austin: That's like one of those things where it's like, sometimes you find the character— an important part of the character, from the playbook that is not necessarily like...hey— you would never sit down and be like, “And also a thing about Adaire is... [chuckles] that she will consistently stab people in the back for a ton of damage.”

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: But that ends up being true about the character, regardless of your like pre-written notion, you know what I mean?

[0:45:01]

Janine: Yeah. I mean, I pretty much...the only reason I picked Thief was 'cause like I hadn't looked at any fan classes, and basically all the other ones were taken. So, I— like, I went into it being like, “I want to play this mapmaking, former patent medicine seller, [**Austin:** right] and I guess that's a Thief.” That's fundamentally, I guess, kind of a thief-like thing to be. [**Austin** chuckles] But you know, it's...and with PARTIZAN, too. There was...I think the thing you were alluding to was like, you came to me with a playbook like, “I think this is what your character is,” and I was like, “No?”

Austin: Well...

Janine: “That's not...no?”

Austin: I think it was actually the other way, right? Because, we had...so, the thing that— uh. The thing is [Janine chuckles] that we had actually spent...we didn't know we were gonna play Beam Saber until a couple of months ago, and for me, one of the big things was that like...the party that played Beam Saber in the upcoming— in the Beam Saber live game that will be in the main feed in a few weeks—or a couple weeks, I guess now—really loved it. But the other half of the party— or, the other half of the crew—hadn't played Beam Saber yet. And it was like a thing where it was like, "Well, do we want to run another game in the Road to Season 6 where we play Beam Saber?" That had been on the table, in terms of potentially doing that after For the Queen instead of Microscope.

But we had been running those games for so long, I wanted to get back to other Live at the Table games, and I wanted to— we needed to start prepping for PARTIZAN, a game that did not have a name yet at that time, [chuckles] as people who are Pusher level [Jack laughs] backers have read the long, long journey of getting a name together know. [Janine chuckles] And...at a certain point, I just reached out to everyone and was like, "Hey. I think it's Beam Saber. I like Armour Astir, but I'd like...it's a little too revolutionary in its fundamental ideal, like it's about a resistance movement facing off against an authority. Which is dope, but it's not the story that PARTIZAN is at, at least not at the top. Beam Saber has gotten so good. I've been hanging out in the Discord. I've, you know, helped brainstorm some cool mechanics that I'd love to see everyone play with." And I finally reached out to you and was like, "Hey, are you in a place where we would be...where you'd be good with Beam Saber?" and you were like, "Let me look at the classes again." [chuckles] And at that point, you'd only seen all of the main classes—

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: That are in the book currently. And then I linked you to one of the Patreon prototype classes, like the upcoming ones that'll be in a supplement. That currently, if you support Austin Ramsay's Patreon, you can get access to like four extra classes, and I want to say two additional crews. And I was like, "I was thinking about this one." and your exact response was, "Oh, yes. This is one hundred percent correct." which, I...previously, there just hadn't— the thing you wanted to play just wasn't in the book. It just a hundred percent wasn't in the book, and it would have been one of those things where we would've had to have forced it in a little bit, you know?

Janine: Yeah. Where like you start reading things a little more metaphorically, in terms of moves and whatnot.

Austin: Exactly. Well, this is a soldier, that's sort of like this other thing. Like, I get—

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: This person's strong. This person's smart. Like, okay, I guess you can do that. And I think the lesson for me there, for you Riley, is to like, think less— and actually, you know what I

actually think about a lot, is Masks playbooks. The playbooks in Masks. All of y'all played Masks, right?

Art: Mm-hmm.

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: Where like, those books aren't about doing superpowers, right? Like, to your last point here, Riley, "In a setting where there isn't magic or scifi." Masks has fantastic playbooks that are about interpersonal relationships. Are about the identity— you know, a character's identity and their vision of themselves, and about the way that the characters relate to the world and other people. And that is so much broader than "here is a person who can lift a car," you know? And I feel like that is my favorite model, even though...even though I also love it when Jack de Quidt takes the move that is "do extra damage to a robot" and then gets to say "do you know what the weakest point of a mech is?" [**Austin, Jack, and Janine** chuckle] Or I like the Onomastic and the Cybertome, or I like the— you know, all of those— I do like flavorful setting-filled books, but I think a lot about how much...as a GM, it gave me so much joy to see all of you make Masks characters, because you were starting with "How does my character relate to themselves and the world?" So.

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: So, yeah.

Janine: To be clear, the thing I was referring to was like, I think you had...you came to me being like, "Oh, I thought this hacker-y one," and I—

Austin: That was after. Then we were like, well—

Janine: Okay.

Austin: We ended up having a conversation about the playbook we were talking about, and you were like, "Well, but it doesn't have anything that connects to this thing," and then I was like, "Well, what about this thing," and we went back and forth at that point, but it was mostly about like...figuring out how to tie in one other aspect of the character.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Which, I guess, to that point, Forged in the Dark games are super good at this, which is...a character in Forged in the Dark games—and like, if you're running Forged in the Dark stuff at home, please, please, please remember this—like, if you choose a character type, a playbook, in Forged in the Dark, the only thing you're really locked to is: starting action score, starting like your first ability, and then gear. And in the case of Beam Saber, vehicle gear.

Everything else? Oh, and I guess items. Er, gear, I said that. Everything else is, you can— is multiclass, right? You can start as a Soldier in Beam Saber, and then take one move from Soldier, and then every other update, every other upgrade that you take can come from Infiltrator. But maybe you first want that Soldier ability. That's the same thing with crews. So you could start with, you know, if you're playing Blades in the Dark, you could start with the Hawker crew that sells stuff, and then decide, actually, we want to be like tough-ums. Whatever the one is about fighting. Brawlers? [chuckles] I don't remember.

Jack: Strong boys gang?

Austin: The strong boys gang. [**Janine** and **Austin** chuckle] You can decide you want to be in the strong boys gang and immediately start taking stuff from strong boys gang. [hushed] Also, man, I miss...I miss that video that doesn't exist (unclear ??? 51:18)

Jack: [wistfully] That video.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: What you're talking about as well is also really good if you feel like your character is moving farther away from that broad picture. Because sometimes you move further away from your initial very broad stroke of a character, and you're like, "[chuckles] Hell yeah, this rules!" and I got to do that a bunch with Fourteen, where like, Fourteen just transformed into a variety of different characters that I didn't think I was gonna be playing? But sometimes you do want to be like, "Oh, I thought I was gonna be doing more of this, and I really wanted to do that more, but that's not coming through."

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: And then you can start looking at other playbooks, and be like, "Well, I want to do this ability." Like, we did this a bunch with Lem, where we were like, what does Lem want to be doing more in combat? And can we look elsewhere to make that happen?

Austin: Yeah. Totally! Totally.

Jack: The answer is war crimes.

Austin: That is what ended up happening with Lem. Whoops. Well, more just crimes against humanity. You weren't really at war.

Jack: Yeah. I wasn't really at war.

Austin: Did we ever have a war?

Jack: War with a river.

Austin: Did we ever have a Hieron war?

Jack: Did we ever have a war? I mean, Ordenna is kind of a war.

Austin: Yeah, there was some— you know what, that was the big war fight.

Jack: There's some war.

Austin: The big war fight was the Twinbrook-Old Man's Chin stuff. That was a good war fight.

Jack: Oh, yeah. Definitely.

Austin: That was fun. Anyway.

Jack: Just generally crimes.

Austin: I was like, "We should do a season about war," I started to say, [**Janine** groans] before remembering that I—

Jack: What if we did a season about war?

Austin: Well, before remembering that we're about to, in some real way? [**Jack** laughs] So... [**Janine** groans nervously] Uh huh! Nothing to stress over.

Janine: Multiclass stuff is great.

Austin: Multiclass stuff is great.

Janine: I just realized, as you were talking about that, that I think some of the most iconic moves my characters have had have been taken from other classes.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Like, Bamboozle is a Bard move that Adaire took.

Austin: Oh! Wow, yeah, true.

Janine: Onomastic— or, not Onomastic. The...doctor? I took a...

Austin: Stitcher?

Janine: Mystic? I took a Mystic move—

Austin: Yes, yes.

Janine: With Stitcher that let me do some of the Onomastic stuff.

Austin: Totally.

Janine: Kind of, when we switched that over.

Austin: God.

Janine: More multiclassing.

Austin: More multiclassing. Alright.

Janine: Bangs desk. [**Austin** chuckles]

Art: That's not a good answer to "How do you make complete playbooks?"

Janine: No.

Art: Is "allow multiclassing." That's sort of the opposite. [**Art** and **Janine** chuckle]

Austin: Yeah, I mean, I mean...yeah.

Janine: Encourage it, though.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Okay, so a thing— here's a real thing. A thing that Beam Saber does, specifically talking about vehicles, 'cause you mentioned that vehicles are one of the only— are a thing where like it's kind of set what classes have what. But a thing that they encourage you to do when you are adding your vehicle's quirks is to look at the other classes, look at their specific— look at the other playbooks, sorry. Look at their specific vehicle things. And if you see one that you like, take one, and then add a negative modifier.

Austin: Oh, it's so good. Yeah.

Janine: Like, you know—

Austin: I love that rule so much.

Janine: Makeshift whatever, or like old blah— you know. So, that even lets you use, you know, sort of multiclass in a more rigid sort of section of that book.

Austin: Totally.

Janine: Which is good. Like, encourage that. Build that in. That's very real stuff. Because then people can really...you know, the thing that we...to basically boil this down, we all make our individual character and then basically shape a playbook around— [chuckles]

Austin: Totally.

Janine: Like, we shape everything else around that. So, the more you encourage that, the more people are going to be compelled by what you can offer, in terms of those classes and playbooks and whatever.

Austin: And to go back to the first question from Jay, briefly, actually. What you're unders— what you're hearing here is that I have three players on the call who love to have toy boxes and to tinker, to come up with ideas first, to have their like, "Here is who my character is," and then map something in the game to their idea. Riley, it is your job as the GM and the—or, sorry, as the creator—to anticipate the fact that some tables will not be like that. Some tables will be the situation that Jack suggested earlier, which is like, we're all around the table. We've never played this before. I go, "Yeah, I read this once. Uh, here are the playbooks." And I hand them out. And then you all flip through them and go, "Um...I'm gonna do this one. I'll build this one. Because it has a cool move in it." And walking that line is definitely important, because, especially if you're gonna start playing this game at conventions, if you're gonna be playing this—

Janine: Mmm.

Austin: If you're gonna expect people to play this for one shots. The idea of like, quickly being able to say, "Okay, I'm not gonna be able to build a— I don't have time to build a huge long backstory or character. I don't know this world. I don't really know you as the GM. I'm just here to kind of like, make a thing." That is a way to...or, a thing worth keeping in mind, when it comes to especially the presentation of that information. It's one of the reasons why Forged in the Dark games do still have playbooks, instead of not having them at all and just being a list of moves. Is because it just helps the reader to start to conceptualize things in terms of like, consistency and categorization. Where it's like, okay, listen. The Lurk does not have to be...you can pick the Lurk, and then immediately throw it away. But you might have a player who's like, "Um, this is my character? This is it. This— I'm playing the Lurk. I'm gonna check all of these boxes. I'm not gonna look at another playbook." And that is one hundred percent an acceptable way to play that game.

And so I...while I definitely want to support everyone here who's been like, multiclassing, you know, kind of loose structures so that we can kind of fit...like, almost classes as dress form, instead of as dress, you know? Some people are going to want to put a dress on. Some people are gonna want there to be enough to be like, "I am playing the Thief, and that is who I'm playing." And it's a choice you'll have to make in terms of which way to err, because you will bias one way or the other, for sure. But probably best practice to at least consider both of those perspectives while you're designing the game, and formatting the game too. I'm gonna advance. Eamon— [struggling with pronunciation] or Eamon, or Eamon, I actually don't know how to pronounce your name, I'm sorry. Apologies.

"I've been asked to join a few games recently as a player, and I'm really struggling with how much I should have of my character before going in." [**Austin** and Janine chuckles]

Jack: This is part two.

Austin: Part two.

"I find I either go into a game feeling like I'm ticking off a checklist for a character arc, or I'll end up trying something with little to no planning and end up getting bored of the character quickly. Since y'all are going into a new season, I thought it might be a good time to ask how you all personally go through creating a character. How do you know when you've got enough for a character? How do you keep track of who your character is and where they're going? And what does smart characterization look like?

Ramble/rant shortened into a single question: how much of a character should you bring into a game before it starts?"

Art: Some.

Jack: Not a lot.

Janine: Today you don't know what the rest of your life is.

Austin: Damn.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Time is quote of the day. [**Janine**, Jack, and **Austin** laugh] Submit it, someone!

Jack: Albert Einstein.

Austin: [laughing] Albert Einstein: Today you don't know what the rest of your life is! No, I get you.

Janine: Look. I'm like really guilty of overthinking stuff. I will have hours-long playlists before a season even starts. That's why I have two playlists: I have the me playlist where I just put stuff, and then the playlist that I actually release on Twitter and say, "Here's my character playlist!"

Austin: I'm gonna open this—

Janine: [chuckles] They're completely different, and one of them is six times longer than the other one, and that's fine. But like, when you're starting out a game, for me, a big part of it is: think as much as you want about who that character was before the game starts.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Janine: And maybe about what their goals are because that's the information that character has when that game starts. Like that's their experience. If you start thinking...I mean. [sighs] This is not gonna work— you know, in some games you need to think about like, well, what does this character want— what do I want this character to accomplish, in terms of story? And all of that. But...if you want to give yourself room to be enthusiastic about the character, but also have room to react more spontaneously to the story, rather than feeling like you're forcing things in there or checking off a list. I think that's my best advice, is to think of who that character is before the story starts, and work on that stuff. But like, don't...I'm gonna add to that, saying: don't be like waiting for the moment for you to introduce the lost sibling of so-and-so who comes back and they have a fight or whatever. That's not necessarily what I mean. Yeah.

[0:59:46]

Austin: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think that speaks to this question of like, Eamon says, "I find I go in feeling like I'm ticking off a checklist for a character arc," and I think that's always less effective than go in with a bunch of raw material. As the GM, I always appreciate it when I can see a bunch of potential arcs. Especially when you're giving me enough material to intersect your arcs with other character arcs, you know what I mean? Whereas, as a player, I've definitely done the thing of like, "I'm ready to tell the story of this character. And are there other characters in the party? Who knows. [chuckles] I don't know. I don't care. I'm gonna tell my story, and I hope the GM pays attention to me and does that." And that's like, a totally...I get where...that comes from me playing lots of video games when I was first starting to play roleplaying, like tabletop roleplaying games. And thinking of characters in that way.

And I don't just mean in terms of like being the protagonist. But thinking about like, the Bioware character, where it's like, "Well, this character's gonna have their arc, and it's gonna be situated over here, away from all of the other characters." Like, Cassandra is gonna have her thing, and yes, she'll be in the party when the main plot happens. But, her thing is over here, separate from, you know, another...why have I blanked on all the characters? [**Janine** laughs] Blackwall? Why did I go to Blackwall next? [**Janine** laughs] Anyway, you get what I'm saying. Whereas, in fact, the best version if this is: hey, everyone gets to pour all their stuff in the middle of the pile,

and you can immediately start building connections together. It's why I think one of the...it's why I always want to do a session 0 with everyone, before we kind of hit play on the game, so to speak? So that we can talk about connections between characters, and so that we can kind of finalize those bigger ideas together.

It's why I also like systems that mechanize relationships. I'm never going to be over the first step of Technoir, where you have a list of NPCs and you build connections with them, because you end up with this great linking chain of characters who multiple people might end up connected to the same character in different ways. And that creates relationships then innately between the characters who share those relations. If you go back to the beginning of COUNTER/Weight, like, we switched off of Technoir, but that fundamental first step of like, "Here are the player characters and they've linked up with these NPCs," carried so much of the season forward, in terms of relationships that were important and being the building block of what would come. And that stuff only happens because we take the step at the beginning of the game together to talk about characterization and relationships. That doesn't happen if you're like only in a corner writing your own story for yourself, if that makes sense. Jack and Art, I'm curious, as we go into the season where, I think, yours are the only characters [**Jack** and **Austin** chuckle] who have established relationships. Or, relations to each other. There's kind of an interesting thing, there, where like...

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: I'm curious what you think about this.

Jack: I like either having...very broad statements. Like, very, very broad statements. Like, "This character is this age." or like, "This character wants this thing." Or, [chuckles] really vague questions. Like, I definitely feel the tendency of wanting a checklist for a character arc. Or, more specifically, kind of wanting to...wanting so badly to find an arc, that I have to resist the temptation to plot that out earlier. Because, like Austin said, the best way and kind of the way I think our medium finds those arcs best is through messy entanglements at the table and through relationships and through surprise answers to questions.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: So, I wonder if the closest we— the closest I get to...to a checklist is I write a bunch of questions.

Austin: [interested] Mmm.

Jack: That I am interested in thinking about and talking about. And I try very hard not to write answers to them. And I try and pick...I try and [amused] make the questions big enough, that I just straight up can't write the answer to them, because if I try to write the answer now, it would always be like, "TKTKTK."

Austin: Yeah, yeah.

Jack: Or just like, “I do not have enough information to answer this.” [**Austin** chuckles] And so I think, for me, it’s definitely like, big broad statements. “She wears white.” Okay, cool. Right.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: We know we have a character that wears white. “She’s this age,” or whatever. Or, questions like, “How does this character respond when being threatened?” Not in terms of specific lines, but just like...what is the posture that this character would take? And it might be that we find that the answer that...the answer is not what we were expecting.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: But I find questions like that can help guide me over a season, in terms of like, what do I want to be thinking about as I play this character?

Austin: Yeah. [sigh-laugh] Morgan—

Art: Whereas, I have a more cynical answer to this.

Austin: [interested] Ooh.

Art: Where it’s like, Jack pitched me their character. And I was like, “That’s great. I’m gonna just make...I’m gonna have a character that can just interact with this character as much as I want.”

[**Austin** and **Janine** laugh]

Austin: You just built, like, a parasite. You’ve just decided...or a symbiote. Like, alright, I can build off that.

Art: Uh huh. Yeah.

Austin: I can live off of your aura.

Art: I’m gonna—

Austin: No, I’m super excited.

Art: And, you know, I’ve...there’s a good history with this inter-player relationship, and so I know that we can bring it when we need to bring it, and...you know, I think I crafted a character that does [**Austin:** yes] stand alone. But like, it was just like, I am going...that’s a very shiny object, and I would like to be close to the shiny object. [**Austin** and **Jack** laugh]

Jack: There's a—

Art: Especially when no one else had anything, at that moment. Everything else was just dark.

Jack: There's an extent to which there's so much about our relationship that is just completely dark.

Austin: If I— yes.

Jack: At least to me.

Austin: Well—

Jack: And you haven't told me.

Austin: Yeah. There's— it's very funny to have the bird's eye view here and know...know more. Not more, not like secrets.

Jack: You have the hidden information game, Austin.

Austin: I have, yeah. [laughs]

Jack: You have had your eyes open during the round of Werewolf where everyone... [chuckles]

Austin: [laughs] You have to understand that there was a moment during character creation, during the phase of which I was like, "Hey, if you have— let's talk about character ideas," with every player for PARTIZAN, where it was like, people were pitching me stuff here and there. And there was one day specifically where Ali was like, "I can't believe Jack and Art—" I'm not throwing you under the bus, here, Ali. Ali, I love you, because the end of this story is that you rule. You were like— Ali was like, "I can't believe Jack and Art already have finished characters." And I was like, "Well, I can see why you would think that." [**Jack** chuckles] And then within a day, or two days, Ali was like the first one to have a character sheet. Or like, the...like, a complete history of the... [**Art** laughs] I was like, alright, see? [chuckles] Here it is. Now we're good. Now we're in it. But I get— but I also, I guess, for that matter, to Eamon's point, I will say I have been at the table when I like show up and am like, "Uh, I'm gonna play...[thoughtful breath] Let me see here. I'll be Ranger?" And then someone else sits down at the table, [chuckles] and is like, [gruff, dramatic voice] "My name is Thurgod the Barbarian, and here are—"

Jack: [chuckles] Puts papers down on the table. [**Janine** chuckles]

Austin: Yeah. "Here are my conquest— conquest number one!" And I'm like, "[stutters] Well...I have a dog, [chuckles] so, who won, bro? It was me. I got a dog."

Jack: But there's an extent to which, like...it is so wild in play, and we've seen this in the show, where a character has, in the moment, ad libbed a bunch of past conquests.

Austin: Yes. Totally.

Jack: And like, to an extent...obviously, there's different games and different setups, so I'm reluctant to say "this is the better option," but to an extent, I feel so much more excited about tabletop games when one character on the fly discovers a bunch of past conquests.

Austin: Oh, yeah, totally. For me, the real thing I wanted to get at there was...you should— this is also one of those things that's worth talking about as a group. That is like—

Jack: Right.

Austin: "Hey, how prepped do we want to be, here?" Like, we do have prep for PARTIZAN characters at this point. But we actually don't have as much as we did for Twilight Mirage characters in some ways. Like, I feel like there's a degree to which I want PARTIZAN Episode 00 to feel more like Marielda Episode 3? Or Dungeon World episode 1.

Jack: Mmm.

Austin: Where it's like: here is who they are. Here's what they want. Wait, more than Dungeon World, right? Dungeon World was so, so raw. So much was just like, "Yeah, I think I'm this." And I don't know that we can ever capture that again, outside of Live at the Table games, because we have to think about things so much more, [**Jack** chuckles] and prep for seasons takes so much longer. And even, you know, even in my wildest dreams, at this point, there is such a pressure, that I can't imagine being like, "Uh, we don't know what we're gonna do next," and then in one week—the way I decided we should do Dungeon World—and then the next week we do it. And I just cannot imagine us living in that world again. But Marielda was like a really great happy medium between that and like Twilight Mirage. Where it's like, alright, here are my character ideas. Here are some things that are...I want to find a map. I think I run a blacksmith shop secretly? I'm making a boat? You know, like, that's, okay, cool. That's enough. You know. And PARTIZAN has the Drive system, which is a very cool way to start conceptualizing arcs, and blah blah blah. Anyway. Or, Beam Saber. Not PARTIZAN, Beam Saber. So, yeah. Someone in the— [chuckles] Morgan in the chat says, "We're sisters." That's right, folks. Jack and Art are playing Yuki and Tiffy, their BFF characters, [**Jack** laughs, Janine makes amused sound] but in mechs.

Jack: Ahh.

Art: Ahh!

Jack: Our first crossover.

Austin: [laughing] Finally. Did you know the BFF...if you zoomed out from BFF, what you would realize is it takes place in the same planet as the Ech0 game we did.

Jack: [laughs] It's deeply, deeply cursed. [**Austin** laughs] God.

Austin: God. Anything else, here, before we—

Jack: This is a joke. We're not—

Austin: We're not— that's not what's happening.

Jack: This isn't— we're not playing Yuki and Tiffy.

Austin: That is not happening. Next question?

Art: No, there's really not enough...not enough time to go back to that.

Austin: No. Ooh, I wish. Ready for the next one?

Jack: Let's do it.

Art: Yeah.

Austin: This one coming in from Adam. And Adam asks:

“How do you use NPCs in a way that still gives them stuff to do, so that they aren't just useless things with names that the PCs banter with, while also allowing the PCs to be the protagonists? In the game I'm running most often, Masks: A New Generation, there is a principle that reads, “Make adults seem childish and short-sighted,” which exasperates the issue. While I know this doesn't literally mean “make the adults incompetent,” it is what can easily happen. But in general, I super don't know how to make NPCs have a purpose in the story. If y'all could provide any tips, that would be wonderful. And, related, any tips on how to give NPC a character arc would also be appreciated. Thanks in advance.”

Austin: So, the first thing for me is if you look at Masks, it has a bunch of principles, and those principles aren't meant to be taken word for word universally. The “Make adults seem childish and short-sighted” one is, in fact, a corrective meant to ensure that you as the GM don't produce adult characters who seem perfectly reasonable and logical. Which, when you're making a game starring children and teens, is something that I think the game creators expected might happen. If you don't have that issue—if your adult characterization is not, by default, kind of cold

and rational—then you probably are already doing what this rule is meant to intend for you to do. Which is to make them complex, and have them make mistakes, and have them have, you know, prejudices, and have them have, you know, bad ideas and get into trouble. It does not necessarily mean make them...it not only doesn't mean "make them incompetent," it doesn't mean "keep them from having goals," or "keep them from having motivations." It means that they maybe don't know how to act on those motivations or achieve those goals, in the way that like a perfect, you know, soldier or robot or, you know, this idea of "i'm single-minded. I'm gonna get the thing done. I'm gonna hit my target no matter what." They're gonna get distracted. They're gonna have, you know, conflicted emotions, et cetera.

And, for me, that ends up being...kind of containing the key answer to this, which is: the way you make NPCs that have stuff to do is to give them things they want. Just about every major NPC I do, I at least at some point...and I mean major. Like, I don't mean there is a guard at the edge of the road, you know? Or at the edge of town that they're gonna talk to. But anytime I'm like, "This is gonna be an NPC that I suspect players are going to really spend time with," I sit down and I think and I, ideally, take a quick note that is just like, what do they want? What's the thing that they are working towards, either day in day out or on their offtime? What's the dream that they have? It can be as simple as "to get rich." [chuckles] It can be as broad as to, you know, reform the system of citizenship in this nation. And somewhere in between, you know, or on the way to those things, you end up making them be characters who do things on their own and who find their way into action instead of just being backdrop.

The second way to do it is to rely on them as things that...as agents whose actions intersect with the player characters. So, you don't necessarily have a person who necessarily opposes the player characters, 'cause maybe they're not a villain in your Masks game. But they might have something that...they might have something that gets them into trouble in a similar way. We just recorded another game for Bluff City in which the characters met an NPC who was in the area under her own, you know, motivation, doing her own shit, getting into trouble, and ended up being able to be like, a little bit of the fire under the player characters' asses? But also a pressure for them to respond to and react against. And that ended up being really helpful, for specific reasons I won't get into, because that'd be spoilers. [chuckles] But yeah, I think that's the big one for me, is: identify what they want, and then identify what is their capacity for pursuing what they want. If they're an admiral in the Navy, they're going to have different ways to pursue what they want than if they're like a stay-at-home dad, you know?

[1:14:58]

But figuring out what they want and then what is available to them for how to get there is definitely like the first, biggest step for giving them action. Giving them purpose in the story, which is to say, narrative connection to the story, and making their purposes— or making their motivations and action connect to where the camera is is harder work. But for me it begins and ends with getting them entangled with the player characters. And if you can do that and you can see the ways in which their motivations intersect with the player character motivations, their

goals begin to either conflict or align, suddenly you'll have characters who move in and out of your story that have weight and have presence, instead of just being cardboard cutouts who give the NPC— or, who give the player characters quests, you know? I'm curious if anyone else at the table who has run a game or who has played a game and been like, "Oh, this is what makes a good NPC."

Jack: There's an extent to which you're definitely feeding off...you mentioned it earlier, like an NPC that you have sold to us.

Austin: Yeah, totally.

Jack: Where you're like, this character— the players are going to like this NPC. Or even when it happens accidentally, and we all are like, "You know what. This person— this stranger, we're really into." And you're like scrambling to be like, "Oh, geez. Okay."

Austin: [chuckles] Uh huh.

Jack: This character. Was...I can't remember if Primo was one you under- or overestimated our involvement with.

Austin: Um...probably under. Primo was a few sketches. But I did have motivation for him. I did know who he was loyal to—

Jack: Oh, yeah.

Austin: What he wanted to do with the world. But he was not meant to be a big one, and then everyone loved him, so.

Jack: And then we were like, "Primo rules!"

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: And that's...that is like an incredible sign [**Art** chuckles] from your players.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: And also can help guide your character work, because your players will want things from these characters outside of just interaction with the plot. Like, you know...if you've set these characters up with interesting motivations and entanglements, as Austin was describing, players should be interested in...in this character's interiority, to a certain extent. And they will ask questions that you might not have answers to, and in finding those answers, you will have the character act more realistically than just showing up to give a plot beat or whatever. Like,

players will, through their involvement with your characters, prompt you to make decisions about those characters. That should help flesh them out.

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: “What’s this character’s deal?” can be expressed in a whole bunch of ways.

Austin: Totally. Yeah. I also don’t want to undersell that part of making a good npc can be, like—or, not a good npc, but a useful npc, an npc that has stuff to do—can be arrived at from the opposite direction, which is not, “I need— hey, I have an idea for someone with motivations and...you know, the ability to pursue those motivations.” You can arrive at a useful npc, or an npc that ends up doing stuff, by having a sort of narrative structure goal? Which can be, “I need an npc to light a fire under the player characters’ asses.” “I need an npc who...”

Jack: Oh. Ibex.

Austin: Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah. A hundred percent, Ibex, right? Ibex in Kingdom...you know, obviously, Ibex starts as a tiny side character in...what do you call it. In a Kingdom— or, not the Kingdom. The Stars Without Number part of COUNTER/Weight. And the Kingdom game was always going to be about him to some degree, but the degree to which he became an on-screen important character was—and the way that he rocked the boat in the Kingdom game of COUNTER/Weight—was fundamentally about a need I saw at the table to generate outcomes and to push the player characters into conflict. Versus, “Hey, here’s a person who has a specific motivation.” His motivations and what he had available to him came from my need to make sure not everyone constantly agreed their way through Kingdom. And I think the same thing is true if you look at a number of other major characters who have shown up across all the seasons. Like, Arrell...Arrell exists the way Arrell does for completely metatextual reasons that have to do with a player leaving the game, that have to do with me wanting there to be an echo of Samoths and Samot with a certain relationship and kind of my interest in generational and cyclical tragedy, exists because I wanted there to be a character who pushed Hadrian to make certain choices.

That stuff...who the character is comes together organically around that narrative purpose. You don’t have to think about these characters— you don’t have to start with interiority. You can arrive at interiority. Interiority is important. Interiority and capability is how you arm them and make them do stuff, but you can decide like, “I need someone who...you know, challenges their commitment to justice,” or “I need someone who challenges their commitment to nonviolence,” or whatever. And then build from that, you know? That is how storytellers work, too. That’s not just a game thing. That is how like, sometimes you’re writing a story, and you go, “Ah, fuck. [chuckles] I really need someone who...I really need someone who would make Batman make a rash decision instead of making a thoughtful one, you know? Because I want to tell a story about Batman making a bad call.” You know? Whatever. Anyway. Any other thoughts here on NPCs? I think we have one more question after this.

Janine: Um...

Austin: Uh, Janine.

Janine: Yeah, I...so...I think an important thing to consider here is that player characters don't have a purpose in the story just because they're player characters. Like, there's...like, as I go through this question, "allowing the PCs to be protagonists," "make NPCs have purpose in the story," there are things that sort of leap out to me in terms of like, the...you know, a character is, to some extent, a character. It's just some of them are not being controlled by you, as the GM, and some of them get more camera time.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Janine: But like, the thing that makes a player character interesting in the story is the thing that makes an npc interesting in the story, which is reacting to things that are happening and being a part of things that are happening. And if those characters are in place to respond in interesting ways, it'll come together. If a character— if a player character does nothing and never responds to anything, they are also not...they have no purpose in the story, you know?

Austin: [chuckles] Right. Right, yeah.

Janine: Like, if they're just there, it's the same thing. The other thing I would say is that the...in terms of getting hung up on "Make adults seem childish and short-sighted" as a thing...kind of that point was said earlier. That doesn't...you don't— that doesn't mean that they just have to be contrarian.

Austin: Right.

Janine: If...you know, if the game is setting them up as sort of they want the team and everyone else to have a kind of sort of adversarial relationship, there are a lot of ways to portray that. We never saw...when we played Masks, we never saw Chanti's mother on screen, but I think an example of this would be Chanti's mother, who knew about her powers, believing that her daughter should be an ornithologist. 'Cause Chanti could talk to birds, if you— for people who haven't hear Masks. **[Austin chuckles]** So, her mother was like, "Oh, well, you can talk to birds. You should go to school and learn about...and become a bird scientist." And Chanti was like, "Well, that's an incredibly terrible idea, because I can talk to birds, **[Austin chuckles]** so if we're super wrong about birds, how do I explain how I know all this based on talking to birds?" Like, it doesn't realistically bear out. And that's not her mom...being incompetent? That's her mom expressing the fact that she doesn't understand this experience.

Austin: Right.

Janine: She's outside of it. Her ideas about it are not super relevant. She's not being antagonistic or foolish or whatever, or incompetent, it's just, you know. And that's something that says something about both Chanti and her mom.

Austin: Right. And then, from there, you can take that disconnect and extend it into action. We haven't played more Masks, but like, I can ima— as you were talking, I was generating ideas. Like, how would I then use that relationship to put pressure on Chanti to have to make decisions? So it's like, what happens the day that Chanti comes home and her mom says, "Guess what? I got you into the ornithology department at Harvard. Like, I know you said you didn't want to go, but I submitted an application. I printed out one of your essays that you were really proud of." And like, okay—

Janine: They sent you a bird scholarship to bird school.

Austin: Right. They sent you a bird scholarship to bird school! That's exactly what it is! Exactly. [chuckles] And then, so, well, fuck! Well, now you have to take action in response to that. And that is not not action, it's definitely action, and it is childish and short-sighted. But it's not like incompetence, and it's not non-action. It's not like, "Well, that means they can't change the world," you know? So. So, yeah. That would be really fun and terrible. [**Janine** chuckles] Can't wait to one day revisit those characters.

Art: I'm excited to find out what "wrong about birds" looks like. [**Austin** and **Janine** laugh]

Austin: Uh, I have a new player character, and the only trait I'm bringing to the table is "wrong about birds." [**Jack** laughs] What's that mean? Well, let's find out together. I'll start with this. Doesn't know the different between a crow and a flamingo. *Really* wrong about birds. [**Janine** laughs]

Art: Whoa, that's pretty wrong!

Jack: Monumentally wrong.

Austin: I know! [chuckles]

Art: I'm interested in hearing about this character, though. [**Janine** chuckles]

Austin: Yeah, I'll bring him in. We'll figure it out. The seed of a character. [chuckles] Alright, last—

Art: How'd that even happen?

Austin: I— you know? [chuckles] Um, I don't have an answer. I'll figure it out. See, now you've given me a question, I'll go back into prep, and we'll figure it out. Alright. Last one comes in from Matthew, who says:

“In my current campaign, I have a player who, at the end of every session, voices an anxiety that they haven't been playing their character well. I'm the GM, and as far as I can tell, they're doing fine as I understand the character. I've already suggested listing character goals and guiding principles at the top of their sheet, which they did. However, the anxiety and the voicing of that anxiety continues. Is there anything you can think of that I could do to help? Again, as far as I can tell, they're doing a fine job roleplaying the character, but their anxiety is genuine.”

Austin: I'm curious...

Art: You can just @ me next time, I mean. [Austin and Janine laugh] We don't have to do this like this.

Austin: You do fine, Art! It's— you do great! I don't know why you always... [chuckles]

Art: I know, but I frequently end recording sessions like, “Oh, I fucked that up! This is...”

Janine: [overlapping] Same. I think a lot of us—

Art: “I've ruined this season, this session, the podcast.”

Austin: All of us, yeah.

Janine: Yeah.

Art: “We're all gonna be broke in the gutter.” [Austin chuckles]

Janine: I have a tweet about this.

Austin: You do. You do. [chuckles] It's a good tweet.

Janine: Maybe...I think the thing...like, I was the one who flagged this in the thing, as a thing we should probably answer. And I think what might be interesting is if we talked about what makes us...like, what is the source of us at the end saying “I don't feel good about that.” Like, for me, for example, it is often that I feel like I missed an opportunity. Like, either to be useful or for characterization. If I feel like I didn't a hundred percent get all of those and like pick up everything that was being put down, that's what makes me feel like I fucked up a session. So, you know, the sessions that I leave feeling best about are ones where I feel like I really did something with my character, and that I really understood everything that was happening, and

that I really contributed to everyone else's stories as much as my own. That statement's weird. That's kinda contradictory to stuff we normally say.

Austin: Eh.

Janine: But you know what I mean, in terms of like...it feels like I, you know, was part of what was going on and not just locked into my own path of it.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Janine: Or my own section of it. And when I feel bad, it's because I feel like I just didn't do any of that.

Austin: Yeah. Do you have techniques for addressing that? Now that you know that that is one of the kind of triggers of the anxiety?

Janine: Not really, 'cause a lot of it, for me, is I have a hard time, like...I lose track of the big picture a lot, I think, both in terms of what my character's goals are. Like I think I usually get their...I usually have their tone and their responses and stuff down, but in terms of like, what their alignment is and all this, I have to remind myself of that actively a lot. And so there's a lot of stuff where it just kind of feels like sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes I follow things well, and sometimes I get extremely lost. [chuckles] But I think...yeah, I think part of it is just being able to recognize if that's the problem with this anxious player, and being able to...I don't know, it's easier in terms of if it's an issue where they don't feel like they're contributing or they don't feel like they're doing what their character should be doing, because you can kind of help with that a little more, versus if the problem is that they aren't following the intricacies. That's harder to help with.

Austin: Yeah. For me, that is like...if you know that that is one of the things causing anxiety, slow down. Do more summaries, which is a thing we started doing in the middle of Twilight Mirage, where it was like, "Alright. Before we go further, here is everything that just happened."

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: "Let's try to break down, so that we're all on the same page. What was the big picture of that last sequence, you know? Where is everyone at now? You know, what are they working on?" definitely, definitely helped, I hope. Art, you just voiced that you definitely finish every session feeling this way.

Art: Not every session, but certainly many. Certainly every one where I've ever made like a big choice.

Austin: Sure. What has...why is it that those sessions that trigger it, and then, have you found some way of addressing that? Or, what has helped you address that anxiety?

[1:29:46]

Art: Um...the...I mean, one thing that...I think what causes the anxiety is this idea that like I've made a big choice, and it's wrecking the game for you or for other players, that I'm like, "Well, we're just gonna do what I want to do," and I'm just like pulling the wheel too hard? And, one, it usually helps that no one ever voices that opinion to me, [Austin and Jack laugh] which I feel like at this point, certainly they would.

Austin: Yeah, five years in, one of us...

Janine: I was gonna say, I've never, ever, ever, ever once felt that. [chuckles]

Austin: No, me either.

Janine: Or, it's never even occurred to me, partially. [Austin chuckles]

Art: And then there's like general performance anxiety. Like, oh, well, that was bad work and everyone will hate it. [Austin and Janine make protesting noises] And what's helped with that is: generally people don't! The positive response to late Twilight Mirage helped a lot, because that was when I thought I was most just like...off on an island setting things on fire by myself, and then people generally responded positively to it. [laughs]

Austin: [chuckles] They were like, "Yeah, Grand Magnificent's off on an island setting things to fire by himself, but he's doing it really well."

Jack: "This works."

Austin: Yeah. [laughs]

Art: Yeah.

Austin: Ahh.

Art: And part of it's never gonna go away, just because that's what performance is like. I've, you know...

Austin: Yeah.

Art: You step off the stage feeling shitty about what you just did, even if you got a standing ovation. And, you know, you probably— it's the same, you know, everything I've ever written that

I had to reread has been like, “Oh, what idiot wrote this?” [Austin laughs] And that’s only for a little while, right? And then, you know, six months later, you’re like, “I was a genius then, and now, *now*, I’m bad.” [Austin and Janine laugh]

Austin: Yeah, this is the worst.

Art: This is bad! Back then, I was brilliant! And I think it’s just like...you just have to let all of that go, because it’s just a bad part of your brain talking to you, you know?

Austin: [chuckles] Jack, I’m curious about you.

Jack: [overlapping] I think—

Austin: Yeah, go ahead.

Jack: I absolutely feel this. It’s been...actually, so, this is part of an answer, is like: it’s been really heartening hearing Janine and Art talk about these anxieties as well, ‘cause I’m like, “Oh, wow! I’m not the only person on Earth who is feeling this!” [Jack and Janine chuckle] Specifically about ending a recording and just going like, “Wow! Damn! Friends at the Table, it’s over! We screwed it up!” [Austin and Jack laugh] But I think, for me as well, and...again, this is speaking to my own anxiety, so I’m not sure to what extent it is helpful, but, for me at least, it kind of comes...it’s like in seasons. Not linked to the show, but I definitely have memories of working on Friends at the Table and being both substantially less and substantially more anxious than I am at any given moment.

Like, I remember, you know, certain periods of certain seasons, I remember being really very difficult. And I came away from them feeling like I wasn’t doing what I wanted, or I wasn’t picking up what people were putting down, or I was pulling the wheel too hard, or I performed badly. And then, there are definitely bits of seasons where I felt good about what I was playing with and what I was working on. And...I think part of the way that tabletop is structured where you sit down with a group of people, you know, semi-regularly, and work on a continued story, means that there are definitely going to be days where...and I’m not saying this in a sense where I’m like, “Oh, don’t worry, it’ll pass,” so much as the way the anxiety feels and the way that it lands and the way that I try and address it in myself varies depending on what I’m working on. Rather than it being the case where I’m just like, either I feel great all the time, or I get to the end of every...I can comfort myself by saying, “Well, hopefully I won’t feel like this in five or six months.”

Austin: Yeah. Yeah. Almost referenced something from the end of Evangelion, which I will not do. [chuckles] But go listen to the— if you go listen to the Waypoint episodes on Evangelion, I make a note about the depiction of anxiety and depression in the final episode of the regular show that speaks to the exact thing Jack just said, because of how true it felt to me, in terms of that feeling of like, “Well, right now I feel like shit. But, [Jack chuckles] there is the possibility...there’s the *possibility* that tomorrow, or three months from now, I will not.”

Jack: It's like, no feeling is final.

Austin: Right. Well, that is it, right?

Jack: Is a thing that KB says a lot.

Austin: And I think that is my advice to you as a GM, Matthew, is to make sure that when you have those conversations with the player that there does not feel like there's pressure on them to hide or negate that anxiety. Because that can make...that can just redouble it. The thing is that like...what we...playing games with other people can be an anxiety-inducing thing. And because anxiety—and mental health in general—is, like you said, Jack, ongoing. There's no final state. There's no—it's a process. It's an ongoing process. You can have someone who has an anxious reaction and who can have...who can process that on their own time, but if you pressure them to resolve it? That would be the thing that I feel like would be very risky and increase the degree of anxiety. I know, as a GM, for me, with y'all, I expect that when...I do expect, every season, for there to be kind of [chuckles] high anxiety moments.

And, as you say you do here, Matthew, you do check-ins with them, with your player, you make sure to give them tips about how to prioritize the stuff that you think— or, that they've told you can be anxiety-inducing for them and how to address it. It sounds like you're doing that stuff well already. And to some degree, while it is your job to check in on them as a GM and as a collaborator, what it is not your job to do is to like be demanding that they fit their response to your comfort, if that makes sense. And I'm not saying you're doing that, but I'm just, as a corrective, as a potential corrective to anyone listening who is like, "Well, am I doing enough? Am I doing enough? Am I doing enough?" And I'm only saying that because we've already had so many episodes where I've explained that like, you know, how important the conversation Ali and I had after the Hella, you know, evil conversation in the game happened. How important it was to talk to Janine, you know, after the early Veil arc where there was such a big disconnect that caused lots of anxiety.

Like, we should have those conversations. Those conversations are so, so, so important. But also, you are not...you have not been...no one has come to you and said, "And now you're my therapist. Help me work out this anxiety." And also, if they did...it is within your right to be like, "I'm happy to be your friend. [chuckles] I'm not a trained therapist. I don't want to give you bad advice," et cetera. So like, there is a degree to which I think recognizing the limits to what that relationship are is an important part of that process. And recognizing that anxiety is a thing that happens as part of these games, and that isn't a personal failure on you as the GM necessarily, especially if you're already taking these good steps that you've outlined here, and it's not a failure on the person who feels anxious. you know, that is a thing that happens. Like, I can't imagine playing something like the Feast of Patina—

Jack: [softly] Oh, Jesus.

Austin: And not feeling anxious afterwards. [**Austin** and **Janine** chuckle] You know what I mean? I'm happy we did it.

Jack: World's most horrible tabletop session.

Austin: But like— I'm so happy we did it. But also, [**Jack** chuckles] I don't know that I could move for a day. [chuckles] You know?

Jack: [faintly] No. Art and I...that ended Art and my friendship.

Austin: Was that it?

Art: Yeah. Uh huh. [**Janine** laughs]

Austin: That was the end.

Jack: Oh, yeah. Mm-hmm.

Austin: Is that why Art is now fluttering around your Season 6 character like a moth?

Jack: [laughs] Oh, god.

Austin: I tease. I think that that's all I have on this stuff. Uh, Matthew in the— is in the chat, actually, and adds, "This was a while ago. We ended the campaign last week with a big finale that included this player having us go back and rewrite a scene after a break to better reflect their character." That's awesome. And that definitely speaks to what we were talking about before, about like nothing is permanent in these games. Like, character— player comfort should definitely take priority. So. So, yeah. God, is there anything else on this one?

Art: And we rerecorded a scene from the end of the Spring finale, because I—

Austin: Oh, yeah.

Art: Thought I did a bad job of that. And it was the right call.

Austin: It was the right call. We absolutely did that, and it was the right call. And it was because you were not happy with it, so like, yeah, do it. I mean, you know, we recorded the first episode of Twilight Mirage twice. [chuckles] So, like, you gotta be willing to take your player comfort—

Jack: There's precedent here.

Austin: There is precedent, yeah, absolutely. And like, that is...player comfort, finding the right tone for your game, being able to talk at that meta level. Like that, for me, the number one thing that has helped me as a GM is being able to talk as a storyteller but also as a collaborator and as like a table...as like a showrunner but also as like a person in the room who is an organizer. And so being able to not just say, “Hey, did you like how the *story* went?” [chuckles] but also, “Hey, is this system working?” is...like, “Hey, I noticed that, you know, we had a lot of failures in a row, and that was a fucking bummer. Is there some way we can talk about how to revise your character sheet?” or “Is there like a situation that hasn’t come up that would be exciting?” You know, stuff like that ends up being so important, because it isn’t just...when I was a GM in college, like the only thing I talked about off— not off-mic, but away from the table, was like, “What do you want to do when you level up?” [chuckles] and “Do you have a good idea for a scene in the next epis—” or the next rec— you know, not recording session, not episode. The next, like tabletop session. And that was it. There was very little “Hey, did you feel like you got enough time, you know, to show off that session? Do you feel like I put too much on you?” And, again, I don’t want to— I’m not advising that you batter your players with questions. [chuckles] But if you’re paying attention, you can tell. Or, I’ve been able to tell when like, ooh, someone is not having fun in this moment. How do I either adjust going forward or talk to them about how to best adjust going forward? Or get confirmation that the thing I’m reading is actually a real thing, versus me being anxious? Because GM anxiety is also very much a real thing, [chuckles] so. So, yeah. If there’s nothing else, we can end the show. Remember, you can send your questions to tipsatthetable@gmail.com. We are now caught up on Tips at the Table, so the next one will be in November. I know that November starts in three days. [**Austin** and **Jack** laugh] But, you know, we’re currently in the process of catching up on all of our Patreon stuff. There will be Bluffs coming out pretty rapidly over the next few...months? Next couple of months, at least. We’re two...

Art: We should have three months of log, right?

Austin: Mmm...

Art: At this point?

Austin: It’s— we’re putting—

Art: One and two are done?

Austin: We’re putting them out more quickly than that.

Art: Oh, well then...

Austin: Because we’re so far back on them that we’re trying to catch up. So people will— should look forward to more Bluff City very soon. [chuckles] We have two full arcs recorded at this point. I think each of them is gonna end up being three episodes each, instead of the

normal two, because they went long. So, you have a lot of episodes of Bluff coming. And then, we'll do another Live sometime soon, to continue trying to catch up on those. I'll have one more Drawing Maps episode, at least part of this pre-PARTIZAN stuff. And that should be either this weekend or next weekend. Are there any other things en route? I don't think, for sure. So I'm gonna not make any promises. [chuckles] I hope everyone has a great night. If you wanted to change your support level or you want to check out some of the stuff we talked about in terms of being in the Pusher level or anything like that, you can do that by going to friendsatthetable.cash. I just remembered I am gonna do an updated Mapmaker thing for...I lost connection! I lost connection. That's very funny. Well, I'm gonna end speaking into the microphone, and we're just gonna cut it anyway. That was very funny. Um. I was gonna say there's a Mapmaker update for Armour Astir also coming soon. Hopefully this week. I'm just saying this to myself now, because I've lost connection to the internet, but that's okay! Who cares. Let's call it there. [chuckles] Have a good night, everybody. Peace.