Tips at the Table - Flawless Combination of Words (March 2018)

AUSTIN: Welcome to Tips at the Table, a Q&A podcast, focused on critical questions from you, hopefully smart answers from us, and fun interaction between good friends. I'm your host, Austin Walker. Joining me today, Art Martinez Tebbel.

ART: Hey, I'm on Twitter @atebbel.

AUSTIN: Jack de Quidt.

JACK: Hi, I'm on Twitter @notquitereal, and you can buy any of the music featured on the show at notquitereal.bandcamp.com.

AUSTIN: Janine Hawkins.

JANINE: I am @bleatingheart on Twitter.

AUSTIN: And me, Austin Walker again. I'm on Twitter @austin_walker. You can support the show at friendsatthetable.cash. Uh, what else? Um, I think those are the big ones. Today, we got some good questions… Just jump into them I think maybe. And no other real announcements I think. So, lets just dig in. This one comes from Kasey, who says: '**Hello friends, do y'all have thoughts on how to avoid the 'arms race' campaigns without resetting the campaign? I'm starting a Masks campaign with friends, and I want it to last as long as it logically can before we run into a Dragon Ball Z or Bleach situation, where the villains are seemingly unbeatable but slightly stronger than the last seemingly unbeatable characters. I know the obvious answer is 'don't make everything fights', but I feel like a huge part of… a huge part of the superhero genre is making abstract fights into physical fights and upping the scale of normal live. Also my players have made very strong characters and have, in the past, showed a tendency to punch through solutions instead of talking them through**.' Anyone have thoughts here, about this?

ART: I mean, the thing that jumps out to me is that Superman is a very powerful superhero and they have been doing comics for him for like, 80 years now.

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: Like, it isn't… you have to like make them go wide. Like, there's always the door that you can't punch down, right?

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.

ART: Um, that works… You know, I think that works best in superheroes, like I think superheroes is built into it in a way. I think, you know, D&D is very much like 'Well, you're level 10 now-

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: - You fight…' I don't know what a level 10 D&D character should be fighting.

AUSTIN: A big orc. A big one.

ART: A big, big orc. You were, you went from goblins to regular orcs to big orcs, and in five levels-

JACK: Tall orc.

ART: - And in five levels, it'll be giant orcs.

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: Until you hit level 20 and you fight the biggest orc there is and you retire.

AUSTIN: Right. Uh, well, I mean, that's actually the answer to some degree, right? Is, for me, Masks is a Powered by the Apocalypse, uh, superhero game. It's not one I've run, but it's one I've read. And, you know, there's a point at which, you should make it… I have one solution, this is not every solution but, like most PbtA games, one of your, uh, advancements, one of your higher, your second-tier level of advances is 'retire from the life of being a superhero, go off and become somebody else.' Uh, and you should make that attractive, right? You know, superheroes- superheroics are dangerous to you and to other people and there are ways to tell those sorts of stories such that you can continue being like, a superhero somewhere else, or you can become a scientist, or you can become, you know, a, someone who is in a leadership position but maybe not on the front lines anymore. And that isn't necessarily resetting the campaign, right? You can have this sprawling game where you begin as, like, 'Oh, this character is basically Superboy, and then becomes kind of a Superman figure. And then goes off to be part of the Justice League. But you're still focused on this city, you're still focused on what's happening here. And so, like, that's one way to do it, right? Is to graduate those characters away. Um, the other for me is just like, think about… Instead of thinking about increasing difficulty of villains, think about what the… shifting where the… what is at stake at the different levels of villainy. The thing that, for me, that separates a rogues gallery from like, the chucklehead villain to the one who is deeply threatening isn't just like 'this one punches harder.' It's what they can… what they can put at risk. Both physically and, and metaphysically and metaphorically. So like, Spider-Man fights a lot of villains who rob banks, you know? Uh, Rhino robs a lot of banks and then Spider-Man goes like 'Hey, it's me, Spider-Man! Like, stop it, Rhino!' you know? 'Time out!' or whatever. Classic Spider-Man catch phrase.

[Art laughs]

AUSTIN: And Rhino rarely puts… puts, uh, Spider-Man in a place of, like, um, kind of repose. He's never like 'Uh-oh! I have to think through who I am as a character!' Maybe even a better example here is Daredevil, because I know where this goes. You know, like, eventually Daredevil fights Kingpin. And Kingpin says like: 'Oh, we're the same character. Oh, actually we're both just trying to take care of our own.' And Daredevil has to confront this, and that ends up pushing Daredevil to the edge.

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN: And there's lots of character in between those spaces, right? And so, between 'this person robs a bank' and 'this person threatens a neighbourhood' and 'this person threatens a city' and 'this person threatens, you know, the country and millions of people' and 'this person threatens reality itself', there's also a scale between like, 'Hey, this person helps you solidify who you are as a superhero', 'this person, you know, puts your friends and family at risk,' 'this person makes you doubt wanting to be what you are, or calls it into question'. And the scale should go that way too, and that… that can go up, you know, pretty high without, uh, it just being numbers going up. That's about character development and kind of holding some cards so that you can bring them into play later.

ART: Well, there's also, like, there's also 'Dr. Octopus robs a bank' and there's also 'Dr. Octopus marries Aunt May'.

AUSTIN: Right. [chuckles] Is that a thing that happens?

ART: Yeah, I don't know if they actually got married but they definitely got engaged.

JANINE: I think that was a cover. I think I remember seeing that as a cover or something-

AUSTIN: Oh boy.

JANINE: - floating around. Um, I was gonna say that, like, a lot of this is also, um, can also be a language thing.

AUSTIN: Mm.

JANINE: Kind of connecting to what you were saying Austin, of just like, the example I think about here, because [chuckles] I've been listening to people who are watching Dragon Ball Z-

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: - is, uh, one of the things I think is a big narrative flaw in Dragon Ball Z is how often they say: 'This is the strongest thing we've ever gone up against!

[Austin laughs]

JANINE: And then every few episodes, they repeat that about a different thing, and that leads to something that feels weaker, um, and that feels repetitive and feels, I think like what this question asker is trying to avoid. And, I think what Austin said, don't just focus on the numbers. Don't just focus on 'this person is... This enemy is the strongest one we've ever faced' because that does get old. Like, there are other things to be afraid of other than just like, power.

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.

JANINE: Um, there are other things to motivate you other than… Like, outside of the desire to defeat a strong guy.

AUSTIN: Right. And there are threats that have nothing to do with someone being able to fight you.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And I know that, you know, Kasey has said that, that their players have made very strong characters and have shown a tendency to punch through solutions. Find out what they won't punch. They probably won't punch politicians who want to regulate their powers, right? They probably won't punch… like, children. Or, people who are disappointed in them. Who they love…

[Art chuckles]

AUSTIN: Maybe they will. Maybe they will, and in which case, especially with Masks which is a game about, like, what it means to be a hero…

JANINE: Yeah…

AUSTIN: Maybe that's a group that is just interested in playing a kind of hack n slash D&D game.

JANINE: …If they really like fighting. If what they're there for is the fighting-

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: - then, you know, there are ways to twist that without taking it away. But also, I understand the desire to not take it away, like if they have responded really well to 'this is the strongest guy ever', um, and you still want to change things up, then I… There are things you can do with fighting that aren't just 'we have to fight the big guy'.

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And one thing to do here is to look at, to look at comics directly, at this. Like Art says, they've been writing Superman for a long time. But like, a lot of times, Superman's hit a brick wall. You know, what happened with the Man of Tomorrow, or even look at the 'Who killed Superman' arc with like hey, this isn't perfect by any means but this is a time at which Superman is a character is so powerful that, that what follows from it… part of what's interesting isn't just 'he fights someone else who's really strong'. It's that the world has to deal with the fact that maybe Superman can be beaten. Don't be afraid to throw something really really really powerful at them and have them have to figure out, like, 'what's it mean if there isn't a degree to which we can become so strong that we can win?' You know? There is something powerful in that that could maybe become its own interesting, kind of campaign arc.

ART: I would like to shout out Nick? – I think it's pronounced Nick in the chat – that, the cover for the episode where… the issue where Dr. Octopus tries to marry Aunt May, uh, that says 'With this ring, I thee web.'

[Everyone recoils]

JACK: Oh my god.

AUSTIN: Fucking god.

JACK: Wait, why did he-

AUSTIN: Jack,

JACK: Why did he say that? He's not the spider.

ART: No, the cover says it. The cover is, uh, the great chorus of…

JACK: Oh right, okay, I see. Right, that makes sense. The other thing is that like, I think, that there's a… definitely have a tendency sometimes when I think about these sorts of situations, and especially when I think about superheroes, of positioning villains, or positioning threats, as some sort of, cue. Some sort of a line.

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.

JACK: Um, of saying 'the villain approaches the front of the line to get beat up, and then you beat them up.' And something that I think that… the freedom that this sort of storytelling lets you do is create a sort of a pool, sort of a pallet of, of people to beat up.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: And in the same way that what… when we're… by the time we get into the middle of a season of Friends at the Table, there's like a laundry list of people we could beat up if we wanted to-

[Laughter]

JACK: -but we don't. You know, we didn't get halfway through COUNTER/Weight and go 'Now we shall fight Rigour. Let us go!'

[Austin laughs]

JACK: Because we'd have gotten completely pounded to the ground!

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: And that's fine. That ties in with what you were talking about, Austin, right? Of like, throw villains at your players who will absolutely destroy them and communicate to them that they will absolutely destroy them.

AUSTIN: Yep.

JACK: Uh you know, you don't have to wait for the… you don't have to create a queue of increasingly punchable villains.

AUSTIN: Well, the other thing that happens in comics is, there are… You kind of hit at this, that there are recurring villains, and sometimes you get the story where the character is like, a pushover, and sometimes they come back later and they're not a pushover. Or vice versa. You have the character who is like a joke character, or who is presented as being a super-powerful, like incredible… the centre of an on-going arc. And then later, it opens with your characters just knocking them the fuck out.

JACK: Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Like the first panel is, Spider-Man tying up Mysterio even though this time last year there was an eight, uh, issue run of Mysterio's greatest plan and, you know, that's the other thing here – there might not be anything wrong with having a team that can just win fights. Like, that might help you decentre the fighting from the thing, and look at their moves, right? Because Masks moves are partially about fighting, obviously, right? But they're also about being like spotted as a delinquent or like having your mask, having your identity being seen through, or saving people, and saving people from, uh, a natural disaster is not the same thing as punching

something really hard. So think about that. And maybe another one here is – If you get a chance – I wrote a lot about the, um, kind of the kinetic feel of Into the Breach over at Waypoint recently. And how about the thing that I love about that is that it captures the kind of physical choreography of mech shows. Think about that with comics, because most fights in comics aren't 'we exchange blows until your HP drops'. Um, I mean, that's like, the Doomsday fight with Superman becomes that, and that ends up being so scary because of that, almost. Like 'wow, Superman is just punching this thing over and over and nothing is working. They're just down to throwing blows at each other.' But by and large, superheroes – superheroics – have a kind of kinetic choreography also, where it is about like 'stopping the girder from falling on the bus' or 'stopping the bus from falling on the bigger bus' [chuckles] or 'stopping the bigger bus from falling off of a bridge', right?

ART: Hey man, what comics are you reading?

AUSTIN: Uh, a lot of Bus Saver. Bus Savers' Incorporated.

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: BSI

JACK: That's what that was.

AUSTIN: Yeah, it's pretty good.

JACK: Bryan Lee O'Malley.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah, of course. And uh… Yeah, that's the thing. Because think about like, think about challenges maybe. Even more than villains. Um, think about what villains can do to put people into situations that they have to stop, without… like, knocking out the villain is not always the hardest part; stopping whatever the plan is that's been put into motion can be. Um, any other thoughts on this before we move on?

JANINE: Um, one last thing I'd say is like, another things that comics often do, to the point that like, I think it's rightly made fun of a lot, but is still useful, is they do a lot of like, they sometimes focus on side characters or they sometimes focus on spinning things out or doing alternate universe things or little like, twists that are kind of, you know, to someone who is only interested in the core canon, a throwaway. But like, you get your Jimmy Olsens and your Lois Lanes and your, like, what's that? Red Sun, and like all this… There's a lot of stuff that, if your players are open to it, you can maybe kind of, experiment with what these characters are without actually affecting the core campaign. You can just kind of… you know, it depends on if they're into that-

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: - but like, that's a good way to break things up if you feel that there's a monotonous pattern forming.

AUSTIN: There's another thing here that I, building on that, which is like, maybe pushing that to the extreme and considering: 'why do you want it to last as long as it logically can?'

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Like, it is – and I'm not dissing Kasey for this in any way – but, like spend some time... There's a valid reason for it which 'oh, we don't enjoy…' There are lots of valid reasons. One of them might be: 'I don't enjoy doing world building and character generation. I don't like starting over. I enjoy the… what we like is getting up to those higher levels.' And if that the case, then totally, awesome. But, consider what you could get out of, again, like a Bluff City style structure, where you are jumping from character to character. Where you are ending a campaign when it makes sense to. You know, don't do the American television thing of stretching out a show for 8 seasons when it only really has 4 or 5 in it. And then moving on, and trying a new game, or starting a new game of Masks, where people roll out new characters and maybe it's in the same world, and maybe it isn't – maybe you start a completely new world, where the tone shift from being like the Marvel Cinematic Universe to being like, Dragon Ball Z, or more like, uh, Golden Age DC Comics or something, right? There's a lot of wriggle room to keep having fun where like, if you are saying goodbye to characters. Um, and I get – I can be hard to do that. I totally get it, and I'm definitely showing my own personal bias, of enjoying starting new stories a lot, and also enjoying ending them. Um, but… have a kind of like 'Oh, that was that thing. We finished it. We put it on the shelf. But… think about it! It's a hard thing to do because I think the default position in tabletop games is the like, 'this is my five-year campaign, and we've been doing it non-stop.' Um, but most Powered by the Apocalypse games are actually not super built for that. They're not like D&D or Burning Wheel or Pathfinder, which can really support that kind of on going, forever, everplay. But, um, you know, think through it. Uh, alright. Next one. This one comes in from Tim H., who says: '**Jack, your music has absolutely improved over the years. Still, I think there's something magical about the piano of Season 1. That music is what I hum to myself to help deal with anxiety and I love it. Do you think you'd go back to the simplicity of the breaking waves and lonely piano, or – like Austin's storytelling ambitions – will the music continue to increase in complexity over time? Love the show, Tim H**.'

JACK: Uhh…

AUSTIN: Good response. Good start.

JACK: I'm glad. I'm glad that my music has improved over the years, because it's also hopefully improved over the years before we did the podcast.

AUSTIN: Mm, fair. [laughing] Yes.

JACK: I was really bad at the piano for a very long time. Uh, and I still can't play my scales very well

[Austin chuckles]

JACK: But, in terms of talking about, the complexity of it, it is… it's been becoming really clear to me as we've been broadening the pallet of the musical styles on the show, how important it is not to kind of get sucked into this fairly insidious desire to keep trying to... to one up myself.

AUSTIN: Mmm.

JACK: Um, or, that's not even fair. I think, whenever you make something, you want to try and make it better than the thing you made before.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: But, sometimes with music, and especially with the way we produce the music on the show, with these very tight deadlines, um, and these very like, intense periods of work… Um, it's sometimes easy to fall into the trap of thinking that 'the way you do better than you did before is you make it more.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm

JACK: You make it… you make more tracks. You make more intricate stuff. You do weirder things, um, and Twilight Mirage has been great fun and I… This isn't a screw up [???] Twilight Mirage. My goal has always been to try and make Twilight Mirage complex and-

AUSTIN: Mm

JACK: - noisy and big and weird. But, if I go back to Hieron, especially for the last time, and it sounds as big and weird and complex as Twilight Mirage-

[Austin laughs]

JACK: - that would be a colossal failure.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: And I think that would be easier to do than I'm probably letting on. Something like Marielda is big and complex. I would be fun to go back to Hieron and say: 'I'm gonna make it sound really really massive!' But it… ideally I want Spring to sound even sparser than, than Winter.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: It should be barely there. Like really small and really sparse.

AUSTIN: What do you think Winter would have sounded like if you hadn't had that transitional period of Marielda, coming off of COUNTER/Weight, which, by the end, was getting layered because we had motifs that we could call back to – not that we didn't have motifs in… I mean, you know, uh, Autumn in Hieron has two songs-

JACK: Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: And so we went into COUNTER/Weight and then, by the end of COUNTER/Weight, you had built a system of motifs and callbacks and little hidden, you know, um, not even hidden, right? But, things like the Rigour sound that appears again and again in different ways. If you'd gone right from that, back to Winter, do you think Winter would have come off more complex, uh, or do you think you would have been able to like, stop that?

JACK: I don't know. Especially because there's a… I'm really happy that we work with this kind of motif system because it lends itself quite naturally to the way the podcast works.

 AUSTIN: Mmm.

JACK: But, I'm always worried that it ends up feeling like a greatest hits collection. That it feels like, like the comic book team-up, where all your favourite heroes team up together-

[Austin laughs]

JACK: -and you're like 'oh god, they're playing the Marielda theme again!' Um, so I think that without developing the motif structure, Winter would have sounded less focused.

AUSTIN: Mm

JACK: There would have been more disparate themes. It would probably have sounded, um, like a lot of rearrangements of just what we had in Autumn.

AUSTIN: Yeah

JACK: But knowing that we wanted to do this motif structure again, and coming off Marielda which gave us all of the gods' themes, which turned out was really important in Winter.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Uh-huh!

JACK: It meant that we could go into Winter like, with some idea of where we were going. The motifs, though, is part of the problem with of something to keep in mind with Spring, right? Is like… [sighs] I could just… We could go into Spring and I could just write a bunch of… bring the motifs back.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: And that's not interesting composing. That's not fun composing.

AUSTIN: There's a way to be workmanlike about it, or like, or there's… There can be an effect from that sort of stuff, right? Like, we-

JACK: Oh, yeah, totally!

AUSTIN: - You and I had a lot of conversations going into Winter, um, which was the first time that we were returning to a specific show. Like, obviously Marielda, we had some major story stuff laid out. But you were playing in, you know, 90% of Marielda so I wasn't going to tell you that stuff. And, uh, and unlike Marielda, Hieron was a return to certain characters, right? It was the first time we were returning to a specific time and place, and a specific setting. And so like, two things that we had, that I think about in prepping for Hieron were… I told you very early about some big things that I knew you wouldn't be part of, right?

JACK: Mm

AUSTIN: Like, you weren't gonna be part of the Buoy and, kind of, the, um, strata and lamina stuff. The kind of dwarven area. And so, you I talk about that kind of a lot, very early.

JACK: Oh yeah.

AUSTIN: Like, during Marielda still. To get the gears turning there. Um, and then the other… So, there were a couple of other things like that, right? Um, that were big picture things. But, not necessarily, not twists so much as like 'Oh, this is Arrell – he's going to be sort of this arrogant wizard character.'

JACK: Yeah, yeah!

AUSTIN: You're reading about him in the intro, or in the descriptions. Um, he's gonna need a theme. Here some stuff…

JACK: Which he didn't end up getting in the end.

AUSTIN: No, no, and I think we may have used that as a… as a Pusher backer maybe. I don't know.

JACK: Yeah, the pusher people got Arrell's theme.

AUSTIN: Yeah, I think that that's true. Um, but there are other times where like, everyone here, everyone on this call actually had the Benjamin talk together which is like, what are we doing with Benjamin? Uh, and that was when we were all in LA for your wedding, Art.

JANINE: You had the fucking umami burger.

AUSTIN: And, we had an umami burger. That's true

ART: Yeah, at the Grove, yeah.

AUSTIN: And Ali was there too. At the Grove, yeah! And like, that was another situation where it was like: 'okay, we're going to be doing this in a few months and we hadn't… or weeks or whatever… and we hadn't recorded it yet. We were figuring out what that looked like. And you were able to kind of sit on that and kind of come to something there, which then still reflected the scene but like, you could start thinking about Hadrian, and about Benjamin, and about Rosanna.

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: But uh, the other thing – and this is the actual more interesting thing – is, I think, before that season, coming off of COUNTER/Weight, I was definitely interested in, um… Coming off of COUNTER/Weight, I was coming off of a lot of great music from you that backed my words, which meant that I was able to say things that had emotional weight, supported by the music. And that, when we got back to Hieron – the same thing with Marielda. Marielda especially, right? Marielda was filled with music in terms of like music – new music per minute. In terms of like, intensity-

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: - the only time we've gotten more is in This Year of Ours' kind of run. But Marielda, it's like, you know fourteen episodes or whatever and there's eight tracks? Ten tracks or something, right? Um, so then we came back to Winter and I was like, immediately – I felt naked. And I felt like 'Oh my god, I need music!' And one of the things that I really wanted was… Not really wanted, but one of the things that we talked about was like, 'oh, could we do scene transition music? Was there a way to kind of play with some of that stuff?' And you were like 'Well, no. Because every scene would need new transition music.' And I was like 'But, well, TV does with just interstitial music'-

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: -like, and it does! You turn on the TV right now, and you go and watch Scandal, there's a theme that plays whenever there's a sad theme, or whenever there's a sequence that seems like, you know, tense and it's going to commercial break or – does Scandal have commercial breaks? What channel is Scandal on?

ART: Yeah, Scandal's on ABC.

AUSTIN: I just pulled a name... Ok, I thought so, but you know what I'm saying right? Like, television does have those interstitial things between sequences, and between… and like, going to commercial breaks. And one of the things that you said Jack was like 'well this is just not that medium,' right? Like, to return to literally the same piece of music multiple times would be to diminish it, and also to cash in the ability for that motif to used in a major way down the road.

JACK: Yeah. Yeah! I'm very adamant that we don't repeat music. Or, we don't… we don't drop tracks in, other than the themes.

AUSTIN: The main themes, yeah.

JACK: And in part, that's through this bullish thing that like, 'Well, we can just make more!' Um, but that's A: unsustainable, but the reason that I'm particularly, um, not into us just straight-up just reusing music is because – you're right, it robs the motif work that we could do. Um, because we have played the Hieron theme in a bunch of different contexts-

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: - and in a bunch of different… Like, I have rearranged that theme maybe like 9 or 10 times now. And it's been different and we've used it differently each time and, at the same time, in Twilight Mirage, the first Twilight Mirage theme has popped up again and again in a bunch of different ways. And if, every time we did that, instead we just played the Twilight Mirage theme-

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: - all you'd have would be like 'oh, yeah, that's the, yeah. That's the theme.'

AUSTIN: There's the opposite there too, which is like… There was a time when I wanted to use the, uh, Sleep Detachment related to a thing that had to do with the New Earth Hegemony and you were like 'No, the Twilight Mirage theme has it in it already.' Not the actual theme, that doesn't have- that didn't have Sleep Detachment in it, but it did have what the scene needed. Like, trust that that theme… that you don't need the explicit connection to the New Earth Hegemony to find the emotional core of what this sequence is.

JACK: Yes.

AUSTIN: This is for Declan's Corrective's first poem reading. Um, this is a thing I should put up on the Pusher level also, at some point, is just like I have a test run of what that sounds like with Sleep Detachment-

JACK: With Sleep Detachment

AUSTIN: - under it. Yeah, and it sounds cool but it totally. Now that we are six weeks, six months later, being able to pull on element so Sleep Detachment in other sequences instead made those so much more powerful. And it's one of those things where it's like; know when to use… Be limited on the reuse, but also know that when you build that first core structure of the main theme, that it's actually very flexible. It's very… It has a lot it can do.

JACK: That's why the Bluff City… Bluff City doesn't have a solid theme but it does have a cue of like four notes-

AUSTIN: Mm.

JACK: - that show up in every track. Uh, and that's just to make that as absolutely flexible as I can, right?

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: Because you can do a bazillion things with four notes that you couldn't do quite as easily with like, a full theme.

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: Especially because we knew we'd need to have to be doing that in a bunch of different styles. But yeah, I think that the… the short easy answer is: 'Spring is gonna get really, really small. And really paired down. But, it's important for me to remember that complexity doesn't have to equal more instruments and more instrumentation.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm

ART: Hey, um, I don't get a lot of chance to really get into the nitty-gritty of the music here, so I have an idea-

JACK: Oh yeah? No, go ahead.

ART: - based on this conversation that I'd really like to make sure we talk about.

JACK: Mm-hm?

ART: Have you thought about just sitting down and recording like two hours of like, Seinfeldy music?

JACK: [laughs]

ART: And then we can use that for the transitions.

AUSTIN: Oh my god.

ART: Like, you can do just do like… 'Cause it wouldn't be reusing it. You can just use a-

AUSTIN: Can you give me a…

ART: - different thirty seconds of-

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: - like bow-bow-bum-da-bum-bum-bum.

JACK: [laughs]

AUSTIN: Well we are about to do that TV show. We're supposed to do Primetime Adventures soon, so…

JACK: Oh god.

AUSTIN: Jack I'm gonna need, I'm gonna need… You know what, let's do four hours – let's double Art's request – four hours of just-

JACK: Just four hours.

AUSTIN: - interstitials. Various instrumentation.

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: Because, we're gonna have a bunch, you know? So, maybe there's gonna be a sequence where we're gonna be, like, what if the aliens go to Medieval Times, and we need the same one but in like a harpsichord.

JACK: Yeah, like a harpsichord.

AUSTIN: You know, like a medieval harpsichord? [laughs]

JACK: Yeah, like the harpsichord that they had the ability to create.

AUSTIN: The King Arthur's Harpsichord.

ART: Mmm.

AUSTIN: Classic, uh, Umberto Eco novel. Alright, we're gonna go to the next question unless someone else has music thoughts. None? Okay.

JACK: Let's do it.

AUSTIN: There are two here. One here from Keita, who I am pretty sure is not Keita Takahashi, who we were dragging in the pre-show. Pretty sure a different Keita.

ART: I hope not.

JANINE: If so, very sorry. It was a beautiful park idea. It was a beautiful vision.

[Austin laughing]

ART: It's really embarrassing.

JACK: Also your game design is incredible.

AUSTIN: Really fantastic. I can not wait for Wattam.

JANINE: Love the soapy trampolines. Love the… big space… the space wife.

ART: Big girder? What was it? -

JACK: Sorry? –

ART: - Big ??? (unclear)

JACK: - Space wife?

AUSTIN: Friends at the Table season 7, featuring Big Girder and Space Wife. Can't wait.

[Janine laughing]

AUSTIN: Um, so there's two questions here but they have an overlap, so I put them in the same screen. One from Keita, one from Angelina. Keita says: '**I'm trying to figure out a way to draw a world that feels lived in and populated while leaving blank spaces and plenty of room to**

explore. Trying to find a middle ground between both of those things is something I found quite daunting. How big of an overworld map is too big? I've also been trying to do all this with my pretty limited art abilities.' Same, so do not even worry.

[Art laughs]

AUSTIN: Angelina says: '**So, every time I have to make a map for Dungeon World, I literally sit there and stare at the screen, and then I go: 'I mean, a hotel I guess? I guess there's probably a market? Honestly, I don't know what to do because while I feel very comfortable about visually describing what places look like, I'm just not a city planner. I don't even know how cities, or even towns, are supposed to work. Is there any way to make this process more interesting? Best, Angelina**.' Um, any thoughts here? Janine, I know you do a lot of maps for us.

JANINE: I 100% have some thoughts here. Um, for the first one, my thoughts immediately go to when we had those first conversations – before I was even on the podcast – about the Hieron map-

AUSTIN: Oh yeah, I forgot about these.

JANINE: - And then, about the map of Velas, and those things of like, I remember the first… [laughs] I still don't like the Hieron map because I think it looks really bizarre.

AUSTIN: Huh.

JANINE: I think it looks really bizarrely… It looks like… top-heavy, kind of? I don't know. It's just, there's so much empty space on that map that, to me, it doesn't look like a finished map, which is the point really.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: But at the time, it was very much like the things you knew and told me to place were like: 'Okay, we know there's a city here. We know what this island is called. Um, we know there like a university or some shit and then there's like a forest-

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.

JANINE: - and some like hobbity types-

AUSTIN: [laughs] 'hobbity types'.

JANINE: - and then there's all these weird symbols. Do you have a bunch of weird symbols you can just put here? I don't know, those look, yeah, put them in these exact places. Uh, this whole

area, empty? I don't know. Whatever. Also, there's a big scar here. Good job.' Like, it was a very weird conversation.

AUSTIN: It worked, in the end.

JANINE: It did. It did totally work. And like, that's an overworld map with a lot of big blank spaces. And even within those filled in things, like, you know, Ordenna is filled in there. Velas is marked on there.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: The University is marked on there. Rosemarrow is marked on there, but like, [laughs] based, you know… based on marking where Rosemarrow is, versus you know, 'we've been to Rosemarrow now'

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: We know a lot more about Rosemarrow than, I guess, most of us probably knew back when, you know, it was first appearing on that map. Um…

AUSTIN: Right. I've brought also up, I've brought up both of those maps including the… the original… Like, the one that we did on our weird drawing programme-

JANINE: Mm-hmm.

AUSTIN: - Our weird shared drawing programme and then the one that you built from that. Whew. One: you did a very good job, because this is bad. This first one we did-

[Janine laughs]

AUSTIN: - Not great. I'm not gonna lie. Um, but what's weird about this is there's a lot of these things that, even now, going into the final season of that show in a couple of… In a few months, probably not a couple months; probably more than two months. Uhh, I can firmly say… Because I think we have [chuckles] another month of recording Twilight Mirage still to go before we even get to a billion other things. Um, there's a lot here that would still be empty, right?

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: Um, we know vaguely… I know where that… I know what Marielda is now, for instance. I know what that bridge is. I know we talked vaguely about what's happening up in the North-East a little bit, but like this whole spot in the bottom West. Like, vague idea? South-East? Who knows, right?

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Like, lots of empty spaces. Um, which maybe speaks a little bit to the question which is like: Uh, that middle ground is… what are the things that are so big that your characters would have to know them, right? Would have to have heard of them. People in Velas know what the University is, even if they don't know anything about magic. They're like 'Oh yeah, there's that big university area that's all far away. I'm never fucking going there. But, but that's where it is.' I know where Rosemarrow is. I know where the New Archives are.

JANINE: That was the thing with that map too. Remember I asked about, you know, that map has like six or seven different fonts on it because the idea was that there was… that they had a map sort of.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE - pseudo-fictionally. They had a map, but everyone had planted their like: 'well, I'm from Ordenna, I'm gonna write Ordenna here-

AUSTIN: Right, right.

JANINE: - You know, I'm from the… You know, that's not canon or anything but that was why it's all those different fonts and all those-

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: - different styles mooshed together.

AUSTIN: Right, so that would be like Hella and then Hadrian at Velas-

JANINE: Mm-hm

AUSTIN: And then, Lem at the New Archives, and Phantasmo at the Lost, or Last University. We never really picked one.

JANINE: It's just a bunch of people gathering round a map-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: - and saying like: 'this is what we know about this world.'

AUSTIN: Right. Totally.

JANINE: 'I heard there's a bridge down here. I don't know.'

AUSTIN: 'I don't know!' Exactly! The end. And there are these weird symbols. Cool. Great. Why not? Um, yeah, so I think that's one way to think about it is like, what could they not… what could they not not know? Put that stuff on the map for a start, because that's the stuff that will help be the frame of your story. Like, even if all they know is: 'Oh yeah, and there's a militaristic empire over here.' Like, 'alright, put that on the map. You don't need to know where their cities are. You don't need to know what the capital of those places are, what the names of all of the city states inside of that massive empire are, right? But what you do need to know is: 'Hey, there is this thing here. Like, there is a big thing over there that is on the Western border or whatever. And that will help, kind of, frame and ground a lot of what's around. Do you have any answer for that second question? About being… About not being a city planner?

JANINE: Um, this is also… I think is an answer to both of like… don't get like really… Don't let the weeds kind of, drag you down. Like, don't get too deep into the weeds.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: I remember especially with the Velas map. To a lesser extent the Marielda map because going into the Marielda map, I kind of… like, I was already familiar with that space too, at that point.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: But with the Velas map, I didn't know really anything about Velas and I was just going on these broad strokes of what you thought was there. But I was the one who was like 'Okay, well I guess I need to mark out like, streets or something? And then districts. Are these like wall, or? And you would tell me things like 'well these should be separated'-

AUSTIN: [chuckling] Uh-huh

JANINE: -or like 'there's probably some kind of main thoroughfare.' Or like-

AUSTIN: Very broad.

JANINE: -Outside they mostly farm or whatever. It's very broad strokes and I was sitting there trying to put all that into a visual information. And it was really easy for me to be like, 'well, what are the streets? How many streets are there in this district? Is… Do they have big roads? Do they have small roads? And like, none of that information fucking mattered, honestly, at that point-

AUSTIN: Right. Right.

JANINE: -but it was real easy to get sucked into it and I think-

AUSTIN: Or, there was another-

JANINE: - another piece of advice is like, just don't… There's an impressionistic degree to it, right?

AUSTIN: Yes. Exactly.

JANINE: Like it's… A lot of it is like, the map is… If you wanna make a really literal map, that's a good thing too. That's a different kind of thing, though.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: The maps that, especially the maps that we deal with, are very much like… It's as much an informative tool to help people know which direction we need to go as it is to give them an impression of the space, of like, how it is divided up. You know, if they have a lot of room here versus if they don't. Or like, if this place is well-off and this place isn't.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: You know, it's supposed to give you these broader strokes.

AUSTIN: Um, like with the Velas one especially – which we needed for Holiday Special, for that first season – a lot of the places are just little… I just added little black and gold markers on the work you did. And so like, we didn't need specific layout necessarily, right? We needed… Or, we didn't need street by street layout. And things like: the bulk of the Sun District is just these like little wavy lines because, impressionistically, its just, uh, you know… its tonnes and tonnes and tonnes of abandoned buildings. We didn't need, like, the same thing that you did in the Fish District. And, in fact, what actually works there is: when I say, on the podcast, 'Oh yes, the Sun District is filled with countless kind of, apartments and, you know, tenement buildings, that have been emptied out. Whereas the Fish District is a little bit more, kind of, upper-class and there are lots of families there and individual people who are building, you know, growing businesses. Stuff like that. You get the individual houses that are not… like, that are actually rendered as individual houses. And that communicates something to the players, even if its not very specific. Even if its not very like: 'Okay, this is the house where Jericho's family is from', necessarily. Like, you can't see the front porch but you can see that it has a front door, you know? Whereas the bulk of the Sun District – even the tight area around the Temple – is still just like a bunch of buildings right on top of other. So, you can communicate a lot if you let yourself go a little bit there. Um…

JANINE: Mm-hm

AUSTIN: The thing that I'll say as I've built maps from places, um… A couple things. One: Uh, you know, Angelina, you say 'oh, I don't know how cities grow.' It's worth the time to look into that a little bit, right?

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Look at like… think about what type of city it is, because cities grow a bunch of different ways. Towns grow a bunch of different ways. Is it growing because, um, for instance…

JANINE: Is there a river? Is there a church?

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: Is there a trade centre?

AUSTIN: Exactly. Is there a single highway that has brought that, uh, you know, that settlement has grown around? Is there a – like you said – a river that everything is growing around. Is it a… Is there a new technology the way that like, cars changed Los Angeles, right? And look at a city. Like, you can look up maps from places that change over time based on, you know, what has happened in the area. Look at a map of Los Angeles from above, or different areas of Los Angeles as the suburbs begin to sprawl out is like, so fascinating-

JANINE: Mm-hmm.

AUSTIN: - and it will help you gain an intuitive sense of how… what cities and spaces look like. Um, this is silly-

ART: It's also nightmare fuel.

AUSTIN: Oh, it's terrifying. It really is. Um, play Sim City. Play Cities: Skylines. Think about… And like, those aren't necessarily teaching tools [chuckles] and you can be really bad at them like me.

JANINE: Also, Banished maybe.

AUSTIN: Banished is a great one.

JANINE: Right, is that the medieval one, yeah?

AUSTIN: Totally. But, city-builders in general. Um, the Anno series. There's lots of series that... they don't necessarily build the most realistic cities 100%, but they get you thinking about how a city would be laid out theoretically, in terms of the distances between public service… uh, you know, public service headquarters, like police departments and fire departments and city, you

know, kind of, where the city government is, related to the industrial and the commercial districts, related to where waste is kept, related to how close is it to a major thoroughfare, like a river or an ocean or a highway. Um, and those things… Starting to think from there is one way to start building. And then, here's the opposite way. Here's like, the exact opposite, but maybe the inverse – not the opposite – because it kind of, gets you to the same place of like, 'who is in the city?' Um-

JANINE: Mm-hmm.

AUSTIN: - And how can you communicate character – the character of the characters? I'm not even going down the line of like, 'the city itself is a character' thing. I'm actually just saying like, the city itself is a medium for how you can characterise the major players in your story. So, I think about something like Nacre, where like, yeah, I had ideas about what Nacre was. I knew I wanted there to a place where there was like, the industry of Nacre where they had like, early manufacturing centres and stuff like that. I knew I wanted here to be this nice, like, dockside marketplace. Stuff like that. But really, what I wanted was: 'alright, it's tiered. Adelaide needs to be at the top of this thing and she needs to be able to look down on everything, and she needs a way out.' And so that's immediately like: 'Okay, that means that everybody else needs to get like, boxed in so I'm gonna draw a sort of horseshoe shape of the tall cliffs that kind of surround this inlet. And there's gonna be a road out on the Eastern side, because that way she has access to that but nobody else does. And it's gonna be raised up so I'm gonna draw like, some tiers.' And that's all about communicating something about who Adelaide is and then I did the same thing with other characters, both major and minor who – some of which never came up, right? Like, there are… I had a whole thing of like, the Sable Spire, who is like… which is the prison where they were kept and there was like, a whole prison chief warden who I'd written up, who never really came into play. But, the way that that place looked, where it was located, kind of in-between the industrial centre and the palace was supposed to communicate something about him and that place. And so, you can think about it in terms of characterisation. And then, also just like, what would those characters need to have around them? Like, okay, you have, um, you have a character who is like, a shitty industrialist. What do they need around them? Would they want to be close to their factory or not? Do they want to live out in the wilderness and then commute to their factories everyday? Do they to be close to it, so they can keep a close eye on them? Um, stuff like that ends up being like, really influential in how you can tell a story with a map because the players' actions will take them down a pathway even if you didn't intend for them to be on that pathway. And, based on what you've kind of drawn the life of the characters… of a town or a city or a rural community, whatever it is, they will learn something about what that place feels like very naturally because they'll go from place to place and kind of, put together an image of what life is like there even if no says those words. No one will say like: 'Oh, this place seems like, everyone gets together and go to church together.' No, but like if the church is at the centre of the town. If you say that and they're like: 'Oh, I guess a good place to meet after we go do our other stuff is the church because that's the centre of the town.' That will tell them something about the world and it will communicate a certain vibe that's different from the city where the centre of the town is like, a big, you know, nondescript fountain or a big

trading centre or something like that. So, it's a pretty good… that's how I go about it most of the time. Um, someone says: 'Do we use special software to draw the maps?' Janine, what were you using for the really nice Hieron maps?

JANINE: Photoshop? And… hands. Um, for Hieron I used-

AUSTIN: Good ones.

JANINE: [Laughing] Sorry…

AUSTIN: No… that's it

JANINE: No, for Hieron I used, uh, oh god. I don't remember the person's name. They're on like, Deviantart. I want to say it's like, Dark Ra… It's Raven something? Um, I used to shout out their brushes all the time, but there's a bunch of people who've made map-making brushes-

AUSTIN: Mm

JANINE: -on Deviantart that I used to use. I used it for those, for the first map. I've stopped using them since because obviously we do a thing now that is like a thing and it becomes very complicated.

AUSTIN: Like a commercial thing? Yeah.

JANINE: Yeah. So I make my own brushes now, which I should probably release at some point in a Pusher thing. Um, but it's very easy to doodle a little house and then clone that house a bunch-

[Austin chuckles]

JANINE: -and stuff like that. But-

AUSTIN: And just keep working from there.

JANINE: -I know that there are like generators and stuff that we've talked about before. Like, map generators. And I know there's specialised software too. Um... A lot of that feels like-

AUSTIN: (crosstalk - unclear) just hasn't really-

JANINE: - A lot of that feels like, if you don't have a specific thing in mind like, if you're looking for a starting point-

AUSTIN: Mm-hm

JANINE: - They seem really good for giving you that starting point. You usually have much more than a starting point already, so it's not a thing that's come up-

AUSTIN: Yeah, yeah.

JANINE: -for us, I think.

AUSTIN: The other thing is to, with those, is put a lot of it on your players. There's a lot of times I'll say like: 'Art, what's this look like?' 'Jack, what's, you know, what's the closest structure - what's the first structure as you enter the New Archives. Um, it's pretty useful. Okay, any other thoughts on-

JANINE: Oh hang on, it's uh, I wanted to get this person's name.

AUSTIN: Cool.

JANINE: I believe it's StarRaven on DeviantArt.

AUSTIN: StarRaven.

JANINE: They've done a whole bunch. StarRaven all one word.

AUSTIN: And they did the-

JANINE: They've done a whole bunch of map marker brushes that are just kind of like-

AUSTIN: These are the brushes for Hieron that you've used?

JANINE: They did like a bunch of them, yeah.

AUSTIN: Cool. Awesome.

JANINE: So those are really handy. There's a whole bunch of people who've done stuff like that because they're doing like, Lord of the Rings maps and stuff like that. And so if you want just sort of a starting point and don't want to like, sit down and doodle a tiny castle for an hour which I don't fucken blame you, honestly-

[Austin laughs]

JANINE: - Uh, It's a good place to go for that sort of basic stuff.

AUSTIN: In the chat, Ben notes that there's a supplement called the Perilous Wilds which is a really interesting world-building tool that kind of modifies Dungeon World, that uses some of the Dungeon World travel rules but also kind of, random tables to build locations. Not as maps but in terms of 'here is a thing that is related to another thing. Here is... Here are different places and how they relate to each other. Um, and how they connect without you having to sit down and actually draw those spaces out. So that's worth looking into.

ART: I just think that, real quick, to tag onto the end of this: it's if you do this for the places that are worth it but if you have like, the campaign where your party is like, going from town to town don't do this every time.

JANINE: Mmm.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: Like, most of these towns don't matter. It's just like, 'What do they need? Yep, it's got that. It's... You know, if the locative stuff becomes important, just fudge it then.

AUSTIN: Yep.

ART: Just, you know, do this for the places you really care about and know that, for the places you don't care about, you can let it go.

AUSTIN: And if something becomes important. Let's say it's like: 'Ok, this is just a whatever city because you're going to go off into the woods nearby to go find an evil cult. Um, and you're not really interested in how the cult interacts with the city because you don't have the time to be because sometimes that's how our lives work.' That's okay. And if it does become important, have... feel no guilt in saying: 'Oh, I know I said before that this town has, you know, seven churches, but it really only has three. And it's important that it only has three because, blah blah blah-blah-blah.' And like, hopefully - if you have the right environment, and the right environment for me is like, we all know we're making it up as we go along. We all know that we're collaborating on this, and we're trying to find the best version of the story. This is not an oppositional play between the GM and the players. Everyone should be excited and on board with that. And you should bring them on board to help explain it. You know, you say: 'Oh, this is, you know, the... There's three churches and one of them is of, um, you know, Jono. And Jono is the goddess of fishing and of, you know, any hooked instrument of any kind. Tell me what the church looks like. And bring people on board to do that. Even if the last time you were here, you were like: 'Uh, there's a big church in the middle of town and that's it. The end.' Like, now you're back you can just say: 'Oh, actually, there's more to this city than we thought there was. There's more to this place than we thought there was. And you can save doing that until you know its going to become an important place. And that's okay, you know? Sometimes you don't know. Sometimes you think it's just like, a rest stop and it turns out to be a capital.

ART: And the church they built real quick is an interesting story to tell.

AUSTIN: It totally is. Yeah, totally. [laughs] Or maybe you just didn't know.

JANINE: A think that you do really well, Austin, is that you don't just describe places but you give us the same kind of like, tone notes that you're using yourself.

AUSTIN: Mm.

JANINE: Like, that's a big thing for us in general is like, we get sort of, we all gather our aesthetic like, footholds and touchstones.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And like, you are pretty - I think - transparent about those, of being like: 'Oh, I've been thinking like it's probably like, mosaics here and there's a lot of like, Mediterranean influences here.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm

JANINE: And by giving players that, you also give them a lot of room to like, if they say: 'I want to go to a tavern' and you didn't think of a tavern-

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: - you can say, 'What does a tavern look like?' and then they can say: 'Well, you said there's a Mediterranean influence so I imagine the walls are really white and maybe there's like, you know, a fresco on the outside-

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: - which sort of advertises the whatever whatever. You know, so making sure your players have those tools means that they can help you and like, trust them to help you because I assume if you're playing a game with them, I assume you think they have good ideas so...

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Totally. And again, talking about transparency around that stuff, put it on the table, right? Like-

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: -don't just say it.

JANINE: Put your links out

AUSTIN: Put your links out. Exactly. Say, oh, I think it looks kind of like this. I think it looks like this picture from this show. I think it looks like, um, this painting I really like. Uh, write just the words down. Write, you know, that the church has... Write like, you know, 'High uh...' Or like, 'Tall stained glass windows'. Write that it has 'Big open space in the middle', right? 'Huge chandeliers.' Like, those things actually will continue to help keep that space in the mind of people. It's uh, one of my favourite things from Fate - which is a system I don't actually love as much as many people do - but I think that the tag system in Fate is brilliant. Um, and its a thing I do in my own head when I'm building physical spaces for games is, I just list out internally what all of the features are and when I have enough prep time, I also really want to put those on the table for people and say like: 'Oh hey, here's what... Here's the six things you should be thinking about in this space.' Um, because those can help make - going back to that Masks question; the question of being overpowered and stuff - is like, imaging the difference between saying like, 'Okay, you're fighting this super-villain, you know, in Times Square' versus, even just saying: 'You're fighting this super-villain in Times Square. Here are the things. There are giant billboards. There's a traffic jam. There is the place in the middle where you can get tickets for cheap - where you can get broadway tickets for cheap. There are fire hydrants. There are... There's a police barricade. There are...' And like, literally listing those things out, without going into complete list mode, but like, painting that place at the very least and even again, at the table, if your players aren't necessarily able to like, remember all that stuff as they play, or create their own in line with it, listing it out on a sheet, listing it out on a map and saying like: 'Oh yeah, these are the things that are there.' I promise you those players will suddenly have ideas about what to do with that police barricade. About what to do with the fire hydrant, right? Um, 'Oh and there's a fire truck here and the sirens are going off!' Like, painting that word picture is also giving them a palate that then they can paint with. Uh, and the sooner you can do that and the kind of, more vibrantly you can do that, the better the entire sequence will play out. Um, okay. I'm gonna move on. This is from Emily, who says: **'Hi Friends_Table. A bunch of friends and I are planning to start a new campaign and we're still in character creation mode. I'm trying to get out of my comfort zone in terms of personality since I tend to default to brash, smiley people. Hi, Keith.'** We'll probably return to this question once Keith is on. **'However, I'm feeling stuck and don't know where to begin. Specifically because I'm worried that any attempt to have a serious character will just come off as boring. I know that serious isn't boring when it's done well but I'm having trouble making a character interesting without making them crack a joke or break something in a funny way. How do I find that spark that makes a character interesting or, at the very least, fun to play. Any tips for how to flesh out a character before starting a campaign? Thanks in advance and thanks for all of your shows. It really inspires me to create more. Emily**.' Thank you Emily. Um, Art, I know you had some thoughts here which lines up, based on a lot of these words.

[Janine chuckles]

ART: Yeah, I mean, I also started my role-playing- my tabletop career playing a lot of brash smiley people.

AUSTIN: Accurate.

ART: And, um, it's fine. It's fun. It's great. Um, it's... I don't want to say it's easy because it's not. But it's like, It's always a little easier to be the character who doesn't care about stuff.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: Um-

AUSTIN: Can you speak a little bit more- why is that easy or what is the- why has that been easy for you, in the past?

ART: Well because- because, it's, you know, a tabletop game is about stakes and if you can just be like: 'Well, the stakes are this but what I'm interested in is like, you know, talking about that weird chicken we saw on the road ten miles back, you're not engaging with the stuff, you know?

AUSTIN: Mm-hm. Yeah.

ART: And... But like, it isn't true. Like, it's not real. People who are funny care about things in their real lives like-

AUSTIN: Like all the time.

ART: Like all the time! [laughing] Everyone cares about the things in their lives! And I think that that's an important thing to get to with your character is like, this character can be funny. This can be a funny person, as many of us are funny people in our own lives. But like, if you think about it: I think of myself as a funny person but like, you know, if my mom was in an accident I wouldn't be at the hospital being like you know, 'I told you to break a leg! I didn't mean this!'

AUSTIN: [laughing] Yeah, and I think that you see that in play both from your characters who have moments of comedy all the time like, 'Of course the wind can be evil' is this like, perfect overlap between a punchline and really revealing characterisation.

ART: Mm.

AUSTIN: Which is maybe part of this, right? Part of it is getting a... figuring out somewhat of a worldview for your character in an intuitive sense. You hadn't sat down and said: 'I think that Hadrian believes the wind can evil.' But the second that somebody suggested it couldn't be, you knew what Hadrian believed, right?

[Janine chuckles]

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: And the other side of this, which is figuring out what your... So that side of it is a lot of like, being serious enough that you know when your seriousness can become a joke at the table, right? The other end of it is, if you're playing that jokey character, figuring out where the limits are. One of my favourite things Keith's done as a character is - as Fero - not want Lem to go meet, um, to go meet his cousin alone. Jack, I don't know if you remember that moment-

JACK: Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: From the Rosemarrow where Fero- where you were like: 'I'm gonna go meet your cousin!' and Fero-

JACK: Fero's like: 'No you're not.'

AUSTIN: 'No, not alone. No. Uh-uh.' And like, changed his plans so he could go with you. Um, and that was really interesting! And showed there were lines, right? Like, oh, this is something Fero really cares about because its giving up control of his own life where he can't intercede to paint himself a certain way. And that's great- that's a great of moment of characterisation of like: 'Okay, this is what- This is Fero. This is part of what Fero-' Like, Fero doesn't want to give anything away and, in the process of trying to stop anything from being given away, gives something away. So that's, those are like, from the table, what I've seen across the board those two things of like: knowing enough about your serious character's worldview where its fun to push that worldview so far in your characterisation so far that it actually becomes kind of comedic. I think Grand Mag does this really well too. Or the opposite, which is like, play your goofy character but know where those lines are. Know where those curves are. I'm curious from Janine because I think Adaire is really that second thing: very fun, very goofy, very like, always has a backup plan. Always has a ridiculous plan and also a backup plan. And Signet's the opposite but who doesn't actually push towards comedy. Does just... you do just find joy in playing that character and finding... Kind of, inhabiting her worldview. I think you find joy in it anyway. You do it really well and you do it often. So I'm curious like, how do you find the fun in someone who is very serious as a character?

JANINE: I think - and this goes to what Art was saying - it's really important to realise that 'serious' doesn't mean uh, 'right'.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And serious doesn't mean honest. Serious doesn't mean that you are like, that you are a moral compass, which I say even though Signet has - in, I think, both games - had moves that say she would be a moral compass-

[Austin chuckles]

JANINE: - or I considered those. Something like that. But, you know, being a serious character doesn't inherently mean that you have to be like, you know, like a... yeah, a moral centre or anything. It doesn't mean like... I'm trying to figure out how to phrase this. Um, I think one of the reasons why it can feel easier - and again, this goes to what I was saying - is because, not just because you have this distance or you can be a more sort of natural version of yourself or just sort of, inhabit yourself more than your character, but because you can kind of trust that whatever situation you're in, you're going to be able to have fun with it. Whereas, with a serious character - like, with Signet, I have to think a little more about: 'what situation is more interesting to put her in?'

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: Which is the conversation that we tend to have a lot when we're deciding parties and like, deciding what to do next, of just like, 'Well, you know, Signet can be serious wherever, but what is more likely to produce an interesting situation?' Like, what position can I put her in that is going to sort of, pull on that character in some interesting directions.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And you have to - when you are playing a character who is serious, or when you are playing a character who is outside of yourself a little more - you have to think about that stuff in a different way than you might be used to if you've just been playing jokier characters. You need to like, be a little more active and aware, I guess? And that can be intimidating but I also think is worth it. Like, I think Art is very very very good at this. [laughs] Um, and I've definitely tried to sort of take cues from Hadrian - to an extent - with Signet, in terms of like, you know, a serious character is boring if you don't push on them or if you don't find reasons to push on them.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: I think that is part of the reason why I was immediately really drawn to playing Signet against Morning's Observation.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And like, making them interact.

AUSTIN: I think, I'll say the other thing for both of those characters - and Jack, I do want to bring you into this conversation in a second too, because I think you do a good job of walking this line in some very big specific ways - but, the thing I want to say very briefly is this notion of 'serious characters' are often represented by hitting a check-list of behaviours. Of like, symptoms of seriousness-

ART: Mm, yeah.

AUSTIN: - which is, you know: 'We have food at home.'

[Laughter]

AUSTIN: Which is, like... But seriously, it's like 'No, that plan's ridiculous!' Or it's 'Come on, we're being serious.' It's saying the word 'serious'! Uh, It's like hitting this checklist of what we think of as serious behaviours without thinking about where they come from - why someone takes something seriously. Uh, because there tends to be that underlying reason. It's one of the of the reasons why I always ask players to write beliefs down, because when you say, for instance - um, this is actually coming from a different side of character: 'I'm going to find the body of a god here-

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: - Or, I'm going to go find a divine and built it a new better body. Suddenly, all the seriousness that can come out of that stuff is grounded in a specific belief, right? When you say that, you know, you want to uh, find the... or, you believe in the best in everybody. You believe in finding the best in everybody. That is now a very specific sort of seriousness that comes to play. It's not a seriousness that comes out when you are, you know, tilling the soil or helping someone with chores necessarily. You can be a goofball during that. But when you confront the bandits, suddenly your character can be become serious and try to figure out what's going on with the bandits' lives or whatever. That stuff - guided seriousness that has a core, or that reflects a position. Like, I think about, in Dragon Age 2, Aveline - was that her name?

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: Who is, the serious character of that game, right? One of the... 'I'm a guard. I take my duty very seriously.' And then, like, there are always cracks there. And she's sad about things and she's happy about other things, and she's mad about other things-

JANINE: Also found (I think it's 'found'??) a whore, constantly.

AUSTIN: Constantly. Constantly! Um, and it all emerges from sort of a core set of contexts and beliefs. Um, and that's what makes her believable as both - as a serious character, and not just a kind of like, walking automaton who has been programmed to say: 'Now come on, everybody! We gotta do this-'

JANINE: Cassandra's a good example of that too.

AUSTIN: A hundred percent. A hundred thousand percent.

JANINE: And even has that big, like-

AUSTIN: Yes.

JANINE: - The big thing with her is like, she's very very serious but also she has this outlet.

AUSTIN: Totally. Totally.

JANINE: You know, she has this unserious outlet. And is very defensive of it.

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Yes. I love Cassandra. The wedding is in May. It's gonna be beautiful. Um, Jack - I think it's interesting because I think you play characters who shift between these modes really clearly, and often do the thing where it's like: 'I take this so seriously that it's comical because it's so absurd.' Like, I think Lem especially, a lot of the archivist stuff feels absurd because it's - it's so serious about where the painting frames are stacked, or whatever, you know?

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: But even with Edmund and Ethan Hitchcock. Those were characters who shifted between these modes really well. Really clearly. I think Fourteen Fifteen does also. So, I'm curious - for you - how you approach knowing when to shift between those modes and how to ground your characters in a way that even the most ridiculous shit is still core to who they are and where sometimes they can be serious about it in a way that doesn't make... That isn't laughable. That you can have something like pattern magic be a joke. But you can also have it be terrifying and - not just terrifying because its dangerous, but terrifying because it shows a flaw in who Lem is.

JACK: Yeah, I think there's a bunch of different ways that can be kind of brought out, right? I think, with the Hitchcocks, I knew from the start that I wanted to do this very fast-talking sort of goofbally sort of character. And the fact that they became these twins that could lie about each-other's identities sort of like, began to inform that all the more. Because, you know, as soon as you're like: 'We have identical twins', anybody who has ever gone to school-

[Austin laughs]

JACK: - with a set of identical twins is like, 'Alright. Okay. I see what's going on here.'

AUSTIN: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Jack: Um, and... But then, as we played more of the Hitchcocks, two things began to become clear. One: that sort of a character can often be... not masking, but can be reflective of an anxiety. Of not necessarily a crushing anxiety, but an anxiety about how to go about doing

things. The Hitchcocks are people who, you know, came out of a war. But also have this belief that, if they just, you know, put on the right sort of smile or try and talk in the right sort of way, they'll be able to just adjust things just so.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JACK: The Hitchcocks are definitely people who believe in that really dangerous thing that there is a flawless combination of words.

[Austin laughs]

JACK: You just have to find it, and then you'll get through. And the other thing is: the mechanics just got us to a really interesting place there. Because we knew, really early on, that one of the Hitchcocks was essentially compromised, right?

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: Uh, Edmund suffers trauma and takes on - what tag does he...

AUSTIN: Soft.

JACK: Soft? Is it soft?

AUSTIN: Yeah

JANINE: It's soft.

JACK: - takes on the soft tag and that was just a really nice gift that the game gave me because-

[Austin laughs]

JACK: - because it then recontextualises everything that we've talked about in terms of the Hitchcocks' anxiety and how that anxiety works.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JACK: And so, it's a case of listening to how you want the scene- how you want the scene to go, and moderating the character in that regard, right? Like, Edmund praying in the chapel is this like, moment of real anxiety and vulnerability but it's definitely also a goof because he sees the candlestick and, you know, thinks about stealing the candlestick or whatever.

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Right.

JACK: But at the same time, hopefully that gives me room to just do like, jokes. To just also play straight comedy scenes-

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JACK: - at the same time. And with Fourteen. Fourteen is definitely, um, this kind of chameleon character who at the same time - having spent most of their life killing people professionally - especially recently, especially post-Miracle, Fourteen has such a motivation to try and nurture a space, or bring something good out of a space-

AUSTIN: Right.

JACK: - that that feels that that just has to take focus in situations where that is important. Fourteen has to be taking that stuff into account. And that might get in the way of jokes, and that's fine.

AUSTIN: Right. Like, I really cannot underscore how important it is that your characters should have a thing they want in the world. No one - no one is broad - very few people - even the people who are in a situation where they say: 'Oh, I'm in a rut. I can't get outta here. I just go to work everyday.' When I think about the people who - when I used to work at a comic and games shop, the people who were like: 'I've been working my same job for thirty years. I hate it. I hate it so much. Even those people who like, who are stuck in that rut - again, the self-described rut - have the thing of like: 'Oh, I just go my job every day and then I come here and I paint miniatures. That's it. That's my whole life.' Even those people are like: 'I can't wait to go to Florida this Summer. To go to Disneyworld. I can't wait for the new season of this show to come out. I can't wait for, you know, Thursday. I can't wait for Thanksgiving - I love Thanksgiving meals! Um, like, most people have a thing that they're looking forward to, even if it's just: 'I can't do this anymore. I need a new normal. Because this current normal is fucking me up.' And characters in stories just about always have that. And if they don't, they have the opposite which is: 'I have this thing that I don't want to change.' And so like, either they want things to change or they want things to stay the same. And both of those things are power - excuse me - are powerful motivators that can ground any character. Like, even if that's just: 'I want more money. And that's why I'm going off to go do this stuff.' That will be the thing that grounds them when they - or should ground them - when they get the offer from the bad guy to like, give up the treasure that they just found because 'Hey, listen, on the market, that's only going to give you 100 gold coins. I'll give you 200 right now.' And when your players says: 'No, this is clearly the bad guy', have them... you know, say: 'Okay, so do you care about something more than money? What is it that you care about more than that? Is it protecting people in your home town? Is it something else?' Like, and that can... And you as a player should also think about this, to be clear. Like, if you're playing this character and you're like: 'Oh, I think my character wouldn't go for the money,' that's because they care about something else. And think about what that thing is. Is it about their faith? Is it about their relationships? Is it about like, an

internalised sense of right and wrong? And if so, where'd that come from? Who taught them that? Because if you can answer that, then you know who they care about. And you know who they value. And you know that maybe they value people who are older than them and they think that there's great wisdom in age, and they think that their parents are actually really - you know, maybe they're coming around on their parents. They're finally like: 'Oh, you know what? My parents did give me a good sense of right and wrong.' And suddenly you know something about your characters and you know what they think about this thing. And then everything can kind of continue to grow very naturally from that. But, you really... Like, the number one hardest thing I think, about people who come into tabletop games, especially from video games, is like: it can't just be: 'My character says the good thing every time.' It really needs to be: 'My character believes that people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps', or 'My character believes that, you know, people are fundamentally good and just need a little lift.' Or, that, you know, 'The church should really be the centre of people's lives.' Or, that, you know, that 'People should stay out of the wilderness because the wilderness should remain the way it is and that nature needs to be protected.' And like, you can paint very broadly here. Very broadly, as Mattias in the chat says: 'You can go in loose at that point, and explore things out in play.' Like, totally valuable to go in with a very loose character idea and just feel things out, but let yourself actually feel things out, instead of falling into the trap of just like, hitting up on the d-pad, so to speak. Just hitting the Paragon selection every time. Or the Renegade selection every time. Or the joke selection every time. Like, try your best to find... And sometimes you don't find it until after the session is over, and don't beat yourself up about that. Try to kind of have that decompression and kind of like: 'Okay, why did I make that choice? Is there a through-line here?' Because I've seen all - everybody at Friends at the Table - do that work of like, they have a confrontation, they make a choice and then, later, we talk about it and they go: 'Oh...' And I think the Hella-Calhoun scene is huge for this, and if you dig through the post-mortems or the Q&As - the Tips casts - you'll hear Ali talk about how she did a thing and only later was she able to be like: 'Okay, the reason I did this thing instead of this other thing I planned on doing was because: Here's how Hella felt at the time. And that reflected something deep in Hella. I've seen it with every character, you know, and - at least, in the main stuff; Bluff City, you're really fast and loose. You know, everybody, everybody - myself included - is like: 'Alright, I guess in this scene, we're doing this shit!' Um, and that's part of why Bluff City's so fun. [laughs] But, with campaigns, you have the room to reflect. So, try to use that. Um, anything else here?

JANINE: Um, actually we just mentioned that... So I mentioned this briefly before, that I've been sort of starting to get, uh, a group of mine off the ground, GMing the Dragon Age tabletop game.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: And the thing that I've sort of said to them a lot - we've only just set up character, so I don't have any deep first-time GM insights or anything - but the thing that I told them a lot when they were setting up characters was to, you know, in the language of Dragon Age itself, think about these characters as like, you have just met them as companions. So like, you know the

basics about them. You know, within the first little bit of meeting Iron Bull, you know, kind of, his deal. He's pretty upfront about like-

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah.

JANINE: - he's a mercenary. He does not exactly wait a long time to be like: 'Oh, also I'm a Qunari spy! Here's my crew.' Like, all that stuff is relatively face value. You have a sort of general understanding like: 'well, he's a spy so the Qun is important to him etc.' Like, that's all stuff - you know, like you said, Austin - that comes into belief later as stuff that you butt up against.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: You don't need to have everything figured out all at once. You just need to know the sort of, you know - like a Dragon Age companion - you have this basic idea of who they are as they've introduced themselves. And then, there is a lot of room to grow with that. There is a lot of room to figure out the limits of that and like, poke at it.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Totally. Um, I think we're gonna actually leave it there. I had another one in the chamber here - I had another good other question - but I think we're already running a little later than we intended, so we're gonna wrap there today. Um, If I didn't get to your question, I promise we have like fifty on the dock still to work through! So, hopefully we'll get there for you next time. As always-

ART: I don't think they're gonna find that really, like, encouraging. Like...

AUSTIN: Okay, well I could... Hmm...

ART: Send in your question. [laughs] We have a big stack it'll go on the bottom of!

AUSTIN: Well, it actually doesn't go that way, right? We put it on the list and then every time... The way it works - I guess, some transparency - is, we all go through... Everybody who's going to be on the show looks at that list and is like 'Oh, hey! These are some questions we'd like to answer this time!' and marks it. We're not going through like chronologically. We're often going through, often by theme. Like, 'Oh hey, this whole group, you know, has played characters who are religious before', right? 'This whole group has done characters who are, uh... they all were in Marielda or whatever'. So sometimes we find themes: 'We're gonna do one that's really GM-focused this time.' 'We're gonna do one that's really player focused this time.' So, tend to be themed like that and uh, you know, it's a big... like I said, it is a big collection of questions but please add yours to it! Because I think just about every time we add something new from the most recent collection, because people are constantly asking really great questions. Uh, you can send those to Tipsatthetable@gmail.com. As always, you can follow the show at Friends_table on Twitter. Friends at the Table - you can just do a search on Facebook - there's a

fan group there. There's Fansatthetable. There's also the official Friends at the Table group on Facebook. And, uh, I think that's gonna do it for us. For today. We should Time.Is. Oh, and again, thank you again for supporting the show - Friendsatthetable.cash. Um, we should clap... our hands. Just to do it. Just to have fun.

[Jack laughs]

AUSTIN: Uh, how about 40 seconds?

JANINE: Yeah.

ART: I'm not even on the damn website.

AUSTIN: Alright, 45 seconds.

ART: Aw, I could have made it.

AUSTIN: No one did the joke clap. Look at that. Talk about serious characters!

EVERYONE: [an imperfect clap]

AUSTIN: 55.

[Janine laughs]

ART: Joke claps are terrible!

[Austin laughs]

EVERYONE: [an even worse clap.]

AUSTIN: I was late. That's okay. I'm sorry, Ali. Bye. [laughs]

[Laughter]

AUSTIN: Alright everybody, thank you so much for hanging out. Uhh, we'll be back I think this weekend with some more stuff so look forward to... I think that that's true. Maybe that's not true. I shouldn't just say things. I'm tired. I rolled here right from work. So, I don't know if we have-

ART: I was like, 'what do we have this weekend?'

AUSTIN: We might have it, I don't...

JANINE: Sixty hour marathon!

ART: No no no no no no

AUSTIN: I do have a thing on this cal, but no! I'm good, actually.

ART: That's two and a half days. I don't think we could do that on a weekend.

[Janine laughs]

AUSTIN: We gotta be very efficient! It's person-hours, it's not just uh...

JANINE: We're cross-streaming each other all the time.

AUSTIN: Exactly!

JANINE: Every single one of us-

ART: It's not just like, from when Austin comes home-

JANINE: - is just cross-streaming, so it's really only like an eight hour stream or something.

ART: From when Austin gets home, until Austin leaves for work, he's gonna be on this stream!

JACK: No no no no!

AUSTIN: I mean, that's not that far off. Anyway, have a good one any- everybody. Anybody! Have a good one anybody!

ART and JACK simultaneously: Anybody!

AUSTIN: You know what, anybody - have a good one, anybody!

JACK: Have a good one!

AUSTIN: Alright, bye.

ART: But know that you took it from someone else!

AUSTIN: Wow. [laughs] Bye.

ART: Bye.