

## [Tips at the Table: Who Knows Sephiroth? \(May\)](#)

Transcribed by: bailey#6828 on Discord

Content warning: brief mention of cannibalism [01:14:30] - [01:14:52] (marked in transcription)

Spoiler warning: the final question [01:24:26] contains vague spoilers for endgame character conflict at the end of COUNTER/Weight, Twilight Mirage, and some specific character conflict from Hieron.

Question timestamps:

1. [00:01:26]
2. [00:11:18]
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[00:00:00]

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

ALI: Um, hi! My name is Ali, you can find me @ali\_west on twitter.com-

AUSTIN: [interrupts] Keith J.-

ALI: -And thanks for listening! Oh, sorry! [laughs]

AUSTIN: [joking] Great, bye! Bye everybody, that was it, thanks for listening! Uh, Keith J. Carberry?

KEITH: [continuing pre-recording debate] Even if that was how lightsabers work-

AUSTIN: [sighing] Oh-

KEITH: -Hyper crystals still aren't used to activate holocrons! [Austin laughs] That's never been what that was for.

AUSTIN: The rest of this is gonna be in a Clapcast, people aren't gonna... [sighs] Art Martinez-Tebbel?

ART: Hey, you can find me on Twitter @atebbel, and check out my dope holo- hyper crystal activated holocron sitting on my desk right now, flying in the face of Keith's weird apos- ap-

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah.

ART: Aposta-? Apostasy?

KEITH: Apostasy?

AUSTIN: Apostasy. [joking] Which is also the name of the new Friends at the Table restaurant that we announced recently.

ALI: Oooh!

AUSTIN: Did that make the cut? Was that in...?

ALI: It was in there, yeah.

ART: [cross] Apo-tasty! An apokine-themed restaurant.

AUSTIN: Okay, good. [laughs] Yeah.

ALI: It's very funny- You should listen to it with the music, it's hilarious.

AUSTIN: Oh, that sounds great. Was that- there was music around it? Perfect. Love it. Love it.

AUSTIN (cont.) [addressing listeners] As always we are here to answer your questions and to dig into your dilemmas. Uh, we are- we are gonna start doing that right away because we got a bunch of them. This one comes in from Alexis who says:

[00:01:26] AUSTIN (as Alexis): "I've been GMing on and off with a group of friends for about a year. We tend to have a lot of trouble keeping everyone engaged and interested in the characters, even though out of play we all seem to be on the same page. We've had discussions about what type of game we'd like to play: character-driven with a strong story, but with room for goofy stuff; the kind of characters everyone is bringing, and how individual players most enjoy contributing to the story. However, when it comes time for a session, most of my prompts - even the leading ones that recommend clear action - are met with silence and usually one of the characters doing something random and unrelated. The five of us have been very close friends for many years, so I don't think it's an issue of players lacking confidence. Is my campaign really so boring that the players would rather do absolutely anything other than engage with

NPCs, locations and situations? How can I help my players actually play the game they're telling me that they want?"

AUSTIN: Um, my first thing- my first thing here is like, to... Being friends with people for a long time does not necessarily mean that switching into, like, telling tabletop roleplaying game stories together is going to be easy. I think like- If I think back to like, pitching Ali and Janine on the pre-Friends at the Table campaign I was going to run for them, that game would have been extremely this. Despite being very good friends with Ali and Janine, it very much would have been me being like, "So what do you do?" and then, like, crossing my fingers and hoping that the awkwardness would dissipate, you know?

AUSTIN (cont.): And I've had that experience with other people who come to the hobby for the first time, that like, I've been lifelong friends with them, but they've never done this before. And so... And especially if they're not, like, already a performer in some way, they're not doing podcasts, they're not, like, doing stage, they're not doing theatre. They don't inhabit characters in that way. So I would say the first thing is like, try to disconnect that expectation - or try to like, push back that expectation - that just because you're really good friends, that that should be enough for players. Players are shy. It's- it's *hard* and risky, it feels scary to do a thing, because what if you're doing the wrong thing? And so that's my first suggestion. I'm curious if other people here have like, a gut response to Alexis's question.

ART: Yeah, mine is the general thing of like, people will answer something when asked a question about what they want, and then it's not always what they actually want?

AUSTIN: Mmm, right, it isn't- Those two things don't always overlap exactly?

ART: Right. That like... saying that they're not playing, uh- what is, what is the-? Um... "How can my players actually play the game they're telling me that they want?" They are telling you two different things about what they want.

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: Like, they're telling you something and their actions are also telling you something, and you have to like, figure out what's the- what's the *real* there.

AUSTIN: Right. Find that through-line between those two things. And I think for me the first step is to- if you have to err in one direction, you should be erring towards what they're *actually* doing at the table. So if you say that one of the players does something random and unrelated, pull on that string. Let them. Say like, "cool, yes, and-" right? Like, keep building out what that random and unrelated thing is, and eventually maybe you're able to wrap back around to what their stated intentions or, you know, vision for the campaign is. But, if- if they are doing something, like, have- That something comes from somewhere, even if it's just, like, "uhh, I'm gonna just throw something out!" That throwing something out is still based in some instinct of theirs as a

player, and so like, that gives you some tiny foothold by which you can start the process of bringing them out of the- uh- you know, bringing them into the game rather.

KEITH: Another thing is, uh- so we had a question that was fairly similar, or had like a similar spirit to this a couple times ago that I was on.

AUSTIN : Mhm.

KEITH: And... so some of the same things apply I think, for me, and... I have- I have experience of both, like, doing a worse job than I would've wanted being a GM and then also playing with the GM that wasn't doing what I was interested in. And it seems like, it's like, it's- because they're your friends and because you have had conversations about like, what you do want to see, like, uh... They're showing you something different than what they're telling you, but they did say, like, "we're interested in this", so I think maybe like- I guess yeah this is sort of what Austin was saying is like, take what they're doing and... [pause] I'm gonna start over. Not all the way.

AUSTIN: Okay.

KEITH: Uh. Like, when my- when my players would do something that I was like, annoyed by, during me being the worst GM that I had ever been-

AUSTIN: [laughs] Uh-huh.

KEITH: And I would just like, get annoyed and try to move past it-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: But like, instead of moving past it, you can- you can ground that in what you're trying to do. Like, give it the same stakes as if it wasn't what you consider like, a random piece of nonsense. Um, like, you can- And sometimes it's hard- like if it's really- if it's *really* like-

AUSTIN: Off the wall.

KEITH: -Silly and goofy. Off the wall. Like that might be harder. But, you know, they at least are ostensibly down for what you're trying to do, so if- like, maybe trying to push them towards it by- And I don't know if you're doing this, but by not discounting, uh- or discarding what they're bringing.

AUSTIN: It can be really easy to do that. It can be really easy to be like-

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: -I've prepped all this fucking stuff. Even if you've done the kind of like, open-ended prep, where you're like, all I've done is build a location, and some NPCs, and some stakes, and like hope- I don't have like a... Uh, railroad-y adventure plan? But I have a world built and they

just don't wanna deal with any of it, they wanna go fishing. Like, go do the fishing game. You know? Figure out [laughs], you know, 2d6 plus dex to do some fucking fishing, and like what happens when this group of goofballs goes fishing together?

KEITH: Also, maybe the guy that was gonna be in the tavern is at the lake, also!

AUSTIN: Yes. Yes. Yes.

ALI: Right.

AUSTIN: Yes. That is like, so- such a good idea. Yeah. I do that a lot. I do that a *lot* with y'all. Where it's like, I'm gonna slide this NPC out of their place. They're in my playbook, in my like- it's like I have a briefcase filled with pieces, right, and I as the GM, you know, you are moving across the board. Um, and it's like uh- I think- maybe all of us? Ali, I don't know, have you played, um- Betrayal Legacy yet? With Art and Jess maybe-

ALI: I don't think so.

AUSTIN: No? Okay.

ART: No, we don't have a copy in our house.

AUSTIN: [sighs] Oh, it's so good. It's a game where you put down tiles as you explore a mansion. And GMing is sort of like that, in which, as you explore the mansion in Betrayal Legacy you are like, plopping down tiles, and you're like- I don't know, I guess this is- oh! This is the dining room, okay, when someone goes into the dining room- or when someone moves into a door you play a tile based on like, is it the first floor or is it the outside of the second floor? And then when they go in, there's a symbol on the tile that says 'pull a card from this thing', and it could be like an event, or an item, or whatever.

AUSTIN (cont.): And, um, GMing is not like [struggles for words]. I guess the sort of GMing I do specifically, is not - or maybe I'll say broadly - it's not *just* revealing a map that already exists, it's like having that game in front of you where someone goes into a dining room, and it says like, okay, there's gonna be an event in this dining room. But then instead of just pulling a random card from the deck, you get to look down at- to like, your side of the table where behind a screen you have all of the stuff you've ever prepped, including stuff that you never thought would be in that dining room.

AUSTIN (cont.): But suddenly, if you can make a ju- if you can justify something showing up in that dining room; someone showing up in that dining room; the letter that they were supposed to find at the bottom of the well. Maybe someone from this house found it, and then like, put it in a drawer in this dining room, right? Maybe if the- the secret, like, dagger is- is like- in a se- in a secret compartment that someone like, stumbles over or whatever, right? Those things are- are tools that you can deploy, and you don't have to lead your players to where you want to deploy

them, all you need to do is let them lead you to a place where it's- it's you know, um, *possible* that you could bring them into play.

AUSTIN (cont.): Ali it sounded like you had something else there too.

ALI: A little bit yeah, but it's really just echoing what you guys were saying, which is like, you're gonna get so much further by just being able to be like, "yes, and-" than being like, "oh but we have this big confrontation, and you wanna do this other thing". Like, I get how frustrating that is. It probably sucks.

[00:10:00]

ALI (cont.): But like, for like the hour or two that you're at that table someone is going in a direction like... just go there for a little bit [laughs]. Right?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: Wow, an hour or two. What's that like? [Austin and Ali laugh]

AUSTIN: Couldn't be me.

ALI: But, yeah-

AUSTIN: -My suggestion-

ALI: -Yeah. Oh.

AUSTIN: No, go ahead. Go ahead.

ALI: No, you can go ahead.

AUSTIN: -Is to play something where there's no GM. Play The Quiet Year, play Fall of Magic, play games that are- Play Fiasco. Play games where people are playing characters, even - like Fiasco, unlike Quiet Year - but are, um, but are kind of collaborative, and that will help get them into the mode of being characters who have things to say and things that they wanna do. And, it will completely destroy the- the, um, pretense that they have to look to you for everything, and will get them in the practise of coming up with their own scenes. I really think something like The Quiet Year is great for this, because even though you're not playing as a character, it helps you start thinking about big picture stuff, and thinking about games as storytelling, and I think that that is a hu- a great first step.

AUSTIN (cont.): Um... [pause] Okay! Next question, from Colin. They say:

[00:11:18] AUSTIN (as Colin): "How do you balance following the flags your players-"

AUSTIN: There's like, there's like a real through-line for a lot of these questions by the way. They're all different questions, but they- you can like, sense- I feel like we've tapped into some deep anxiety across our listenership [Ali laughs] with this series of questions.

AUSTIN (as Colin cont.): "How do you balance following the flags your players are setting for you, with the desire for the- for their consequences of ignoring other options? If my players are like, 'Yes, the demonic forest sounds interesting, let's go there' about one option, but, quote, 'the dwarven fortress sounds boring' or 'the dwarven fortress sounds fun, but not right now', or even 'we should go to the dwarven fortress, but Sam isn't here tonight, do we really wanna go deal with the dwarven shit without Sam?' about another, then where do you draw the line between 'the table is interested in X' and 'the world is living and breathing and things happen offscreen'? Specifically, I don't know which way to go when there isn't a concrete precedent set in the game's narrative already. For instance, there is a monster heading to Y, and if you don't go there it will attack, et cetera. And these decisions are being made at more of a player level. We haven't done a dungeon in a while, we haven't seen this NPC in a hot minute, Sam can't make it this week, et cetera. Y'all seem to handle this pretty well in Twilight Mirage while juggling two parties, but also none of the decisions around who would go on which missions together made it on air-"

AUSTIN (cont.): I'll also add that Colin actually included a pretty long, very spoiler-filled paragraph about this, specifically with relation to like, Art, your character, and kind of some of the endgame feelings your character had about other NP- about other player characters, but that they- that you hadn't been with in a while. And it's like, well, was that- were- was that character's feelings, were those because of in-game actions, or were those because of out-of-game scheduling conflicts, right?

AUSTIN (as Colin cont.): "Basically, how do you all manage what you're interested in at the table," Colin says, "with what would make sense in cause-and-effect of the story? And when do you let something go to find something everyone is more enthusiastic about, versus when do you hold onto an idea because *you* really want to see it in there?"

AUSTIN: So my answer is it's way blurrier than there being a, like, even a very clear best practise that you should follow, or like a formula- especially a formula. There is no, um... Actually, here's the actual way I want to answer this, is: do- were people- two of you were in uh... Worldwide Wrestling RPG, right? Ali and Art?

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Do you remember that one of my principles in that game was 'to make it up as you go along, and make it make sense afterwards'? To like, make it seem like you always planned it that way? Which is also what wrestling promotions do [Austin and Ali laugh] also, all the fucking

time. It's a similar principle that's also in Action Movie World, and I hold that pretty, like, close to my heart, even in other games right?

AUSTIN (cont.): I look at something like Twilight Mirage, or even Hieron, where the... relations between characters, where the outcomes of certain events, sometimes those things have out-of-character reasons- In fact, I- for me there is no clean, um- There's a concept in game studies called 'the magic circle' that gets talked about a lot, even though the person who first used it didn't actually talk about it all that much. And it kind of says, 'hey, game spaces are special and are removed from the real world', but in my mind I actually think that that circle is really porous.

AUSTIN (cont.): And so an example of that is think about all the types of content that are not in Friends at the Table stories. Think about all the sorts of like, ultraviolence, or certain types of- of content that would require really strong trigger or content warnings, that just don't exist, right? Like, we just don't go there, and so that delimits the space of possibility, in the- in a way that is not entirely dissimilar from 'Sam isn't here so let's not do the dwarven shit'. Stuff outside of the game is *always* influencing stuff inside of the game, and that's not abnormal. That's the way all narrative works, and especially the sort of collaborative narrative that we space- that we all play in.

AUSTIN (cont.): And so, one is like, when you don't go to the fortress - the dwarven fortress - 'cause Sam isn't there, one, as you- as the GM, it's your job to kind of... One: decide how much that matters in terms of clocks ticking and all of that, but more importantly, two: is to justify that when, and if, the camera demands you justify it. It is not to be like- it is not to be just like 'shrug, well the dwarves didn't do a thing today, because Sam wasn't here', it's- it's not that hard for you if a player says, um- It's not that it's not that hard, it's like, it is part of the job of GMing to be like, if a player says 'well what were the dwarves up to when we didn't go because Sam wasn't here', you should be able to give some sort of an answer there. Maybe they're biding their time, maybe they've been relying on, you know, some spies to gather information, maybe, you know, you- you float out in the adventure you do go on- Again, maybe the players find the letter and you float out an idea that's like wow, this group that you- the other place that you've gone to - the demonic fortress - has been trading with the dwarven fortress or whatever.

AUSTIN (cont.) The- um, like, those things can interlock in ways where you can show that interconnectivity without literally ticking a clock and making them feel bad for not going the other direction. My only absolute answer here is you should never ever ever tick a clock without having shown the barrel first. The thing of like, there is a monster heading to Y and if you don't go there it will attack. They should never come home to find the place dead, and then you be like, 'yeah, well, I've been ticking this clock in the background that you've never seen, and that you have no idea about, and that I've never done any foreshadowing on' and it's literally come out of nowhere. You should always be like, 'hey, there is some shit coming', right? Like, 'The



Yawhg<sup>1</sup> will be here in five weeks'. And so you should have that sense building, you should not be pulling triggers on guns you've never shown them.

ART: Can I gently disagree with you?

AUSTIN: Yes.

ART: I think that- I think that if Sam isn't there and Sam wants to do the dwarf thing-

AUSTIN: Mhm.

ART: -Just put it all on pause and wait for Sam to be there.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: No, I'm also saying that.

ART: [cross] You don't know what Sam's doing.

AUSTIN: I'm also saying that you can- I'm also saying don't do it without Sam.

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: I'm just saying... You don't have- There isn't a binary where it's like, 'oh yeah the dwarves just froze for that month' [laughs]. Um... It's so easy to build a world by saying- by coming up with some vignette about what the dwarves did while you were away, that can communicate something about who they are and what they've done. And I think that's what elevates, like, good games that I've been in, is the sense that the world continues, and it doesn't necessarily- You- There is a way to frame it and be- You can both say 'here's what the dwarves have been up to' and also just say out loud, 'don't worry, like, I'm not punishing you for not going to see the dwarves, but remember they're off there doing this thing'. You know what I mean?

ART: Sure, sure.

[dog barks]

AUSTIN: I'm trying to think of an example in Hieron where we've done that. I mean, I think that we've been doing it this season, right? That like, the- the three places you could go to on the- on the map have all had stuff going on with them, but I also know that like, you know - there are actually four places I would say now - there are things that I could have been like, 'hey, um, failure to engage with this right now will have a huge repercussion', and then could have like, seriously followed through in even bigger ways. But I know that you can only go to one place at a time [laughs], and you know that you can only go to one place at a time, so, like, the stuff that's happening to the immediate east of you just hasn't bubbled up yet. But I've done my best

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<sup>1</sup> The Yawhg is a video game

to like, mention them as many times as I can so that they don't feel like- so that when we do get there and stuff is happening, it's happening because we've been talking about it instead of it being like, a situation where it feels like no one there has been alive this whole time, you know?

AUSTIN (cont.): The other half of this is, you don't have to run games like this. If your players want to like, cut- break down doors and fight zombies and don't want a living world in that way, and that's not a priority, that is one hundred percent an okay way to play tabletop roleplaying games, you know? The world can be static, and like, that's what you get in a lot of video games, is like, the world is waiting for you to explore it. And that can be a really fun way to play a game, so it's one of those things where the best thing you can do is talk to your players about it, I think.

AUSTIN (cont.): Any other thoughts here?

[silence]

Okay.

[00:20:00]

AUSTIN (cont.): Parker says:

[00:20:03] AUSTIN (as Parker): "I am GMing a Powered by the Apocalypse game and I struggle with how to frame the hard moves I make on failed roles. Sometimes the hard move is an obvious part of the current scene, but sometimes it's something somewhere else, or a broader consequence that isn't immediately evident. What is the best way to show the barrel of a gun? This game, Monster of the Week, doesn't have clocks I can just tick as a warning and I struggle with how to show these kind of moves in ways that are narratively interesting."

AUSTIN (cont.): It is hard to do that. Um, I do think- I do think that like, I think about COUNTER/Weight a lot, and how much- how like, rad it was [laughs] that I just had- like, had a page to put you on and be like 'tick', 'this is scary', this is a thing that's like, 'I'm doing a thing back here'. But even then I do think that the ways that that worked best was when I did that and then also illustrated it for y'all? Does that seem- that sounds right to me?

KEITH: Mhm.

AUSTIN: Like, it was never just like, 'Ibex is doing a thing'. [pause] Or rarely, I guess.

KEITH: Wh- The fact that it- I also remember it happening rarely. The fact- but the fact that it happened rarely made it like, tense without over like- You can do it, if you overdid it it would suck, kind of like anything-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: But just like, ominously ticking a clock every, you know, stretch of time-

AUSTIN: Right, right, right. Yeah. Totally. What I'll say is I think the thing here too is just like... You don't have to- not every- [laughs] Who was it, recently, who said you can make a move as soft as you want?

ALI: Oh, Jack.

AUSTIN: Was it Jack? Okay. [laughs] In a Hieron game. Which is true. And so, if you feel like there isn't a hard move you can make that's obvious, or that makes sense, you don't have to make a hard move. You can make a really- you can- you can communicate that things are happening, that there's like stuff at play, and there's the possibility of there being bad stuff to come.

AUSTIN (cont.): Or, the thing I- one way to think about this that helped me so much was playing Blades<sup>2</sup> and thinking about positioning: positioning and effect. Even in games that don't do that, where you think about something like Dungeon World or Monster of the Week does this too where like- Monster of the Week actually does this really well when it comes to monster fights, where you're fighting a monster and if you fail the roll, it can be like, you lose access to a place where you have the ability to fight that monster, right? For the people on this call who maybe haven't played this or don't know it, Monster of the Week is like a Buffy-style game, you know? It's like a- a monster of the week game? [chuckles] And the idea- One of the things that comes up a lot is like, 'okay we can hurt this monster but only if we cover it in ash first', or 'only if we build a, you know, a point of power that we all stand on', or 'only if it's covered in water' or that- you know, whatever. That type of stuff. The stuff that Buffy does. And so, taking that access away is a good way to be like, a sort of a soft move, because it makes them work to get it back, but it isn't- but it isn't necessarily the thing where it's like 'now I'm doing damage to you' or 'now there's a second monster to fight', you know? Um-

KEITH: Something else that might help is like- like- clocks are- are- some games officially have clocks and they're like a mechanical representation of what is just happening in a story-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: -Like in a- like- So you can just keep track of a set of things, just like, you don't have to call them clocks. You can call them clocks if you want, but like, if you had a set, you know, a list of things that you've communicated that you have- like, 'oh, here are the things that are important', you can just pick one of those things, whatever is the most relevant, and say something about it. Like, it doesn't have to be built into the game, right?

AUSTIN: No, totally. Like, you can just do- you can add clocks to whatever you want. [laughs]

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<sup>2</sup> Blades in the Dark

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Just listen to this show. [Keith and Austin laugh] As I've done it in games that just don't have them. They don't always mesh super nicely, but you know, that is a- that is a thing that you can do. And you can do it narratively too, right? I think about something where you could imagine a situation where like, you're fighting in a sewer system or something, you're fighting in a- a- yeah, let's say a sewer system where it's like, the rocks above you - not the rocks - the ceiling above you is beginning to, like, crumble. And you can draw a clock on the board and you can say, you know, or you can draw a clock on a piece of paper at the table and say each time I tick this, we're gonna get closer to the ceiling breaking, and, you know, a pipe above flooding this entire area or something, right? That is- that is a clock.

KEITH: Mmm.

AUSTIN: Even if it isn't- even if all you say is 'alright it's crumbling a little bit more, you think maybe if this happens one more time-'

KEITH: Yeah, they don't have to ever know that it was a clock in your head.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: Like, you know, you're trying to break into a bad guy's hideout and you don't do it the right way, and you know the thing that they're planning, and they know that they're planning something, like, you know-

AUSTIN: Yes.

KEITH: -Just tell them that they're getting closer.

AUSTIN: That was the stuff in the beginning of Winter [in Hieron] with Mother Glory, right? Was like, you were trying to get into a vault, and the way that we- I put a clock on the table without actually putting a clock on the table was just, every time that someone failed a roll, Mother Glory got closer. And, like, put people deeper and deeper into threat, until she would be an added, um- like, obstacle that you have to deal with at that point, you know. And so that was like- that was a good way of thinking about this.

AUSTIN (cont.): And I think maybe that's the actual answer here for me is: if you're struggling to find consequences to- and threats, then it might be worth doing another pass during your prep of the locations and creatures and NPCs, and thinking about ways to add a little more depth so that you can lean on that during play.

AUSTIN (cont.): Being able to- I was beating myself up recently for actually not doing this very well in a fight that happened in a library in a recent episode. Where in my prep I'd done the work of like, listing stuff in a library, and then none of it came up because that was already a very dense fight with a lot of other shit happening. But, like, there's a world in which you can imagine

that fight going such a way that like, um, huge towers of books are falling over, or characters are darting between the different uh- what are they called? Stacks? Um, you know, bookshelves and stuff. Or where like, hey, paper is very flammable. It would be easy to imagine a world in which something caught fire. I'm sure y'all would've loved to just add another layer of bullshit to that fight [laughs]. But those are the ways where, if you feel like you need to make a hard move, having a detailed environment to talk about, or having characters who have stakes that you can quickly put into- put into play, is really useful. Any other thoughts on consequences?

ALI: Yeah, I feel like this question kind of... ties into the answer I would've had for the last question too-

AUSTIN: Sure.

ALI: -'Cause like, I think that there's ways to show that things are happening far away that don't have to be really immediate or really big.

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: And it's like, if this person kind of knows what they want the consequences to be but not how to show it narratively, like you can just change where the camera is. [laughs] Right?

AUSTIN: Right, right.

ALI: And it's a way to make games seem really big and really dynamic and be like, 'okay you pulled a trigger, you know, you got a one, the thing that you wanted to do happens' and then you can just say, 'but like-

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: -On the other side of town there's a screen that turns on and your face is on it.' And the players will be like 'that sucks. I don't want that to happen to me but it did.' [Austin laughs] And that's like, really cool and really interesting and really, like, oh fuck I fucked up, right?

AUSTIN: Yeah. That's a good idea.

ALI: Without having it to be like, immediate, or like, something the character knows right away, or something like that, right?

AUSTIN: Yeah, yeah.

ALI: Or you can- yeah. Or someone comes into town and says like 'oh the, you know-

AUSTIN: 'I'm looking for the guy in the white hat.'

ALI: -on the other side of town, something happened.' Yeah, or whatever, right? [laughs]

AUSTIN: Right, right. This is the- this is the cut away in Mass Effect, right? To- you finish a planet and then it cuts away to Saren and Benezia talking and you're like, 'yo what the fuck is going on? What did I do? Shit!' [Ali laughs]

AUSTIN (cont.): But no, you're exactly right, right? Like that is the stuff that we did a lot in COUNTER/Weight, and also in Marielda because both of those were games about, like, laying low and not getting into trouble [chuckles] and not gaining heat. And so- yeah, that was such a great thing to be able to rely on, where it's like, you've left evidence behind. You've tapped into something that you didn't mean to tap into. In a Monster of the Week game, where you're like, playing with, you know, monsters and demons and shit, listen! You don't know what sort of magical shit they fucking activated by mistake, you know?

ALI: Right, yeah. Like, an episode of Sailor Moon shows you Queen Beryl's office sometimes, right?

AUSTIN: Yes.

ALI: And the characters aren't there, and you don't see it happening, but that doesn't mean that like, you as a GM shouldn't show that on camera, so to speak-

AUSTIN: Yes, yeah.

ALI: -So like, people at the table know that the stakes are getting a little- they're starting to boil, right, like? [laughs]

AUSTIN: Right, totally. That's a thing that we haven't done- I don't do at all in Hieron for like, weird- Like I have- There are a lot of times, I want the camera to be on the player characters in Hieron a lot. But that's not a thing I think is true about tabletop roleplaying games. Those sorts of like, cutaways and cutscenes and that style of GMing, is something that I still- that still appeals to me and it's something that I did a *lot* of in college as Art can speak to, I'm sure. And it's not something that I think is like, innately wrong, in any way. And so like, lean into that, you know, especially if you have like a good antagonist. There are-

[00:30:00]

AUSTIN (cont.): There's another version of Hieron where we have cutaways to like, Arrell grinning, or to- you know what I mean? Like, that's a thing that we could do, I- I'm specifically not doing it for weird reasons, but the- but that is a tool in your toolbox, and you should feel totally empowered to use it. [pause] Art, do you have any consequence thoughts that we haven't hit?

ART: I don't think so, I think this has been a good consequence talk.

AUSTIN: Good consequence talk. [laughs]

ART: Yeah. Good... [pause]

AUSTIN: Talking about consequences.

ART: [cross] Good talking about consequences.

AUSTIN: Next up is Tegan, who says:

[00:30:34] AUSTIN (as Tegan): "I have been playing tabletop roleplaying RPGs for many years, and have been a GM for a small crew for over a year. My partner has been endlessly supportive, but hasn't expressed interest in joining in. I know she'd play with us if I asked, but if I'm going to do that I wanted to be sure it's something that she'll enjoy. Do y'all have any suggestions for games to play with new players or people who are uncomfortable with RPGs?"

AUSTIN (cont.): Any thoughts here at the table? [silence] Any opening feelings?

ART: Yeah, to like, directly answer this question, like in the- in the like, clearest way, is like, a pre-done thing, you know? Like something where, like, everything is out of the book, like- like- like a full-on pre-written adventure, I think removes a lot of the- the uncertainty of working with a new player.

AUSTIN: That's interesting, 'cause that way you just have everything in front of you?

ART: Right, and everything's like, been gone over by a lot of people and you know that like, you know that all the challenges are appropriate and that like-

AUSTIN: They're not gonna hit a fight where they- you're not gonna hit, like, the first adventure that we did in Scum and Villainy, where it was like, 'mmm, this is not- no one is winning. Everyone is getting, like- This is going bad, and this is not a good way to introduce someone to a new system'.

ART: Right, yeah. I think that there's like, an element there of that. I think it just makes it like, it's like playing in a playground instead of- [pause]

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: Instead of, I don't know, like playing in a- let's say- playing at the docks, [Austin laughs] with the rusty bottle.

AUSTIN: Don't do that! Well- I guess you can have a lot of fun, I guess. In this analogy are we the docks?

ART: Yeah, we're in the docks. We're mixing it up with the- with the dock dwelling-

AUSTIN: [cross] The wrong side of the tracks.

KEITH: It's rare to find a *bottle* that rusts. [Austin laughs]

ART: It's a metal bottle? [chuckles]

KEITH: It's a metal bottle? No, metal bottles exist, I'm just saying they are rare, so if you find one, let loose! [Ali laughs]

ART: You would think they would be making them out of some sort of non-rusting material, because-

AUSTIN: [cross] I would think that.

ART: -Bottles hold liquids most of the time.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

[Everyone laughs]

AUSTIN (cont.): Sometimes they hold ships. But-

KEITH: Well, I mean it is part of the new health fad 'rust water'.

AUSTIN: Oh, yeah. That's-

ART: [cross] We're not as far from that as you'd think.

KEITH: [cross] Do we need a coffee replacement?

AUSTIN: Is that not a thing?

KEITH: No, I-

AUSTIN: Is that not a thing already? I feel like it has to be.

KEITH: The closest thing I can think of is the Instagram ad for 'mud water'.

AUSTIN: [quietly] Oh my god.

KEITH: They're not mad at coffee, they're just disappointed in it. [Ali laughs]

ALI: It's the truth. So they had to put a bunch of weird stuff in some water. [Austin laughs]

KEITH: Yeah, they put like, dirt and roots in water, and it's the same colour as coffee, so.



AUSTIN: Mmm. Any other thoughts here for Tegan, any other suggestions?

KEITH: Uh, this is slightly different because my first, you know- when I was playing with people who it was their first RPG they had like, explicitly been like, 'can we do a tabletop game?'. And I was like, 'yes, but first we should play something different'. And we did a couple different things, um... We did do a prefab D&D campaign. It was fine. We also did like, we just did like an improvised, like, dice-rolling thing. Like a zombie thing? We didn't- we didn't really have any rules, I just was like, 'here is, you know, the idea of deciding what you want to do as a fake person'.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: And that actually worked out pretty well. That was, I think, the more fun thing. This was before like, I knew that there were other games that you could play. [Austin laughs] Like I didn't- I just didn't- it didn't occur to me that Dungeons and Dragons wasn't the only tabletop RPG. I didn't know.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: And so I was like, 'well I don't wanna do that', so I just like, did whatever. And, uh... [pause] I had another point... But yeah, that worked. So like, if you find something- there's a billion things that are well thought-out that are, you know, just small decision games that you can find that are- can teach people, or give people practice at playing a character.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: Or even playing themselves in a scenario.

AUSTIN: It is... [sighs] There is... So, I guess I'll give a straight answer first, which is like, there are actually a lot of great two-player RPGs out there that are like, a cool way to just have that sort of tight focus. And actually, honestly, there's a lot of roleplaying games you can do with two players. I think about something like, you could do a really great two-player game of Masks, actually. Or when I say two-player I mean a GM and a player, because you think about, like, superheroes? It turns out superheroes are like, often not team-based stories, they're- they're singular characters- they're-

KEITH: 'Teen' or 'team'? 'Cause it is both.

AUSTIN: 'Team'. It is both, but I am saying it does not have to be a team, a *team*-based-

KEITH: 'Cause Masks does have to be teen-based.

AUSTIN: It does need- Well, yeah. Yes it does. Uh, but if you look around for like, two-player games, you'll find a pretty big list. And I think that there's a degree to which finding something built for two-players is a useful way to start, because- for the reason that Art was talking about,

which is like, you don't need to, um, you don't need to balance- you don't need to like assume that the game- the game won't assume that you're gonna be a party of four who has like healing and blah blah blah.

AUSTIN (cont.): That's the straight answer. My- my *real* answer, like, the thing in my gut, is like, if you're going to do this [chuckles], which for me is a kind of a big 'if', if your partner has not shown a lot of excitement for it, or hasn't shown any personal direct interest, it should be something that is based in what you know about her, and what she likes. Does she really love science fiction stories? Then, like, try to find something that fits that. Does she really like, you know, the idea of, um, of, you know, ghost stories or horror or something? Like, maybe find something in that space that you can start playing with. Something like Ten Candles, something like, you know, Dread. There are ways to find games that fit- that will tie into an interest that she already has, and that is not something where you feel like you are, um... You need to bring her along twice: first to the game, and then to the genre. So I think that's one.

AUSTIN (cont.): Another way to do that is just like, what is a world she already likes? What is a world that she- that you together are already invested in? Is there a TV show? Is there a video game? Like, being able to like, play in a Dragon Age game, or being able to play in a Mass Effect game, like, or a Star Wars game? [chuckles] You know what I mean, I think about something like Star Wars, and actually maybe like a great idea for- would've been a great idea for me. Like, the thing that would have- Actually, you know what got me into tabletop roleplaying games? The first tabletop roleplaying game book I owned was the Dragon Ball Z tabletop roleplaying game.

ALI: Hell yeah.

KEITH: Damn, we gotta do a Live of that. [Austin laughs]

AUSTIN: I don't have it anymore! And it's not good!

KEITH: [cross] Oh my *god*.

KEITH (cont.): Well, that's why it's a Live and not a whole season.

AUSTIN: [cross] And not a whole season- Well.

ALI: I think my first one was the Sailor Moon one.

AUSTIN: Really?

ALI: I never played it but I owned it. Yeah.

AUSTIN: Right, no, totally, me either, I also never played it. I also never played it, but I read it front to back, I like, just completely devoured everything in that book. And that's what opened me up to the idea of playing that style of tabletop roleplaying game. And then I did the same

thing with the Star Wars, with like, the d20 Star Wars stuff that was coming out at the time, and like, that's a really good way of like, starting that process.

AUSTIN (cont.): Ali, wait, so yeah, you owned the Sailor Moon one? Was there anything else that got you into, like, RP or like, [sighs] did you have any other thoughts on this question?

ALI: Not really, because like, I came in- I came in through like, the AOL chat stuff-

AUSTIN: Right, right.

ALI: -So that was just like, a whole different avenue. Um... But yeah, I- So my- my response to this question is like- 'Cause that's a good idea, I think that starting in a universe that like, already exists and being like, 'let's just play this game here so it's already familiar to you', is like, probably the thing to do because it's great.

AUSTIN: Mhm.

ALI: I love to do it. [laughs] But my suggestion, barring like a pre-built like... I know Blades has pre-made characters and things like that-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: -And a system where you can just do that and be like, 'hey, here's your sheet. You don't have to worry about building a character right now, you just have to worry about, like, imagining what this person is like' is great.

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: And also, like, I don't know if the person asking this question plays a lot of board games or card games, but I feel like the ones of those where it's like, each person is playing a character that has its own skills, and everybody's working towards a thing, but like, you have your own card that has a picture of somebody and the things that you do [laughs], might be a good way to start, just getting your partner into like, feeling comfortable-

[00:40:00]

ALI (cont.): -with the small crew that you play with. And also just like, being like, 'okay you rolled a six and you used your character action that like, lets you do a thing, what do you think that looks like?' is a really good way to ease in to like, just getting into a character, and then also like, having fun playing the structure of a game if she needs to start from like-

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: -Floor one, right. 'Cause that's just a way to have a good time. [laughs] When she has that good time, she's like 'yeah, okay I'll do the like, 'roleplaying 102' now. But yeah.

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally. I think that's a great- that's- yeah.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: I just wanna take a brief note, because I wanna note that the Dragon Ball Z- 'Dragon Ball Z: The Anime Adventure Game' is the name of it, it was published by R. Talsorian who you might know also published Cyberpunk 2020 and Cyberpunk, you know, the original, and Cyberpunk Version 3, which was written by Mike Pondsmith, who is rad. Mike Pondsmith also wrote the Dragon Ball Z: Anime Adventure game!

KEITH: Wow.

AUSTIN: So the person who did, like- the person who built the world and game of Cyberpunk, that like, the original Netrunner card game was based in, and that the new upcoming Cyberpunk 2077 is based in, that world? The author of that also made the Dragon Ball Z adventure game. The Dragon Ball Z tabletop RPG. He also made a game called Mechton Zeta, which if you can guess [chuckles], is just a Gundam or Macross game basically, but with the serial numbers filed off. None of these games like- I don't think any of these games hold up to contemporary like, um, play st- not standards, but like, conventions?

AUSTIN (cont.): But, boy is it funny that Mike Pondsmith did all this stuff. Mike Pondsmith is rad. Mike Pondsmith is like, at this point, a kind of middle-aged black dude who's like- there's some great videos of him wearing a leather jacket and sunglasses and explaining what Cyberpunk is while he walks around Los Angeles. I think he might be a Libertarian, he might be, but it's like... [sighs] It's one of those things that's like, he's a Libertarian the way a lot of 80s punks had a Libertarian streak, you know, left Libertarian?

KEITH: He hasn't yet said that his games aren't political.

AUSTIN: [laughs] He has not said that! In fact he said the opposite of that. He has actually said very clearly that Cyberpunk 2020 is like, absolutely a critique of- of like, the- that era of big- big- kind of like the allegiance between big government and big, uh megacorporations, right? So, so yeah. He has not Chris Avellone'd us. I'm so fucking mad, Keith.

KEITH: Oh my god. Did you see my fucking- I tweeted some interview that I read from four years ago-

AUSTIN: Uh-huh.

KEITH: -Where he basically said, like, literally the opposite thing.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh? Yeah, I know. I know. [sighs]

KEITH: [cross] Dumbass.

ART: Um, I have two things.

AUSTIN: Yes.

ART: One: I think I mentioned this to someone, but my mom owns the Rocky and Bullwinkle roleplaying game-

ALI: Oooh.

ART: -That comes with puppets.

KEITH: Wow.

AUSTIN: Wow.

ART: And we need to make that, like, a live show one day. That needs to be a live show because of the puppet aspect.

AUSTIN: Mhm.

ART: We just need to figure that out someday.

AUSTIN: We have to figure it out.

ART: Two: And I don't wanna like-

KEITH: [cross] Now, can I use my own Rocky and Bullwinkle puppets that I have?

ART: I mean, we'll have to see. They have to be in scale with the other puppets.

AUSTIN: Oh! I should note, on that note really quick, the Dragon Ball Z book also has rules for playing with uh- uh- action figures. So similar situation.

ALI: Oooh.

ART: Great. Love it. Um, and I don't wanna like, get too analytical here on this question, but you also have to like, be aware that maybe you're getting a soft no already.

AUSTIN: Right. Can you say that again because you broke up a little bit? But I kind of get-

ART: Oh, sorry, yeah. You to be like, aware that- that the- You know, being supportive and not expressing interest in joining in might be a secret no.

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: And that you should be like, prepared to like, do some work and make this happen and have the answer be like, 'you know, I'm not super, uh-

AUSTIN: [cross] -Into this.

ART: -into it'.

AUSTIN: Yeah. And that's okay. Like, that is one of the biggest, most important things I learned as I was growing up and becoming an adult was: my partner's and my interests do not need to overlap one hundred percent. It's nice when there's good overlap and you can find activities to do that everyone is happy with, but like, you don't need to be mirrors of each other.

AUSTIN (cont.): And, in fact, like every good relationship I've been in has been about finding-being with people who open up my expectations, and like, bring me to- into things that I've never thought of before or that I thought I would like. Or, often, are with people with interests that have nothing to do with me, and that are like, they're off doing that this weekend, and that is cool and like, hell yeah for them, the relationship does not need to be the be-all and end-all of your lives together. And it's actually, in my experience, been very healthy to have partners who have other stuff going on, and for me to be able to have stuff that I have with like, oh, this is with this group of friends. It doesn't have to be all-consuming in that way. And so, I'm just saying that to pre-empt - if that is a soft no, as Art suggested it could be - that does not mean- you don't have to read that as being a problem, necessarily. This is not a relationship advice show, though I bet-

KEITH: [cross] -Not yet anyway.

AUSTIN: -We could do an okay one of those. [Everyone laughs] But, you know, I think that that's- I stand by what I just said.

KEITH: [referencing TV show talked about before recording] Look, if we can- if we can- if the guy that yells at bar owners can do it, we can do it.

AUSTIN: Did that start yet, are we missing that right now?

KEITH: It's today.

ALI: It's premiering tonight.

ART: It's at ten- ten eastern, so not yet.

AUSTIN: Oh, so we're gonna make it? Okay. Great. [joking] Can't wait.

ALI: [cross] Stay tuned.

AUSTIN: I'm gonna ask the question, if we're ready.

ALI: Stay tuned for our Marriage Rescue live stream after? [Austin and Ali laugh]

KEITH: Yeah, we'll just stay on and do a commentary talk.

AUSTIN: [cross] We'll stay right here, yeah.

ART: It's not on in this timezone. You and I can't watch it, Ali.

ALI: [disappointed] Oh...

AUSTIN: I'll figure it out. Let me just-

KEITH: What?

AUSTIN: -We'll find an illegal stream.

KEITH: [cross] Yeah we'll stream it, do a rabb.it stream.

AUSTIN: We are not gonna do that! And you shouldn't do it either. You can support this stream by going to [laughs] [friendsatthetable.cash](https://friendsatthetable.cash) [Ali laughs].

AUSTIN (cont.): Um, Riley-

ART: And watching Marriage Rescue!

AUSTIN: [laughs] Riley writes in and says:

[00:46:30] AUSTIN (as Riley): "So, I'm very passionate about tabletop roleplaying games, and when I'm passionate about things, I tend to wanna talk about them with other people, and the way I talk about them ends up being kind of overwhelming and disorganised. This particular hyperfixation is weirder for me than most, because one: it's more obscure than usual, and two: even people who play stuff like D&D often don't know anything outside of popular games. I work at a summer camp where a bunch of the counsellors and campers play stuff like D&D and since I'm going to be the tabletop roleplaying game specialist this coming summer, I'm going to be talking about games a *lot*, and I want to be able to do that without coming off as an asshole who scoffs at nerds who play D&D, or whatever, while still recommending cool games that I play. It's just hard to find a good place to start with, with the wide breadth of games out there, and my horrible ADHD brain."

AUSTIN: That's Riley's turn- that's Riley's quote about her own brain, that is not me making that claim.

AUSTIN (as Riley cont.): “Basically, my question is, do you have any tips for talking about tabletop roleplaying games with people who don’t know much about them like you are a normal human person?”

AUSTIN (cont.): This is a hard question, because- it’s a hard question but it’s a good question, because I think it’s actually pretty applicable to a lot of interests. Especially once you get into a really specialized place, it can be really hard to talk about- even to talk about something video games with a wide audience, even though video games are such a bigger thing culturally than tabletop roleplaying games are, or maybe not even, we don’t even have to go to bigger things, but like, D&D is kind of *the* tabletop roleplaying game, in a way that is not true for video games, right?

AUSTIN (cont.): Even though video games certainly have a kind of, um, a deeply homogenous and, uh, you know, kind of hegemonic like, set of standards and like, ‘this is what a triple A video game looks like’, it looks like Call of Duty or Madden or Skyrim, like pick one of the three, that’s it. There is still inside of that more breadth than just the one, so I do get that. But I think even if you’re talking about sports, if you’re talking about music, it’s so easy to be that person who is like, ‘I want to talk to you about this, like,’- You should look at Keith and me sending music suggestions back and forth [Keith laughs loudly] from the other day.

KEITH: I mean I’m the- I used- I mean- I- [cross] I was the worst version of this person.

AUSTIN: [cross] You are more or less the person- Keith, you are this person. Keith, there is video footage of you-

KEITH: I know! I know. I know.

AUSTIN: -Like, being this person with music, right?

KEITH: Yeah, well- yeah. I don’t know about mu- Yeah, probably. [Austin laughs]

KEITH (cont.): [animatedly] And, and, and here’s the funniest thing about that, is that like, I probably like, if I was as bad now as I was then I would probably have that same attitude about ho- the music I used to listen to!

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: Like, I would be just as displeased with former me as former me was with some fuckin’ regular person listening to whatever god damn thing they want. [Austin laughs]

AUSTIN: My point is-

ART: [cross] [sarcastic] I hate when people listen to whatever they want. [Austin laughs]



KEITH: Well- well so- Sorry, Austin, you had a point, you can finish your point, but I have very strong opinions on this.

AUSTIN: Well, alright- Let me actually just make this point very quickly, which is: if it's your job to do this thing, the best thing I can say for you to do is to lean into that enthusiasm, but to lean particularly into your positive feelings about the stuff you like, and figuring out ways to-

[00:50:00]

AUSTIN (cont.): -identify the elements of the stuff that you like that is very clear, and that does not require expertise to talk about. And I know that sounds hard because it is hard. It is a difficult thing that comes with practise. I say that as someone who writes a lot about complex games, and who has to talk about them a lot, and who has absolutely done the thing you are worried about to people on this call, where I'm like- This is every- this is our fucking Discord every year before we get to the next season! This is me being like, [laughs] 'y'all have to look at this PDF, this next game we're doing is great! Let me link thirty different things from all of the different playbooks, and all of the different- look at this weird rule for downtime! Look at this cool ability this one class has!' Like, complete hyperfixation in that exact same way, and like-

ART: Austin, I want you to know that I've only clicked on like, thirty percent of the links you've ever sent me in that state.

AUSTIN: I know!

ART: And I'm not sorry.

AUSTIN: It's not for you, it's for me! [Ali laughs] You know, I'm sending it because-

KEITH: You just get excited.

AUSTIN: -I get excited and it's about the process of- of beginning to conceptualise stuff, and like, saying it- putting it into the world helps me find the shape in the marble, you know what I mean? Every link I send you is like- is like taking the chisel to the idea of what the next season is. And when I'm doing it right, it is when I've identified something that is easily communicable, that is only thirty words instead of three hundred, and that is not necessarily about my- isn't one hundred percent about my excitement, it's about me being excited to play something with *you*.

AUSTIN (cont.): And so that is my like, one tip here is just like, really focus on your positivity and not their limited knowledge and their limited, like, D&D-loving shit. And maybe also like, figure out why they like D&D, and draw lines from it. Like... Do they like doing big damage numbers? Do they like finding a cool build? Do they like, like- like a high adventure? What is it about D&D that your players, or that the uh- um- campers? Is that what we call people who go to camp?

ART: Campers? Yeah.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: What they like about D&D, and find a way to draw a line to the things you do like, if that makes sense.

AUSTIN (cont.): Keith, you have big feelings.

KEITH: Yeah, I- so, this- I mean, this is obvious- this is- I think a lot of people go through a period when they go like, 'oh I was an asshole about this thing, for no- for *no* reason', right, and it's like, you know, there's a shift away from feeling very passionately that some person is doing something wrong, into like, 'well [laughs] that person just likes something that I don't like', and that's all that it is, really.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: And when two people- when people are like, are agreeing to talk about something, then that's a great time to say what you do and don't like about something and critique a thing and compliment another thing, or share like- swap- But if someone just likes Dungeons and Dragons, or if someone likes music that I don't like, I can't just go like 'ugh, blugh' [laughs].

KEITH (cont.): Because it's like the same thing as- Yesterday I told Ali I wouldn't eat a Domino's pizza if someone gave it to me. Which is hyperbolic [Ali laughs], because I probably would- I wouldn't be rude about it, but I definitely would be like, 'ugh, why are we getting Domino's pizza, ever?' [Austin laughs] *But*, if this was like a stranger, or if this was someone that I didn't feel like I could say, 'I would never eat a Domino's pizza because it's trash' to, then I wouldn't. And like, finding the line between snob and like, whatever's one less- Like, snob's the middle point, right? Like I try to be on the- the right-

AUSTIN: You want to be a trendsetter, you want to be a... What do you want to be? What is the right side of snob?

KEITH: I just- I just like the stuff that I like and that's fine. And-

AUSTIN: But like, do you wanna- This is- I think Riley's position is, literally her job this summer is going to be opening up- Actually it's not. Her job this summer is 'tabletop roleplaying games specialist'. And there's a way to do that where it's just D&D.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: *Or*, she can do it where her goal is to figure out ways to get people to eat things that aren't Domino's. Or like-

KEITH: That's what I mean, yeah. Like it's-

AUSTIN: Help them figure out other foods that they like-

KEITH: Right, yeah.

AUSTIN: -And in this case, foods that they like are The Quiet Year.

KEITH: And I think that the food analogy works. It's very easy, if someone's only ever had Domino's, to be like, you know, like, 'oh, you like cheese and sauce on a bread? Here, have a try this pizza! Pizzas- All kinds of pizzas can be good, maybe'.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: Different kinds of pizzas can be good too, for other reasons- or even the same reasons. But it's like yeah, I totally understand the feeling of like, no one in my life wants to hear me talk about like, between one and ten different things [Austin laughs] that I'm interested in.

AUSTIN: The other thing that I've run into with this is you don't want to overhype it. And like, I think part of this is you have to feel that sting a couple times, when you are in love with a thing and you like, give it the hard sell, and then people don't like it, and it fucking sucks.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Because you're like, 'but I love this thing!' and they're like, '[noncommittally] yeah'.

KEITH: You've gotta match- You've gotta match energy! You have-

AUSTIN: And... I think it's a lesson hard-learned. You're right. You do have to match energy.

KEITH: Like if someone is super fucking jazzed about Dungeons and Dragons, then you can like, match that energy and be really jazzed about a different game. Like, 'oh, if you're really excited about that-

ALI: Yeah.

KEITH: -then you can be really excited about something else maybe'.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: Whereas if they're like, 'yeah, I like this thing' you can't just go from- you can't go from fifteen miles an hour to sixty miles an hour on roleplaying games. Like, 'oh, if you think Dungeons and Dragons is only okay, then I'm gonna fucking blow your *mind*!' [Austin, Ali and Keith laugh]

ART: Oh-

AUSTIN: Ali, it sounded like you had something here too. Oh, either of you.

ART: Go on Ali.

ALI: Yeah, I think that there is a little bit of the, like, ping-ponginess that you guys were just trying to get into. Which is like, especially since it's like your coworkers, I was trying to think of like, when I talked to my coworkers about video games a lot, like when I sold them, or you know, whenever.

AUSTIN: Mhm.

ALI: Where it's like, 'oh, you know, what did you do in D&D last night? Oh, you have an elf that you really like?'

AUSTIN: Yes.

ALI: '-like, oh the Dungeon World elf class is really cool'. And you can kind of like, tit for tat there-

AUSTIN: Mmm.

ALI: -Where you can have [laughs] an actual conversation about it 'cause you're also interested in the games that they're playing. Um... It's- You know, it might be a hard onboarding process [laughs].

AUSTIN: [laughs] I- I- think-

KEITH: Yeah, I mean, it's a job, so they have to do work. [Austin and Ali laugh]

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: That's the work. The work is doing that part [laughs].

AUSTIN: -Doing this. I mean, like, the other thing here is... So, one is, like, if you're actually asking me how do I sell someone on the idea of a game, I do have strategies for that. And it's like, it's what I use whenever I review a game I like a lot, right? Which is like, try to capture the experience of what you love, instead of giving a bullet point list of the game features. So instead of saying that the reason that, like, Dungeon World is good is because it has X classes and because you roll 2d6, and the 2d6 has a good curve on it, and that [Ali and Keith laugh] there's cool abilities. Tell a story. Right?

AUSTIN (cont.): I recently told a story I've told here a bunch about why- I was on the Beastcast like, last month and I told a story about why I like- about why I personally have had good experience with encumbrance in games, even though that whole podcast hates encumbrance mechanics. I told a story about a Torchbearer game in which I had to make a hard decision while robbing some Orcs: did I want to keep my rations or this really expensive carpet I found? And when I told that story I wasn't talking about like, 'well you have to understand, in

Torchbearer there are- you know- you have X number of inventory slots, and then on top of that you have to think about weight, [Ali laughs] and then also blah blah blah.'

AUSTIN (cont.): I- I alighted all of the actual mechanics to get to the story part, and I think that if you were trying to sell someone on something like The Sprawl, I wouldn't say, 'there's this mechanic where all these clocks are ticking'. What I would try to emphasise is the *feeling* of clocks ticking. What I would try to emphasise is the feeling of vulnerability, the ways- If I was thinking about something Blades in the Dark I would try to sell the ways in which players can work together in order to increase their chances of winning, and the ways in which, like, heists go wrong and things snowball in fun ways. And I would- I would do that by telling a story. I would do that by trying to be evocative and paint a picture and talk about what-

AUSTIN (cont.): People respond well to stories more so than mechanics if they aren't experts, right? If they can't see why something like, um, the- the- getting a crit and clearing stress is exciting on dice rolls in Blades in the Dark, you can still tell that story, by explaining that someone did this incredible feat of dynamism and strength so well that they were like, teetering on the brink of like, personal mental collapse, but they saved their friend, and saving their friend gave them the confidence they needed to like, finish the heist, right? And when you tell that story that way, people are gonna be like, 'wait, you did that in a game?' And they're not- And instead of being like, 'yawn. You just said roll 2d6. I don't know what a d6 is. Did you mean 26? Did you mean you rolled 26?' [laughs] So I think like, that is my actual- If you're going to give someone the hard sell on a thing, bring them in.

[01:00:00]

AUSTIN (cont.): Which actually means thinking a lot about your own experience with games that you love, and trying to narrativise it, even if the actual experience was not necessarily as clean as that.

KEITH: That's a- The last bit there I think is really important, where it's like- and I think it's part of like, matching energy, where it's like- like, you have to play to your audience, and the good news is that if you're at a camp, people are probably signing up to do the thing that you're in charge of, not- it's not like they're just sending every kid to go play tabletop games, probably. I'm guessing? Um-

AUSTIN: Yeah, from talking to Riley, I think that like, it's a situation where- where there will be a lot of roleplaying games being played. Like, that is what she is in charge of-

KEITH: Uh-huh.

AUSTIN: -So there will be like, a situation where- It isn't just like, she's there as a camp counsellor and also like, will sometimes run a D&D game, you know?

KEITH: Right.

AUSTIN: It's like, it's like the equivalent of being like, the swimming instructor, or the crafts instructor, you know?

KEITH: But the- So swimming instructor is good, right, like, you can't talk Olympic swimming strategies-

AUSTIN: Yes.

KEITH: -To someone who is there to learn how to swim.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yes.

KEITH: You have to- like- [everyone laughs]

AUSTIN: [laughing] Well, okay fine, but think about how funny- [Keith laughs loudly] Well, actually, two things. One: it's super funny to think about. Two: Art and I took bowling from a professional bowler once, and that is literally exactly what he did. [Ali laughs]

KEITH: Oh wow, that's so funny.

AUSTIN: He one hundred percent was like- like the first thing he did was he- You know what- you know what a bowling lane looks like? You know-

KEITH: I do, yeah.

AUSTIN: -There's the bowling lane- I'm not talking about candlepin bowling, either.

KEITH: The lanes look very similar.

AUSTIN: Okay. So you know there's like the ball distribution area?

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Like the machine? Okay, so, imagine he was behind that, like closer to the little like, area that goes back up a level, you know? And like where the shoes and shit are, so he was at the very end-

ART: [cross] He was behind the ball return, he was all the way back.

AUSTIN: He was all the way back. On his knees. And then he threw a strike. And that was the way he introduced himself to us.

ALI: [gasps] Wow...

ART: He was in the bowling hall of fame, he was a big deal. [Austin laughs]

AUSTIN: We got Quiznos a lot that year, that was cool, remember that?

ART: That was a- I don't think Quiznos even exists anymore.

AUSTIN: Is it gone?

KEITH: No, no, you can- If you go to the right mall, you can find a Quiznos.

AUSTIN: [laughing] There's one left in one mall? [Keith laughs]

ART: [returning to question] Um... I think there's like two things here?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: One: you should play some D&D with campers.

AUSTIN: Yeah, definitely.

ART: Just- And like, don't be too cool for it, and just like, have as good a time as you can. And like, D&D is fine, honestly. You can have- anyone can have a good time playing D&D.

AUSTIN: You can eat Domino's! It's not- You're gonna eat it.

KEITH: Yeah-

ALI: Yeah!

KEITH: -It's gonna be fine. If you don't want the pizza, just get the breadsticks, they're better.

ALI: Mmm, what's the D&D equivalent?

ART: [cross] And then to like, drill down into, 'do you have tips for talking about tabletop roleplaying games with people who don't know much about them like you're a normal human person?' I absolutely do not have any tips for that. [Everyone laughs]

ALI: No...

ART: And let me tell you what makes that harder, is having it be your job. People ask what I do, and it's like the most stressful 45 seconds of my day, because like, 'well I do like business development and I'm a cast member on a podcast', and like, the *best* case scenario is they just say, 'okay' and start talking about something else. [Everyone laughs]

KEITH: Oh no.

ART: But like, when people wanna know like, 'oh, what's your podcast?', 'oh, it's an actual play podcast. We play, um-'

AUSTIN: You've already fucked up. You've already fucked up, you don't say the name of the genre.

ALI: Yeah. Yeah...

KEITH: I feel like where I go, people ask me and they *won't* stop asking questions and these conversations last like an hour.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Yes. This happened to me recently. Remember I gave that talk at Pomona? So the day after that I had to do something that in retrospect is so scary, and I'm so glad I was just tired and could just go do it, and not have to stress about it, which is I had like a three hour luncheon that was just like, academics from twelve different academic fields, including one who was like, a little too upset that alt-right people had been driven off of Patreon, by the way! And, they like were just-

KEITH: [away from mic] No offense but people that went to school suck.

AUSTIN: [laughs] So, they were like grilling me for three hours, and one of those hours was just, 'what is your podcast?' over and over again. So Art, it is- it is- the nightmare is real, I am with you.

ALI: No, yeah. It's so bad. I have to explain what my job to, like, fifteen plus family members all of the time?

AUSTIN: Mhm.

ALI: [laughing] And they're all just like, 'oh what's that radio show that you're on?' and I'm like, 'yeah, it's just- it's- yep, that's what it is. And it's great.'

ALI: [cross] Me and my friends play a game.

ART: [cross] I want us to start utilising rugs.

KEITH: [cross] Hang out and you can all listen to it.

ALI: [laughing] It's so bad. I-

AUSTIN: It's- The thing to pitch is that we are telling- It's, 'hey, have you heard of Game of Thrones?' or-

ALI: Right.



AUSTIN: -‘have you heard of Blade Runner? Or have you heard of Voltron?’ Or whatever the fuck the person you’re talking to has definitely heard of.

ART: I fucking live in LA, I can’t be like, ‘have you heard of Game of Thrones?’ because then people are gonna be like, ‘oh you work for Game of Thrones?’ [Keith laughs]

AUSTIN: Okay, so, have you heard of... What’s a thing that people, like, don’t like, but they know it’s a thing, so they’re not gonna get excited that you work on it? [long pause] Friends at the Table.

ART: [cross] I don’t know, do you know like, that bad Hobbit movie?

ALI: [cross] Can you say, like, Lord of the Rings and then they’re like, ‘those movies don’t come out anymore’ and you can be like, ‘no no no, it’s like that-’

KEITH: No, the Amazon one. They’re doing an Amazon one.

ALI: Really?

AUSTIN: It’s like Final Fantasy.

ALI: Ooo.

AUSTIN: It’s like Final Fantasy, except-

KEITH: [joking] What’s Final Fantasy?

AUSTIN: They know what the fuck Final Fantasy is.

KEITH: Nah, I don’t know. I don’t know.

AUSTIN: They know who Sephiroth is!

KEITH: No, I barely know who Sephiroth is!

ALI: [cross] No...

ART: Do you think *all* of my wife’s cousins know who Sephiroth is?

AUSTIN: Fuck. They know who Frodo is.

KEITH: They know who Frodo is.

ALI: Austin, I keep asking people- ‘Cause like, Stranger Things is a thing now, and like, Big Bang Theory is a thing now, and-

AUSTIN: Right, people know what D&D is.

ALI: No, they don't! They don't, Austin.

AUSTIN: What? Stranger Things- Okay, wait, one-

ALI: No.

AUSTIN: -Yes they do, 'cause D&D is- D&D Fifth Edition has sold more than every previous edition of D&D put together. That is how big D&D is.

KEITH: Yeah, D&D is like a big culture thing now.

AUSTIN: So you're right, your family does not know what D&D is, I'm not saying that's not the case. [Ali laughs] And like, and like for what it's worth parts of my family I can not tell- I can not use the words D&D with, 'cause they will think I'm going to hell. [Keith laughs] Because they are those sorts of Christians still-

ALI: Mmm, yeah.

AUSTIN: -One hundred percent. But, the point is, the way you tell this story- the way you pitch what this is, is like, I think you focus in on storytelling. You focus in on like, it's a bunch of us, it's like a- You're in LA, Art, it's like we're basically recording a writer's room but that has rules. That has some dice in it, you know?

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN: Have you heard of- Have you heard of craps? [laughs] It's like that, but a writer's room.

ART: [confused] Craps? Did you say- Like the dice game?

AUSTIN: I did, like the dice game. Yeah. Like us. That's what we do. You roll some dice-

KEITH: It's like cr- It's story cra- narrative craps.

AUSTIN: Narrative craps.

ART: 'Story craps' is about what we do, yeah. [Austin laughs]

KEITH: Can you win a lot of money like that?

AUSTIN: We do alright, Keith. [Ali laughs] Let me tell you, we do okay. I'd like to do better, but we do good. I'm happy with the support we have, thank you to everyone who's supporting us, [whispers] friendsatthetable.cash.

ART: Umm, yeah, okay.

KEITH: I had someone that was recently- that was really confused about what I do and I spent a half an hour like, explaining it, and then they said, uh, they said, “Oh, like The Adventure Zone?”

AUSTIN: Right, that’s what you should say.

ALI: Yeah.

KEITH: And I was just like yeah, it’s lit- it’s that.

AUSTIN: It’s just that.

KEITH: And then I was like-

AUSTIN: [cross] The Adventure Zone is a best-selling book.

KEITH: They were so confused about what my thing was, and I was confused, I was like, “Do you like- Do you like, play roleplaying games? Do you know- How do you know- Do you listen to the other, like, podcasts that they do?” And he was just like, “No, I just found it one day and I listened to all of it.” It was so bizarre.

AUSTIN: Huh.

KEITH: Because he still didn’t seem to understand what I did! [Austin laughs].

ART: Um-

ALI: Yeah. My-

ART: [cross] No, go ahead.

AUSTIN: Ali?

ALI: No, I’m just gonna say really quickly, my cousin the other day- like I was trying to have this conversation with her, and then she asked me how many hours a week I worked? [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah. [Ali laughs] Uh-huh.

ALI: My mind- Because I was like, you’re supposed to be cool, why did you ask me *that* of all things?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Can I say the worst thing I’ve ever heard a person say in a meeting?

ALI: Sure.

AUSTIN: This is just, this is nothing to do with what we’re talking about. I’m gonna drag someone I work with real quick. I’m not gonna use names. One person I work with said-

ART: [cross] Patrick.

AUSTIN: It was *not* Patrick. It was no one at Waypoint. [Art laughs] It was someone, it was Vice generally- A general Vice situation. Someone was leaving Vice because they had another opportunity, or they had another thing- They were leaving Vice. I know why they were leaving, I'm not saying why they were leaving. And this is someone who is- This person, they said, um, uh, "Yeah, I was just talking to my partner-" or no, "I was just talking to my- my ex-partner and my husband" by which they meant the same person. And, which was like, hm, if you don't know them, you don't know what their situation is, "Hm," that's an adequate response. What another person in that room said was, "So wait, do you still file your taxes together?"

[Ali and Art laugh loudly]

AUSTIN: And then, for ten to fifteen minutes, just drilled in. "What was that like? Oh, so they weren't from this country originally," like, just *drilled in*. It was the most awkward conversation I was ever a part of.

KEITH: Oh, so the- the ex-partner wasn't a present husband, it was-

AUSTIN: No. Wait, yes, yes, yes. Ex-partner, present husband.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: But they're not partners anymore. They're not together but they're still married.

KEITH: Oh! I understand.

AUSTIN: You see what I'm saying?

KEITH: Yeah, yeah. How do they file their taxes? [laughs]

AUSTIN: See? It's fucking- Keith god dammit. [Keith laughs]

[01:10:00]

Um, briefly, because you had actually a good point before we got way sidetracked Art. Which was: play D&D. I just really wanna underscore for Riley, like, if you're GMing it, you get to make that game whatever the fuck you want. [Ali laughs] And you can lead them to the parts of D&D that you think are still interesting, and can focus in when you see them get excited and be like, 'Aha, here's a direction I can go with to get them off this shit,' [laughs] 'and onto like, my handcrafted artisan pizza.' You know?

KEITH: Mmm.

AUSTIN: So. Alright-

KEITH: Thin crust, deep dish, any size crust you want!

AUSTIN: Damn. Any size. Alright, we're gonna keep moving. This one comes in from Tor. She says:

[01:10:48] AUSTIN (as Tor): "I have been playing in a weekly Fifth Edition campaign for years. We all spend a lot of time thinking and talking about the game outside of play and sometimes I'll veer into fanfiction. What happened to that NPC after we left them? What hijinks did my character get up to before we met her? Although I think of these exercises as happening outside of canon, I know that as a player my imagination influences the game. It's tough to avoid stepping on my GM's toes, especially when he knows more about this world - that he built - than we do. Usually I know my role as a fan, I know the line between the thing I love and my own- and my own thoughts. When I'm a player and a part of a thing, I feel my role as a fan getting blurrier. This may not be applicable to your experience with Friends at the Table specifically, both because it's so collaborative and because you're putting out an actual product, but do you have any thoughts on this relationship between being a fan and being a player? Have you had to reckon with it before?"

AUSTIN (cont.): Thanks Tor. I am gonna talk last, because I wanna know what y'all think as players here. I definitely have thoughts about this, but... I'm curious.

ART: [cross] If I came to you with an idea, and you said that I was stepping on your toes, I would be so mad, I would be mad for- I would tell everyone I met that week about how mad I was.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Like if you'd come to me with what? Like uh- like uh- 'I've- I have, like, Hadrian thoughts' and I'm like, 'No.'

ART: Yeah, and you were like no- I would just be pissed for like a week.

AUSTIN: [laughs] So, this person you're saying is in her rights to like, be thinking outside-

ART: Absolutely!

AUSTIN: Yeah, uh-huh.

ART: This is- this is a- you're c- It's a collaborative effort! You have, like, there's no 'knows more about the world than you do', it doesn't exist! It's not like it's Germany, like! [Austin laughs] I don't know anything about Germany but I-

AUSTIN: [cross] Wait, quick, wait just- Tor, if you're in the chat, I just need to clarify, um, I don't know if you are, but if you are: is it Germany? Does the game take place in Germany? [Everyone laughs] Is your GM German?

KEITH: [cross] [laughing] Is it Germany? Wait, and then also, are you not German slash know nothing about Germany?

AUSTIN: [laughs] 'Cause if so, I think we've found an exception.

ART: I mean yeah, if that's true- If you're playing some like, Crusader Kings 2 hyper-realistic, you know, Dynasty Warriors thing-

AUSTIN: Phew.

ART: -I'm gonna- I lost my reference there-

AUSTIN: Crusader Kings Dynasty Warriors sounds *great*.

ART: Yeah.

KEITH: Yeah. Well, I've been playing that a lot, and-

AUSTIN: [away from mic] [laughs] You have! You literally have!

KEITH: Yeah, it's really good! Not only have I been playing it, but I forgot most of the stuff that I learned about Romance of the Three Kingdoms so I've been listening to a Romance of the Three Kingdoms podcast while I've been playing it. [Art laughs loudly]

AUSTIN: Wait, which one?

KEITH: Uh, it's called, uh- 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast-

AUSTIN: Great name.

KEITH: -Number Three Kingdoms Podcast dot com'.

AUSTIN: Is it good?

KEITH: It's good yeah. It's good because I listened- I saw a couple and um- and uh a few of them were like, a guy like- a white guy who read the book and did a podcast about it or something? And then this one was like, it's specifically about like- He's from China and he's like- 'I'm highlighting the stuff that is super influential that, like, stuck around' like that- that other people aren't covering. There are absurdly detailed resources on his website, like, keeping track of who died and when. There's a flowchart of everybody's relationships to everybody else.

AUSTIN: Wow.

KEITH: It is *wild*. Also, all these dudes suck so bad! It's great.

AUSTIN: Oh yeah. Uh-huh.

KEITH: They all suck! Even the ones who- Even like, even like the guy that everyone's like, 'this is the- this is the good guy-'

AUSTIN: Who, Lu Bei?

KEITH: -He is awful- Yeah.

AUSTIN: Lu Bei fucking sucks.

*CW: cannibalism [01:14:30]*

KEITH: He fucking sucks! He sucks so bad. I haven't- I didn't get to this part but somebody tweeted at me that like, his friend fed him his wife 'cause they were out of meat!

AUSTIN: [shouts] Yo!

KEITH: And it was like, Lu Bei was like, 'Thank you, excellent job.'

AUSTIN: *Fuck.*

KEITH: [shouting] Outrageous! Yeah, yeah!

AUSTIN: [shocked] Keith, give me a heads up next time! Before cannibalism, before misogynistic cannibalism, next time!

*End [01:14:52]*

KEITH: Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, you're right!

AUSTIN: I had a little factoid about the Three Kingdoms stuff and now it's like- There was like- I'm just gonna say it. Did you know, you know the saying that we have, um, which is uh... 'Speak of the devil'?

KEITH: Oh, I know this one, yeah. This is great.

AUSTIN: The fucking Chinese equivalent is, is 'speak of Cao Cao and he appears'. And it's like, can you imagine that like, your name in other cultures, the version of that saying with you is 'the devil'? [laughs] Love it. So good.

KEITH: Yeah. Well I mean, how could you ever think to move your armies as swiftly as Cao Cao?

AUSTIN: [laughs] Sure, you truly must be demonic in- in mental nature. [Keith laughs]

AUSTIN (cont.): Um... Anyway. I need answers to this question and not Three Kingdoms shit.

KEITH: Oh, I had- I had something that I was gonna say about it, what... what was the even question? Jesus Christ. Oh!

AUSTIN: Fan headcanon as a player? And like, if there is a line between out of character and in character, and bringing your ideas et cetera.

KEITH: [pause] I guess my- my- The thing that I'm curious about is how much is she, if at all, trying to connect this stuff, like- like bringing it into the game and then, like- like forcing it on people? Like 'I wrote this thing and we're doing it.' [Ali laughs]. I don't think- That's not what seems like it's happening. I guess that would be a point where I would consider it stepping on not just the GM's toes but everybody's toes?

AUSTIN: Mhm.

KEITH: Because, like, you know, Art's defense of this was that it's collaborative, and so- but then it works the other side too which is like, you should be doing this collaboratively. But that's- I think you would have to be like, extremely... Extremely other-sided for that to be the case.

AUSTIN: Right, right. Um, Ali? As someone who-

ALI: [cross] Um, yeah, I-

AUSTIN: Yeah, go ahead.

ALI: Yeah, I think there's definitely like- It's- The weird part about this question for me is being like 'I know my role as a fan and I feel like this is getting blurry in the tabletop game I'm a part of' because... you're a part of it. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Right. Yes.

ALI: You're allowed to have those ideas and like, make those decisions and suggest to them, and they might get vetoed, I- You know. [laughs] I've certainly- I feel like I've certainly said things about my character and other characters that you've said no to, Austin, but whatever.

AUSTIN: That seems- I'm sure that's true, right, like? [Ali laughs] But what I haven't done is made it so that you shouldn't... You still come to me with those ideas.

ALI: Right, yeah, fair.

AUSTIN: Because most of the time what I go is like, 'Oooh! Here's how we could make that work with what I do know is true about the world' or what I've already started teasing, especially, you know?



ALI: Yeah. There's also kind of the boundary here which is like, there's a difference between you saying, like, 'oh, this NPC after we met them became a doctor and I really want him to be a- I want to go to the hospital to see him later', like, that's different.

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: The GM can kind of close the door on that. But like, for you to be like, 'well I don't wanna tell the GM that my character used to do this stuff before this game' because that's your- that's *your* side of the table [laughs] as far as I'm concerned. [Austin agrees] Like-

KEITH: [interrupts] And-

ALI: -Oh. There's, um-

KEITH: No, no, you finish your point.

ALI: Yeah. There's some kind of things, like, when you think of a GM with a little folder in front of them and they're like, 'this... I have control of this stuff', some of the stuff about your own character can like... that's, you know, your board. You're okay there. You can make those decisions. But um... Not to- not that you should be like, hiding it-

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: -But I feel like, you know, if it's your character you have the kind of, the look back [?].

AUSTIN: [cross] There's one note there, and then I'll come to you Keith. The thing I just want to say there is to- And I've been on both sides of this for sure, where it's like, I know more about my character than the GM does. My one thing there that's happened to me before is, you know, six months into a game, my GM says something that contradicts my backstory that I've kept to myself, and if it's something where I'm like, 'wait, no, that doesn't line up because I xyz', I have this complete different relationship with that faction and it just hasn't come up before [laughs].

AUSTIN (cont.): And ideally the GM is supposed to be like, 'oh, cool, let's talk about what you have in mind there'. But I've definitely had GMs before who were like, 'Well no. You didn't say it, so now it's not true'. And I don't know, Tor, what your GM is like. So there is a value in saying 'I've been thinking a lot about, like, what my character thinks about the Black Eagles' or whatever. Right, like whatever the name of the faction is. And like, 'I think- I think before I joined the party, xyz happened, is that cool?' And giving them that, especially if you're like, 'oh, right, the next like, big adventure is the campaign against the Black Eagles', better to get on page with that stuff ahead of time. And your GM- I wanna just come back to all- to what all of you have said which is like, when it's your character, outside of something- outside of the GM saying like, 'Wait, but you are from the culture that the Black Eagles hate, how was it that you were part of, like, their highest ranking group of assassins?' Outside of like, literal- And even in that case-

[01:20:00]

AUSTIN (cont.): -the answer should be like, 'well here's the cool reason why I was the exception to the rule'. You know what I mean? Like, it should never- It should be about bringing both sides of the table together and finding the- the way in which your ideas influence their storytelling and their, like, um... their worldbuilding? And not just the other way, you know?

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: If that makes sense?

ALI: Yeah, by all means. I feel like you should have these ideas, it's *great* that you have these ideas; the more that you're thinking about this game the better, because if you're having fun doing it, do it. But like, if you're having them, you should communicate them as soon as possible, and not, like, feel weird about that? Because sure, some of them are gonna get vetoed. Your GM might say, like, 'oh, you know that guy Tom, I had other ideas for that character, maybe you'll run into him later'. But if you come up to him and say, like, you know, 'I love Tom as an NPC [laughs] -'

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: '-I really think it would be great if he worked at this hospital after we met him. [laughs]

AUSTIN: I mean....

ALI: 'We met him-' Like, sometimes they're gonna say no-

AUSTIN: [cross] Even that's kind of- Right. But even that's cool-

ALI: -Yeah. Yeah, like-

AUSTIN: -I would fucking love it if y'all were like, like... [struggles for words] I don't think... So Devar showed back up, right? And I feel like if you go through our Discord chat somewhere in the last three months someone was like, 'what's up with Devar? How's Devar doing?' And I was like, 'you know what, how is Devar doing? What is Devar up to?' And if one of you had come to me and was like, 'hey, what if Devar was doing this?' and it was a good idea, I'd be eager! I'd be like, 'wow, that's a really cool idea-'

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: '-let's do it!', you know what I mean? Yeah, maybe Devar is a doctor now, I hadn't thought about that. Um-

KEITH: It works great, we tried to invite-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: Ah, nevermind.

AUSTIN: And he was like, 'nah, I'm good.' [laughs]

KEITH: Yeah. Which makes that- That's very Devar!

ALI: [cross] I think, like-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: [laughs] A slight spoiler, but I'm like, so desperate to just throw that party that Hella wants to throw-

AUSTIN: I know.

ALI: -Because I just want Devar to be there [laughs].

AUSTIN: Please do! [Ali laughs harder] Um...

ALI: Oh well.

AUSTIN: Anyway.

ALI: But yeah.

AUSTIN: Um... yeah-

ALI: One final thing here-

AUSTIN: Please.

ALI: -Which is like, if you listen to this show, you, like, can hear how desperate GMs are to like, have their players be interested in their stuff, so like-

AUSTIN: [sarcastically] Wow, thanks Ali.

ALI: -Don't hold back. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Damn.

KEITH: If there's one thing we know about GMs is that they're thirsty for [everyone laughs] literally anything.

AUSTIN: 'Fun interaction between good friends' is what we're thirsty for.

ALI: [laughing] I'm just saying there's no reason to hold back!

AUSTIN: Yes. Yes. The thing that I- the thing that I hope I'm not sensing, Tor, is that you feel like you have ideas that don't like... that feel somehow contradictory to the play at the table? And if you do then for me that's all the more reason to have those conversations with the GM, because that will help the GM play a game with you that is in line with what you want. Being, like- giving the GM insight into what you think is cool about your character or NPCs is like- I mean you're already doing it, right? If this is a good GM and you are like, 'we talked in the chat and I thought about how Devar became a doctor' Devar is gonna fucking show up again. Your equivalent. And the GM should be picking up on that stuff, even if it is not canon until it's said at the table. If that makes sense.

AUSTIN (cont.): But also, here's the other thing you could do, you can just say, 'what if the things we say- what if we have a different chat in the Discord where we talk about shit that's canon?' And we say like 'ooh, this is a good idea, let's just make that canon'. You can just do that, it doesn't have to happen- We lean on the microphone, because we do release a show, but if we didn't, do you know how many weird side, like, RP conversations we would be doing, like, privately? Of just characters talking to each other, and me giving updates about various NPCs in the world and shit? Like, all the time, a hundred percent.

AUSTIN (cont.): So, I think like, you should - if you're interested in that - you should explore that with your group and see if that's something that would fit into their lives or that other people are interested in. Because as anyone I think- I don't know- I don't know, only Ali and I have done that style of like, online RP, but it's really fun to do that style of like, asynchronous worldbuilding and character building where the stakes are not 'do you kill a dragon?' and the stakes are more like, 'we had an intense conversation' or, or whatever, you know?

AUSTIN (cont.): So... That is my thought here. Um, I think... Is that it? Let me see. Do we have one more? We have one more. This is from Jack - not our Jack, a different Jack - who says:

[01:24:26] AUSTIN (as Jack): "I've been running a campaign for a few close friends for a few years now. The focus is on the three players' main characters. However, for the past year we have moved away to do small vignettes on other characters throughout the world. Soon we will be returning, focused back to the original three characters-"

AUSTIN (cont.): I just wanna say really quick, it is a, like, a *wild* lightning storm in New York right now-

ALI: Ooh.

AUSTIN: -So if I lose connection it's because I've lost power. It is like, non-stop lightning. It is- It is *unbelievable*. [laughs] So...

KEITH: Remember that blue glow?

AUSTIN: I do, I do. I could see it from the window I'm looking out right now, where now I just see non-stop lightning, so...

KEITH: Yeah! That's how I first heard it, before it was on Twitter or whatever, you were like, 'there's a glow'. [Austin, Keith and Ali laugh]

AUSTIN: It was the scariest- It was- I can't even get into it. I'm gonna continue Jack's question instead.

AUSTIN (as Jack): "-Soon, after doing these years of vignettes - or this year long of doing a bunch of vignettes - we will be returning focus back to the original three characters, but I have a few concerns. Mainly, when we last saw these characters, they were not in a good place. There was fighting in the party, and oftentimes major disagreements and arguments would erupt. To be clear, the problem isn't that my players have any problems with each other, or that they would prefer a more combat-focused less story-based game, the issue is that they do enjoy the story and conflict between these characters is natural based on their own individual motivations. As a GM, how do you balance wanting to see characters and players do what makes sense for their motivations and come to what is the natural end-point of a relationship, and wanting to see a story about the world that you've been building together for such a long time come to fruition? Basically, how do I deal with character conflict in a way that still feels true to the narrative?"

AUSTIN (cont.): Um... What do y'all think on this one, about character conflict? [thunder rumbling] As the thunder rumbles right outside my window. [Ali giggles]

KEITH: I heard that one! That was huge!

AUSTIN: Uh-huh!

KEITH: I- I feel like... I mean, Fero's a character that's had some character conflict-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: Yeah. And, uh, and I haven't- 'cause this- I just heard this question for the first time so I haven't put like, a *ton* of thought into how it happened that the story is still moving forward, but it totally did! I mean, um, uh, I guess- I guess there was a big flash forward- [chuckles]

AUSTIN: There was. There was, right?

KEITH: -That probably helped. But, like, I- like- For me, I would have *hated* it if, like, Fero was getting mad at other player characters and you were like, 'We've gotta do the story, you can't hate them' or like, 'can you-'

AUSTIN: Oh, that would've been the worst.

KEITH: '-can you tone down-', yeah! Or like, 'can you tone down this so that we can, you know, keep the party together or something?' And it's like no, Fero went off on his own, and it like- You brought the story thr- like, through despite these characters fighting. [thunder rumbles] Um... uh, like, I just feel like the best way to do it is to tie the story... Like, figure out how them fighting affects what the story is going to be.

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: Yeah. Um... [pause] Yeah, sorry, I wasn't sure if you had more there, but I think that like, yeah, I think that it can totally work. I think that there are like, Friends at the Table examples of this, especially if you're going back to this time period. Like, when we did the COUNTER/Weight finale and it was like, suddenly all of these people are part of different factions, that was like a big thing. And that was a big way to show that like, yeah, there were disagreements there and people kind of had to go their own way, but then still have to kind of, join together for this central thing. But even on like a smaller scale, like, something like Streets of Fire comes to mind, which is a movie that we just watched [Austin laughs] which is also just like, [Art laughs] that was four people-

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: -two of those dudes definitely hated each other, but like, sometimes you just have to go do the damn thing. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Um, like, characters can have individual motivations, and those motivations can be, 'I fucking hate that guy, and also I have to just do the damn thing.'

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: And finding the places in the story where that's gonna be interesting and like, leaving pathways for one character to like, you know, maybe they're all going to go get this thing, and somebody else thinks the thing should go to somebody else-

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: -Also another COUNTER/Weight example.

AUSTIN: That's also the first Friends at the Table thing. [Ali laughs] That's Phantasma Hadrien about the book.

KEITH: Yeah.

ALI: Yeah, yeah exactly.

AUSTIN: It's the *first* thing is: these people don't like each other, and there's a fight about that thing. But they are still, like, in the main forward thrust of the story, right?

ALI: Yeah.

KEITH: Well the- But the flip side of this is like... I never.... Not once in this whole season have I thought that Fero had to do anything. There have been three or four very distinct times when, like, I almost had Fero quit. Just be like, be just, 'No. No, I don't wanna do this. I don't wanna do this, I don't wanna be around these people, they drive me crazy, they're judgy. They're like, mad that I'm mad, fuck this. I'm out.' Like, that almost happened a real handful of times. But that's sort- That's like the- the... I don't- The- What I was going to say was, that's like the promise of these games for me, which I don't know if that's necessarily an overstatement or not, but like, is like, like-

[01:30:00]

KEITH (cont.): -I'm a character being presented with things and I get to react the way that I want, and uh... And you know, we make a story out of it. And that story can totally be that one of the characters hates everyone else so much that they fucking go. They just leave. Um, so...

AUSTIN: Right. That- So I mean, like, the most important thing for me here is like, the players are all on the same page, and are all happy to be playing. I think it's worth having a conversation, Jack, with your players, and say, 'do we want this to be a situation- What are-', put the options on the table. And kind of say, 'hey, we could play the thing where this is like, a tense roadtrip story where like, the final act is these people who have a greater cause in mind, but like, are kind of glaring at each other the whole time and sniping at each other, and whether they resolve those conflicts or not, who knows?'

AUSTIN (cont.): Or you could have like, the game where these characters like, go their separate ways and you end up doing the COUNTER/Weight finale thing of there being a kind of bigger picture faction conversation, and having those characters still interact, but interact in such broader timescales, and like, in passing with each other where you start to play the game in just a different scale. And I don't know what your game is, so I don't know if that even fits for you.

AUSTIN (cont.): Or, the third thing is - and this is something that I think doesn't happen enough - you could sideline these characters. You've already been playing these vignettes for a year. What if you picked a handful of those characters from those vignettes and were like, 'this is our new main party'. And the three of you can come up - or the four of you total - can come up with

what your old player characters are doing, and maybe there'll be moments when you slip back into them, but- and where like, each player ends up having multiple player characters in a sense, um, for certain sequences or certain scenes or certain games. But it's also totally possible, depending on like, where you're at in this story, that you kind of say, 'hey, those characters are such big fucking deals now, and they're working at such odds. They're working more like NPCs than they are like player characters', except you keep them in player characters' hands. Think about like, doing a faction game with those characters. There's- *Everything* is on the table for you.

AUSTIN (cont.): The thing that I don't- The thing that I sense from the question that I want to make sure you don't feel like you have to do, is like, 'how do I make it so that they wanna be in a dungeon together?', you know? 'How do I make it so, like-'

ALI: Oh, no, no. Yeah.

AUSTIN: You know? You don't have to do that. They can hate each other and either be in- you know, fight the dragon together, or not. You don't have to give- you don't have to give up... You don't have to give up the great tension you've built, because that's what a tabletop roleplaying game is supposed to be or something, you know?

ART: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that- Yeah, I think that you really nailed it with like, you can move these characters on either in all or in part, you know? I guess like, spoiler warning too, but if *Twilight Mirage* was gonna go on for another six months I would've needed a new character.

AUSTIN: Right, right. For a little while there, at least.

ART: And like, sometimes you just- you get to a point where all of your drama has crescendoed and like, it's not interesting to see, you know, not every movie needs a sequel.

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: Sometimes you get the end of your arc and it's like, yeah, that's it, I don't wanna make *Lethal Weapon 2*, you know?

AUSTIN: They did. They made that one, though. They made like, three or four of those.

ART: But should they have? Wasn't- I mean, [Austin laughs] setting aside that Mel Gibson's the worst, like, that character was done after one.

AUSTIN: Right.

KEITH: I think it really started to tank around *Live Free or Lethal Weapon*.

[quiet laughter]



AUSTIN: Uhh... Better than Lethal Weapon with a Vengeance, or? [Keith laughs]

AUSTIN (cont.): Any other thoughts on this before we wrap up?

[pause]

AUSTIN (cont.): Alright. That is going to do it for us tonight. Thank you all for hanging out, I'm gonna enjoy this thunderstorm. If you have questions, you can send them in to [tipsatthetable@gmail.com](mailto:tipsatthetable@gmail.com) and as always you can support the show by going to [friendsatthetable.cash](https://friendsatthetable.cash). Do we have any announcements, do we have anything we wanna, like, say before we wrap up? We missing anything?

ART: Um... We might have something fun for people on Tuesday?

AUSTIN: [whispering] What's on Tuesday?

ART: Oh my god. Um, we might have the- um, that Google form? How about that, what if I say that?

AUSTIN: I truly have no idea.

ALI: Oh, are we doing that then? [laughs]

ART: That's- That was the last day that we discussed for.

KEITH: Oh, is that on Tuesday? We all know what it is except for Austin. We all are getting it.

AUSTIN: That's fun.

ALI: [quietly] Do we wanna...?

KEITH: I don't know. [laughs] I don't know.

ALI: [laughing] Okay.

ART: But Ali, you know right?

ALI: I do know. I do know, yeah. I wasn't aware we were doing it by Tuesday, but yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Is it in that chat that we're in? [reading a message] 'We could put that in a Google form...'. [scrolling through messages] Uh, buh-buh-buh... Trying to- Okay, wait no, this doesn't- Okay?

ART: We're firing Austin, that's it. That's, uh... [Austin laughs]

ALI: Mhm. Mhm.

KEITH: Via Google Form.

ALI: Yeah.

ART: Via Google Form. You're gonna vote on whether or not Austin should stay. It's gonna be a 900 number.

AUSTIN: Gotcha. Fantastic. Alright. [laughs] I think- I think I should stay. We should do a clap.  
[Ali laughs]

[pause]

AUSTIN (cont.): Uh...

KEITH: Oh, we missed ten minutes of, uh, Marriage... Ref- What is it?

AUSTIN: [cross] We also missed Ten Ten Ten. It's not Marriage Prep!

KEITH: I said Ref!

AUSTIN: Oh. [laughs]

KEITH: Weird Ref, I don't-

AUSTIN: Marriage... uh, count Marriage-

AUSTIN and KEITH: Rescue. Marriage Rescue.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Do we wanna clap-

ALI: Do we wanna do eleven eleven?

[Keith claps]

AUSTIN: Why did you just clap?

KEITH: Did we not say? Did we not say ten eleven?

ALI: Wait, eleven! Eleven!

AUSTIN: We're gonna do eleven seconds?

ALI: Yeah. Mhm.

[pause]

AUSTIN: Make a wish.

[everyone claps]

AUSTIN (cont.): Alright.

ALI: I wished that I clapped on time.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Aw, good wish! [Keith and Ali laugh]

KEITH: Well, you told us so it won't come true.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yep, that's it! [Ali laughs] Cursed forever! Thanks everyone, have a good night!