

Tips at the Table 30: Double Ayyyou! (December 2019)

Transcriber: @robotchangeling

Austin: Welcome to Tips at the Table, an rpg podcast focused on critical questions, hopefully smart answers, and fun interaction between good friends. I am your host, Austin Walker. And joining me today, Ali Acampora?

Ali: Hi. You can find me @ali_west on twitter.com and you can find Friends at the Table over @friends_table.

Austin: And Janine Hawkins.

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

Austin: You can follow me on twitter @austin_walker, and you can support the show by going to friendsatthetable.cash. We have a question here, for our first Tips question, from Eleanor, who says:

“My gaming group is about to wrap up our D&D campaign, and the DM is in need of a break. We’re also about to undergo a bit of a membership turnover. I’m not sure I’m up to DMing a campaign, whether sticking in D&D or an indie game, but I am interested in doing something that’s a little Bluff City, a little Road to PARTIZAN, and facilitating some shared worldbuilding together through a variety of games, maybe even DMing a mini campaign as well. I recently relistened to both the Hieron and COUNTER/Weight worldbuilding sessions, and I know neither of those universes actually started with a game. If you were doing something like this, would you start big (Microscope), medium (Quiet Year), or small (Stewpot)? Also, how can I pitch my friends on this weird idea?”

Austin: That is from Eleanor. I...there are so many answers here. [chuckles] And there’s so many ways to come at this question. My first piece of advice, before I shut up for a little bit, is to think about what the end result is that you want to do. If your end goal is to have a fantasy world where you’re able to go off and do little, you know, side adventures and have like kind of a home base to come back to, something like Stewpot or...I think it’s called Beyond the Wall? Beyond the...Beyond the Wall is another game that I’ve been looking at a lot lately, where it’s like, hey, there’s a little village! There’s a little town! There’s an inn! Here’s a little tavern! Then that makes a lot of sense, because the end goal is something you would be able to achieve through a game like that. If you, you know, eventually want to build a world where you can have kind of a huge, interesting, interconnected, historical, you know, story, then something like Microscope makes more sense. There really isn’t an answer that is a one-size-fits-all here. Though, I will say, for what it’s worth, Microscope is way more flexible than what I just said, or even calling it a big one. You could do kind of a tight Microscope game about a single town or a single house, even. And, in fact, if you look at some of the other games that Microscope’s creator, Ben Robbins, or the kind of Microscope expansions that have kind of different house rules or like variations on

Microscope that are just about like a family lineage or something like that, you could use that to tell a pretty tight story.

But really, for me, start at the end, in some way. Like, when we set out to do PARTIZAN and the road to season 6, the Road to PARTIZAN, I knew eventually we were building to PARTIZAN. I knew we were building to a story about war and politics, a story that would take place in a smaller setting, but a small setting inside of a very large conflict-heavy one. I knew what we were gonna get to in a broad sense, and so I knew how to build towards that. Likewise, when we were doing Marielda, I think we knew: okay, we're gonna do a kind of a industrial fantasy steampunk-y thing in a city, so The Quiet Year will let us do something that's like city-sized. We'll have to scale it up a little bit, but that's doable. And so, knowing that end goal helps a lot. Otherwise, something like the Bluff City system of just like, "Hey, let's play a bunch of things and fill in the gaps" could leave you with a setting that you could use at a bunch of different scales. I'm curious, Janine or Ali, what do y'all think about this? Kind of using the variety of games or a specific game setup to build a world?

Ali: Yeah, my first impulse to this is that it's an ambitious thing to do, and it's...like, when we started Bluff City, it was coming off of talking about doing a thing as a full campaign for like a year and then deciding that it wasn't the best way to do it. And then the same thing with Road to PARTIZAN, where it was like, this is an ends to a means, right? Whereas, with this situation, I think that like the...the way I feel like this would work for me is like if you had...if you had everyone kind of contribute a game that they might want to play?

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: The reason I feel kind of hesitant about that is 'cause we get so many questions that are like, "I play a lot of games with people who play D&D and then I tried to have them play these other things, [chuckles] and it went really poorly." And not saying that like that's definitely gonna happen, but I feel like having people be able to come in at different sides with their own kind of investment in something might just lead to a better experience for everybody and might end up...you might end up finding and really liking something that really surprises you or gives the group an opportunity to be like, well this is...the vibe of this game we like so much more than this other one. To have a big variety there might be a good way to start.

Austin: Yeah. I think there's also— something cool there could be, if there are other people at your table who are kind of like, "Ooh, I've kind of thought about DMing something, like I've thought about running something for a little while. I also don't want to do a whole big thing," the same way that you're saying that like, "hey, maybe—" you're not sure if you're up to it yet. But this style of like, even if it's just facilitating and being the person who's read the book front to back and really knows it, can be a really fun like act of dipping your toe into the process of DMing or GMing, and I think that that is even a useful thing if you want to do that with a bunch of different games. But yeah. You could also, frankly, if your crew is like, "We want to keep playing

D&D,” you could theoretically still do this in D&D. It’s not what I would do it in, but you can make the game work for you, if your crew is kind of set on that in that way.

Janine: I think another—

Austin: [overlapping] Janine, I think you’ve done some of this. Yeah, go ahead.

Janine: Yeah. I think probably one of the biggest obstacles that hasn’t been mentioned yet is you want to go from D&D, which really, really, really centers the characters, into...you know, things that you’re modeling after, you know, Bluff City and Road to PARTIZAN which have required us as players to not be precious about characters at all, because they are often very one and done. And you can revisit them and stuff, and a lot of that will depend on the systems that you pick, but, you know, you...it’s gonna depend a lot on what your players are comfortable with, because there are going to be players, for sure, who are open to trying new stuff and kind of moving around. There will probably also be players who aren’t comfortable necessarily with putting a lot of attention and putting a lot of work into a character and then leaving the character, only to have it appear as like kind of a footnote later or that kind of thing. So, I feel like being on the same page there will kind of make or break this? Like, 'cause there are ways to do this that respect and revisit characters and sort of build them up in a way that isn’t as far a move from D&D. But there are also ways to do it where it is, you know, you’re really...not discarding characters, but you are not spending the same amount of time with them, you are not putting the same narrative emphasis on individual characters. So, I would say: figure that stuff out, because that will dictate the games that you want to play as much as anything, probably.

Austin: Yeah. Totally. I think it’s also worth not only bringing that up, but also it is worth thinking like...you note here Hieron and COUNTER/Weight didn’t have a game. I will say COUNTER/Weight used a system, because we did build the system of COUNTER/Weight, like the star system, using the Stars Without Number procedurally generated like planet stuff, which was fun. It was fun to do that. It took four or five hours to do that. [chuckles] With a big group of people, so it’s...that definitely felt like structured play, in a real way. But, bring it up to your crew, and you ask kind of “how can I pitch this?” Make the case for the idea of like we could have fun telling stories that are not necessarily tied to characters as Janine said, or that are tied to characters who maybe will be established as, you know, background elements or as major NPCs going forward, blah blah blah. But be open with the possibility that they will say, “Ah, I’d just rather build a world together via conversation, and we can just write some stuff down.” That is...Hieron felt the way it did largely because of how loose that opening like episode world creation stuff was. You know, that gave me as a GM a lot of stuff to start pulling on, but it also gave me a lot of freedom to fill in gaps that were not like...not set by rules, right? Like there’s such a distinct difference between a game result setting something in stone and someone at the table being like, “Oh, I think it would be cool if *blank*,” right? I think about something like during the COUNTER/Weight 0— negative 1 episode, one of the things that comes up is that, like, alright, aliens can exist in the story of COUNTER/Weight, but they have to be like truly, weirdly alien, and not just like Klingons. Not just like head-ridge Star Trek aliens.

Outside of the Apostolosians, right? Like, the Apostolosians, clearly a distinct species, but also like...that's the one thing, but we're not gonna have a bunch of different cultures that are like that in COUNTER/Weight.

And, for me, it was like that's such a specific thing, 'cause like, okay, I do want to bring up something that's truly alien. And eventually that does happen in that setting, or in that story specifically, in COUNTER/Weight. But it gave me the power to decide what that was. Whereas, I could imagine, if we had played Microscope and we had introduced that to the field, I would be like, okay, well, that decision is made for me. I can deploy what that truly alien thing is, but as an author, I don't get to have that space. And that is not a quality thing. I'm not saying, "And that's why COUNTER/Weight is better." We've done the opposite thing completely with PARTIZAN. If you go listen to the Microscope game that went up this past week or the one that's coming up this week, both of them have huge decisions being made by other people in the game besides me, and that's been super exciting, because it's like, wow, I can turn to Keith and ask him about what's up with the Columnar or the Equiaxed, right? And that is really fun. I can talk to Janine a lot about like, well, okay, what's up with Hyphan witches and shit like that, because of how much ownership she had of those across the road to PARTIZAN games. And that is a different type of joy. And so, to some degree, if you decide you do want to be the next big DM for your group, it is worth thinking about like where that authorship will end up lying. And what I would advise against is the idea that somehow playing a game to build a world is superior than just talking through it. Or—and I think there's another question in this set that we'll get to at a certain point—or just playing a setting that everyone's excited about already. I'll save the rest of that little diatribe [chuckles] for when we get to that question. But yeah. Any other thoughts here before we move on? Alright. Next question comes in from Damien. It's a little long, and it's a little small, but I'm gonna do my best here. Small font, I mean. [Austin and Janine chuckle]

[0:12:17]

"My group has an ongoing game of Star Wars D20 that we've been playing off and on for a few years. We've done two seasons so far, but we kind of stopped playing early on in the third, for a number of reasons, including that two of the original players are no longer in the group. I'm not sure if we'll ever get back to that system, but I want to pitch them on a finale using Mobile Frame 0: Firebrands. The game takes place in a "Bad Guy AU" where the Senate is controlled by a Sith Order, the Jedi are a rebellious sect that builds superweapons and sews discord to destabilize the Sith-controlled government, and my character's father was the head of the biggest crime syndicate in the galaxy until he was assassinated, and now I'm the head of the space mafia."

Austin: Listen, Damien, live your life. [Ali giggles] This is... [Janine makes amused sound] From one Star Wars AU writer to another, good job. [Ali laughs]

"The other player characters are an aspiring Sith lord, a mechanic that built my dewback-shaped carrier/warship, and a pilot who works with us because if he doesn't

the Sith character might kill him, but mostly it's a funny bit. I think if we swap out the mech stuff for cool Star Wars ships and the former GM plays a major Jedi-aligned character that we've seen before, we could pretty easily map the Sith, Jedi, and Mafia to the three Firebrands factions and find out what happens to the galaxy when the conflicts among our characters and their connections come to a head. The only thing I'm worried about is that the only GM-less games we've played so far have been two games of Follow, so we don't have that much experience with storytelling games. How should I pitch this idea to my group? If we decide to move forward, do you have any advice for doing fully GM-less Firebrands finale?"

One, I think this story— or, this idea, is dope. I would love to see a fully Star Wars Firebrands hack. [Ali laughs] Ali, I know you also probably would be down for that, because...

Ali: Yeah, I would love that.

Austin: And I think this just— like, part of this is an easy question, because like, I think it does just work.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: And you shouldn't get too stressed about doing it right. Ali, do you have thoughts as the Star Wars... [Ali laughs] leader among our clique?

Ali: I feel like, especially with some of the stuff that we were talking about with the last question, Firebrands is definitely more forgiving on some of the like adjustment stuff, in terms of being able to set up a scene or like...I feel like Fiasco is such a hard game because it's like, okay, you know that your sister is... [chuckles] I mean, your character is someone's sister and works at—

Austin: Right.

Ali: Like a hot dog stand. Tell me what scene you want to be.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: Whereas, Firebrands has the selection like, if you know you want a sword fight right now, you kind of have rails onto how that's gonna happen. Or if you want to do a conversation between people, you kind of have rails on that. So, I think this is dope. [laughs] I think it would work really well.

Austin: Yeah, I want to know how it goes.

Ali: I was looking at Firebrands before we started streaming, just to anticipate this question, and I think the only thing to keep in mind is that...it doesn't have to be, but Firebrands is a little sexy? [laughs]

Austin: Mm-hmm. [**Janine** makes amused sound]

Ali: [laughs] There's like, definitely writing in there that's like, tense, and is leaning towards that thing. And like, you don't always have to do like the dance or sharing a moment stuff. You can avoid that pretty easily. But there's, um...keep that stuff in mind when you're pitching it to your group, I guess. [chuckles]

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: If they're not used to it.

Austin: I'm gonna say Star Wars should...Star Wars lightsaber fights should be more like Meeting Sword to Sword.

Ali: Mm-hmm. [chuckles]

Austin: Which is to say...that's just my personal— that's just my personal view. [**Ali** laughs] Is that...we should get more "We lock swords and your mouth is near my ear. What do you say?"

Ali: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Austin: That's all I'm saying. Should be more. Not that there's none of it. There is plenty of— it does exist. It's there. Anyway. But also, to that point, there isn't that much here that is mech specific. Like, the skirmish stuff that is like, you know, kind of the tactical combat stuff that talks about artillery fire and stuff like...all that would work, I think, with, like you said, ships, or even on the ground stuff, if you are able to like tinker with it a little bit in play. Like, I don't think you even need to spend a lot of time ahead of time re-prepping it in a different direction or something.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: I feel like the most you would have to— like, you should probably read through each of those games and see like, is there a thing that I kind of want to rewrite here?

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: But I don't think there will be a lot of heavy lifting with that.

Austin: Trying to think if there's any other stuff here. Oh! The other half of this is...I mean, one is to build off what Janine said in the first answer. I think this works really well because of how character focused Firebrands is. And you have characters. Like, this isn't a storytelling game in the way that Quiet Year is, which bans you from feeling like you own a character, [chuckles] because anybody could make a decision for that character. This is very much a game about particular characters. And I really...Firebrands works so well as a finale game because of all of the history you've already built up and knowledge of who those characters are.

Janine: Yeah. I was gonna say something to that effect of like, it's a good game for a finale because you don't really need to worry about sitting down and remapping who your character is onto this different system.

Ali: Mm-hmm.

Austin: Right, right.

Janine: You are still...you know, those, the powers that you have spent—or the abilities, the whatever—that you...the lightsaber crystal-crons that you've spent your season getting—

Austin: [exasperated] Okay. [Janine and Ali laugh] You know they're not called that. You know what a holocron is! You collected 17 of them.

Janine: I jumped for so many of them. [Austin laughs] But, you know, all the things that you've spent the proceeding season gathering and accumulating to make your character who they are, you don't have to find ways to shoehorn them into this system, because it is primarily about storytelling, and it's about telling a certain kind of story, kind of, but, you know, you can just add— use those components as part of that story, and it's a very...you know, as far as finales, as far as wanting to pick a GM-less finale type game, like Firebrands is a really, really solid one because of that. Because you don't end up feeling like you are not acting on your character properly or something like that.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Janine: Like, it does— it gives you the room you need to, within a new system, still be, you know, still embody that person, that role, that whatever.

Austin: Totally.

Ali: Yeah. I feel—

Austin: Totally.

Ali: Oh, sorry. I feel like the rope is exactly long enough with something like Firebrands with other games like that. Like, it's either way too long or it can be way too short. So, yeah.

Austin: Yeah. I'll also add really quick that the...you note— you ask here at the end, like, “Do you have any advice on doing a fully GM-less Firebrands finale?” Two things I want to add. One is: someone should just really...ideally, everyone has read the book front to back and understands what all the games are and understands what the game flow is. We have...I've always hacked Firebrands when we've used it for finales, because...what it doesn't necessarily have is systems for like tracking large-scale factional outcomes. You know, there is kind of an over— kind of like a breakdown of what the kind of narratives stakes are in the game for the setup that the people who made the game, Vincent Baker, made here. But, there isn't really like an endgame? I will say, one, the...god, what is the name of the medieval version of this? I have it in this room. I keep wanting to say For the Queen, but it is not that. Fuck, what is it called?

Ali: Oh...

Austin: Um...

Ali: Uh...

Austin: I should just go get it, is what I should do. **[Ali chuckles]** This is...

Janine: Firebrands with an E at the end?

Ali: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Austin: Yeah. Ye Olde Firebrandes.

Ali: The King is Dead.

Austin: The King is Dead! The King is Dead.

Ali: Thank you Luke Jordan(??? 20:18).

Austin: Oh, thank you. **[Ali chuckles]** Has like an explicit endgame, which I don't know that maps to Star Wars particularly nice. But, the...it would be a good idea to think through, to have— you know, everyone should read the book through all the way, and then someone, or as a group, should talk about: how will we know when we're done? Besides being like, “I think we're done.” Which is a totally okay way to win, or to play, but it is not necessarily like...having that out can be very useful. You look at something like Stewpot, which we played on a recent Live, and I want to get back to that soon. That has an explicit end state, in terms of like, hey, when you are done switching over all of your adventure experiences into townsperson experiences, then you are done. We move into the final game at that point. So, think about that.

The second thing is, you know, whoever— you know, the person who was your GM will probably...it is hard to suddenly like shear away the authority of being the GM at the table. And my suspicion is they will want to be the— or, they will end up being somewhat of a facilitator, and some players may just feel more comfortable looking to them for direction or for explanation. But, more importantly, and this was like the number one thing that was difficult when we did Follow— or, not Follow. What was the one before Follow? Kingdom. Was...sometimes players can— and maybe you don't have this issue, because it sounds like you already have some already good rivalries set up in this set. But sometimes players can be a little afraid of hitting each other, so to speak. Of targeting each other, of picking games where they hurt each other. And some of these games really do do that, right? Not just Meeting Sword to Sword where like a character could die, but something like a tactical skirmish where NPCs who are important will be hurt. That is how that system is written, is that like, in that game someone will be torn apart or will be put down, to use the words from the game. And so, probably have a conversation ahead of time. And then, in general, I have found that it is useful if you do have someone who is a facilitator to be a person who can start thinking early about ways to introduce conflict or ways to bring players into conflict. Or, if they're not willing to do that, if they're not willing to go sword to sword against each other, if they're not willing to have a tactical skirmish, to think about ways in which you can let that stuff happen with NPCs, and that will require a little bit more prep if you do want to do that. Look at the way that Twilight Mirage and COUNTER/Weight did it, because there were moments of that stuff there. Where like, hey, the COUNTER/Weight crew is not gonna tear each other apart over control over this system. You know, like that's not where the stakes are. And so, think about that stuff. But, honestly, the kind of three factions you have set up here seems pretty good for running this as is. Alright. Any other thoughts?

Ali: [chuckles] I have a suggestion, which is, if your crew doesn't know what to do after this, you can just like restart your Star Wars roleplay, but like—

Austin: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Ali: Maybe somebody's evil now. [laughs]

Austin: Right. I see.

Ali: Maybe the timeline went different 'cause like, everyone broke up. [laughs]

Austin: Right. What if...right, yeah. Yeah, yeah. I gotcha. How's that? Is that working out?

Ali: Exactly what I did, and it's going great. [chuckles] [**Janine** makes amused sound]

Austin: Okay. How long ago did you make this change?

Ali: [laughing] Um, it was before Red Dead Redemption 2 came out?

Austin: Oh, okay.

Janine: Okay. That's recent.

Austin: Wow, so pretty recent! Yeah. [**Ali** chuckles] And it's going well.

Ali: We had this whole side thing where we were like, we're just gonna write Red Dead Redemption, the first one, but as if, like, John and Dutch are exes, right? [laughs]

Austin: Oooh! Okay.

Ali: But then like having to do that ended up having to answer the question—

Austin: Wait, is that not canon? [**Ali** and **Austin** laugh]

Ali: It's canon enough that it works, right? It just...

Austin: Yeah, yeah.

Ali: It works very plainly. But yeah, we ended up having to answer a bunch of questions about everybody else, because it was like, why are these people here?

Austin: Right.

Ali: And then we were like, these answers are really good, let's just play that.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: And it's going swimmingly. [chuckles]

Austin: Excellent. I'm very happy.

Janine: Sometimes you just need an AU.

Ali: Yeah! [laughs]

Austin: Yeah! Well, this is already an AU, which is great. This is already a Star Wars AU.

Ali: Mm-hmm.

Janine: Sometimes you just need a double AU.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Yeah! Exactly.

Ali: There's so many universes. [chuckles]

Austin: A double AU sounds like...what is that? That's a New York slang of some kind. That's... [Ali and Janine chuckle] That's just when two— when two extreme New Yorkers get into a fight in the street, it's one goes, "Ayy, you!" [Ali and Janine laugh] and then, "Ayy, *you!*" That's a double AU. Anyway. God. Yeah, good luck. I hope this goes well, Damien. It sounds like a blast. I'm waiting to hear. As a big— as someone who recently realized how much— or, not realized, but like, it's...Star Wars is good. I like Star Wars a lot. I'm moving on. Justin writes in, and says:

[0:25:26]

"Thanks to your show, I've been running a Blades in the Dark game for about six months now. Side note: DMing is hard." It is. "It has been a nice change of pace from our regular D&D game, and everyone's been enjoying it."

Hell yeah. Finally. We get to check the box that says [Ali laughs, Janine sighs] "people switched, are enjoying it."

"One of the things I want to get better at is the use of mid-mission clocks. I have the faction/long term planning clocks down, but I'm having trouble using them mid-mission. For Austin, I'm curious about how you design your clocks, and for the players, what is your favorite implementation of clocks?"

They are... [sighs] God. I always go to this example, because it is...was so key for me understanding Blades in the Dark. Even though Blades in the Dark is very clearly influenced by stuff like Dishonored, it was Hitman 2016 that made me— 2016? Is that right? Okay. That made me understand how to design Blades missions. You take a look at something like Sapienza, the first like...is that the— no, France is first, right—

Janine: It is not the first— Paris is first.

Austin: Well, no, first is—

Janine: Well... [Ali chuckles]

Austin: Well, even before that is the training stuff.

Janine: First is the ICA training facility.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Then it's Paris, then it's Sapienza.

Austin: Thank you. Thank you, expert Hitman... [**Janine** chuckles] uh, expert—

Janine: Better get that shit right.

Austin: Janine Hawkins. Yeah, right? Sapienza. Sapienza is a mission that takes place in a small Italian village, kind of a beautiful seaside town, that has a villa that's run by this mafiosa who has a bunch of— mafioso, who has like a bunch of other people working for him. And there's a gate, like a big heavy front door gate that's guarded by— that has guards. And then it has a, you know, kind of a bunch of other ways you could get in. You could get in through like the...a couple apartments nearby kind of have back doors or balconies that open up onto an area you kind of jump down onto and climb through a kind of a back route. I think there's like a sewer system entrance somehow, right? Or like a...you end up behind it somehow. Anyway, there's a bunch of different ways. And instead of...the way I use clocks is I say "entering the villa" is a clock, right? And I don't know how they're gonna do it. You could enter the villa by rolling Hunt to snipe the two dudes out front and then walk through the middle, like right up the front door. I don't think it will go well! I think doing that would, in this situation, move you toward a desperate position, maybe.

But what you don't do in Blades is make a clock that says "this is the clock for...to lock pick this door," right? What you do is you kind of zoom out and you think about what the general challenges are. So, getting past the gate, locating your target. And then, you know, the actually engaging with your target can be the final step, and maybe that's not a clock at all, or maybe that's a clock that has to do with a particular NPC, where like, oh, hey, this clock is like a six step clock because they're, you know, kind of a tough character who can put up a fight. Stuff like that. But thinking about it in that more general sense, of like, okay, here is a clock for...here are mid-mission clocks for things that are either direct challenges that the party has to tick up, they have to clear a four step and then a six step or something like that. And then as a GM and also as like a designer, that can be really fun, where you're like, hey, the first time through I made them get through a four step, a four step, and then have a fight at the end. This time, I'm gonna do a four step, a fight—which is gonna bring their stress up, probably—and then—or like, hurt whatever their...you make them burn through gear—and then I'm gonna have them have to do a four step to, you know, get away or escape the burning building or whatever it is. What the other way to use clocks in the middle of a mission is, for me, is to use a countdown clock that indicates something bad is coming. And that is great, because you can offer Devil's Bargain die to tick that clock. You can have things change as that clock advances, have mist pull in more and more, or have, you know, something start to smell on the— you know, from nearby as something starts to catch fire, whatever, when that gets to like three out of six steps.

All sorts of ways like that, I think, are kind of...there's kind of two things you do there. One is you can add a sense of tension. Two, you can guarantee or near guarantee that certain things are going to happen and kind of frame that around whatever that clock is. I am speaking very vaguely but also something that's been on my mind lately! [**Austin** and **Ali** chuckle] I think that's the big way, is think abstractly about general challenges. Use those as individual clocks instead of thinking about like...here is a challenge. Here is a door you have to pick to get in, you have to, you know, lockpick to get in. And think, instead, about like, getting in is a four step challenge. Or a six step challenge because they fucked up during downtime and now people are extra, like, cautious or whatever, if that makes sense. As Luke in the chat says, clocks should describe obstacles without prescribing approaches. That is exactly the way to use them.

And you don't need them, because like, you could just say there is a gate or there is a fence that you want to get across, and then someone says, "Oh, I'm gonna jump it." And it's up to you, as the GM, to decide how important— how much time in the movie of this game is getting across— getting over this gate or getting over this fence taking up. Is this part of engagement? Could they have just hopped that thing during the engagement roll, because that's what the engagement roll is kind of about? Or is getting past all of the, you know, preliminary patrols outside, is that something that the movie would spend five minutes on? If it would spend thirty seconds on as a montage or as like a quick hop and the hero runs past it, then that's probably not a clock. But if something is an ongoing challenge and you see the, you know, the hero have to choke out a guard and then sneak past a camera and then use like the electric, you know, lockpick on the door, that's probably a clock. So yeah, if it's a scene, if it's an extended scene in a movie, that's a clock. If it's just a quick thing, not a clock. I'm curious for y'all, though, if there are any clocks that stand out from the years of me throwing clocks at you. I know that's a big, weird question, [**Janine** makes agreeing sound] because that's not how we think about stories on the player side, like...I don't want you to remember clocks is a weird thing to say, maybe, but. Outside of The Sprawl.

Janine: I remember kinds of clocks.

Austin: Yeah, I bet! [chuckles]

Janine: That's the thing, is I don't have a favorite implementation of clocks. I have a least favorite implementation of clocks. [**Ali** chuckles]

Austin: Yeah. I'm curious if these line up, because I have one too. What is yours?

Janine: My least favorite implementation of clocks is a clock where it does not feel like you have an expectation that we will actually act on it. It is just a clock that exists to give us, as players, stress. A clock where it's like, a bad thing—

Austin: Yeah. I'm gonna keep using those, probably.

Janine: I know. [**Austin** laughs] I know you are, but for me it's like, a clock that exists just to say this bad thing is going to happen. Your character has no reason to even know this is remotely— [chuckles] there's just like...there is no excuse for them to go check this thing out or intervene in this clock, but this clock is still on the screen. I do not like those kinds of clocks, especially— I mean, if the clock...it's a thing of like, if I already have information that my character doesn't, in that there is a clock there?

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Just give me all the information. Just tell me what it is. [**Ali** giggles] 'Cause they're not gonna, like...you know, I'm not gonna act on it if my character doesn't have a reason to act on it. But not knowing what it is and having the information that it exists...it's like a half trust. Like, it's like a half...

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: I'm giving you enough to be frustrated, but not enough to...

Austin: I will say, some of that stuff is an artifact of us telling— of being a show and not a game we're playing for each other.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Which is like—

Janine: That's true. That's fair.

Austin: We're talking about it— you're bringing up a specific clock that people will hear in a few weeks. And there's an ironic ending to the way that all shakes out.

Janine: It's that and also other clocks. [chuckles]

Austin: I know, but there's one that will be...

Ali: Yeah, we've...there have been lots of those sorts of clocks.

Austin: Yeah. But there are times where at the table I would say "here is the thing," and I would be happy to bring you in on terms of dramatic irony. But it is like...this is an example of like actual play is not actual play.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: That argument that gets made. Which is like, I'm happy doing that, but I know that this has to be the end of an episode, when this clock almost completes or does complete, and then Jack's gonna have music for that moment, and the listener's gonna be excited, you know?

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: But I think that that a hundred percent makes sense for Justin's situation, where it's like, yeah...or, more importantly, talk to your players and say, "Hey, is that something that you are comfortable with?"

Janine: Yeah. Do you want...asking them if they value suspense—

Austin: Right.

Janine: Or if they want to know the moving pieces, even if realistically they're not things that they can act on.

Austin: Right. And also there's different types of clocks, right? Like, I think about The Sprawl's set of clocks. Some of those are explicitly just you're gaining more attention, this clock is going up, and there is not an immediate threat, but...or, there could be, and you don't know what it is, and that is like...that game is built for that specifically. Whereas you can definitely run Blades a little more open, a little bit more transparent than the way the corp clocks work in The Sprawl. The one that I thought you might bring up and the one that I think about a lot is the beginning of the Scum and Villainy run in Twilight Mirage, where there was a clock that just wouldn't fucking complete. Where it's just like, the party can't get the win on the specific thing to push a small clock over the edge. Like, a four step clock. Not a big clock, but like, it's stuck at three. And they can't get—

Janine: I don't even remember that.

Austin: This is the fight in the junkyard, the very first game of Scum and Villainy that we played, where it was you and Dre and Sylvia¹, and there were the little arc runners, the little baby like leopard robots? And it was just...there's this run of like mediocre successes in a row that keep this one encounter, that was supposed to be a nothing encounter, running indefinitely, because it's a clock and not a—

Janine: Mmm.

Austin: —one-off thing, right? And that is why I'm emphasizing the like, really thing about how much time you want to spend here. And, as a GM, think about ways— one, remind your players that they can and should work together. That the game is built for players to be assisting each

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

other and staying close to each other as much as possible, because otherwise the stress resource just blows up and you end up kind of like deep in your bag in a bad way. And then, the other half of that is like, don't be afraid to give them— if that starts to happen and you can sense like, "oh shit, oh shit, this is not supposed to be a whole big thing." I think a lot about, there's a fight— a D&D fight that I was in in college once, where it was like us against five goblins. And one of the goblins just wouldn't fucking die. And like, it ended up being funny, 'cause we went around the table like four times, and no one could get a hit in on this goblin. Our rolls were just shit. And in D&D you can't do anything there, right?

But in a game like Blades, if someone's stuck at three out of four ticks in the clock to advance to the more interesting part of the story, figure out a way to give them increased effect. Say that, you know, oh, the guard is scared and like is ready to run. You can tell that they just need a little push. You know, whatever it is, if you sense it going, part of Blades is that it gives you as the GM a lot of levers to pull on to change the pacing on the fly, so don't feel like your clocks have to— the other thing is, a thing can happen that can advance a clock that was not the goal of the player to advance that clock. The player can be off doing something else, but it's like, oh shit, hey, that happens to make it easier for you to— oh, hey, you disabled the cameras over here? Well, guess what, that means this other player, who's in this other situation, doesn't have to deal with the cameras. I can tick that clock also, or whatever. Think about ways to give the players stuff to move them through those smaller situations. Especially if it's not narratively interesting for it to go bad there. If it's narratively interesting to go really bad there, then let it go really bad there. [chuckles] But if it's just like, oh, this was a speedbump. This was not supposed to be...and they're just kind of stuck on it, but not failing failing, either, then yeah. Be willing to kind of grease the wheel a little bit there.

Janine: I think this is kind of why... [chuckles] I think this stuff you just explained is kind of why clocks...um...chafe—

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Janine: —me in certain circumstances, because, you know, when we're playing like Dungeon World and stuff, you do still make those accommodations. Like, you do still make like...if you feel like the game is un...if you feel like something is kind of unfair, you do tend to like skew and work with us in ways that don't need a clock. There's something about a clock that feels like it is trying to go halfway between storytelling and like fairness and numbers.

Austin: Yeah. I think it mechanizes a lot of stuff. For me, as a GM, it is so much easier to design with clocks.

Janine: Hmm.

Austin: It is like night and day. I don't know how many fucking orcs you can fight. I don't know. [Janine chuckles] But I do know how long it will take you to get six successes, in terms of...with the dice that you have. Do you know what I mean?

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Where a four, five, or six will get you a, you know, two to three ticks per success. Like, I can plan around that. And I can plan around how long I think that encounter should be, right? If it...if, you know, again, barring a bunch of bad rolls in a row or a bunch of really good rolls in a row, which, I mean, think about one of the big fights towards the end of Spring is a really good example of this. That fight— if I'd had clocks for that fight, that fight would have been a much different thing. I'm happy with the thing it was, but there's a version of that that I had in mind that we just didn't get to experience where certain players didn't get to participate in that fight.

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: That made me feel kind of bad. And if, instead, that opening— I'm trying to talk around spoilers, here. There's a big fight against something big, and some early actions basically just like made it trivial. If I could have instead set up a bunch of different objectives to achieve or talk about how those objectives— like, represent those objectives mechanically in front of people's faces in a way that wasn't just about...that didn't allow a narrative setup to open up the one...it's sort of like there was one vector of success. Obviously, in Dungeon World you have to respect the fiction. The fiction comes first. But the way that that encounter played out, the door was wide open, the door to the dragon's HP was wide open, and barring me being like “Ha ha, actually...” [Janine laughs] Here's a...i'm adding a new thing,” like, fundamentally to what I've already written, I couldn't demand you open other doors, because you had opened the big door that I'd already set up. Whereas if I'd been able to play with clocks there, I think there are other ways I could've extended that or planned for it in ways that are not just an HP bar plus general fictional positioning. And so thinking about stuff like that, for me, is just— it's like a treat in GMing, because of the way I can think about the way things will progress and intensify. You think about something like the Siege of the Lineage Brighton towards the end of Twilight Mirage. I don't know that I run that game anywhere near as well without clocks, because it let me really think about that whole game in kind of three big arcs of like here is them on the planet, here is them in space, here is them near the big light column thing. And part of this is just like...this is why I say before if I'm doing my job right you don't remember any clocks at all.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Right? If I'm doing my job right, they fade away, and what you remember is the thing you did. It shouldn't feel like an HP bar. It should feel like, for me, cameras that I'm setting up around a sort of open world [chuckles] environment where you're doing stuff. At least in Blades. But yeah, I think that that's— I do think that it's good feedback and is an important thing in terms of like take your table temperature about that stuff. Because otherwise you can step in— you

can really step into it and be like, oh there's a big disconnect between what people are here for and what they're not. Ali, do you have any clock thoughts?

Ali: Um, yeah. I...I've been trying to think of examples, and I can't really. I think with a system like Blades it's... [laughs] Especially with this example, it might be good to be kind of loosey goosey with clocks in a way that like...I don't know. I don't know if this is just how I play Blades or the way that it feels like to me, but I feel like characters can think of something, like a big thing at once, right? Because with Blades you can kind of like— it's not like moves basis, you can just say like oh I want to do all of these things.

Austin: Right.

Ali: And I feel like a good way to compromise and get people more used to clocks is to be like, "Okay, you're not getting to that building just 'cause you said that you wanted to," [Austin laughs] or whatever, or like—

Austin: Right. Yes, yes.

Ali: You're not climbing up this thing, or you're not running these three miles, like no, no, no. But by being like, "Okay, I'm gonna make that a clock now," so like you can kind of...like...you can kind of pace out the achievements you want characters to make, like in that moment when the action is coming from them is something that I feel like has been kind of fun and interesting when it happens in games.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Yeah, those are definitely the clocks I feel best about. Are ones that like make it feel like something I want is getting closer.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Yeah. I also love that when it's like, "Oh, that's a good idea." As a GM, I love hearing an idea and being like, "That's a clock. The thing you just said is..." [Ali and Janine laugh] Like, okay, that's a good idea. Let's see you start to work towards that. That's awesome, yeah, for sure. Uh, there was another thing there that I thought of and I lost, but do you have anything else? Was that in the middle of your thought? Did I cut you off?

Ali: No, I think I'm done. [laughs]

Austin: Okay. [sighs] Yeah, I think that that's...I think that's probably the gist of it, though. I do think that that style of like player-initiated...not even a long term project, but like a short term project in the middle of a— or like a long term project in the middle of doing a thing. That can be like I'm breaking into this place or I want to do blah blah blah.

Ali: Right, yeah.

Austin: It's very good. I also really— I do really like tug-of-war clocks. There's all sorts of clocks you can use. **[Ali laughs]** Read the book. It's— there's good stuff in there. For sure. Alright, I'm gonna advance. This one comes in from either Gint [pronounced with hard G] or Gint [pronounced with soft G]. I'm not sure. I tried to look it up. I could not find confirmation on the pronunciation of this name, so apologies.

[0:44:39]

“Brief intro: I'm dropping out of a game of End of the World, because the bleak setting and the fact that we're playing our literal selves is giving me some really bad bleed-out.”

Bleed-out is a term that is— or, bleed is a term that's used in LARPing circles—I did not mean to make that disappear, there we go—that's been used for about a decade now. Maybe a little bit longer than that, actually. That is what it sounds like. It's when you kind of have an emotional—you either have bleed-in, which is when you're in a bad mood or you're in a really good mood, and you come to the game, and that mood affects the way you play your character. You know, maybe you're in a [chuckles] a really, you know, you had a shitty work week, and you've— everything is on your last nerve, and you sit down to play your character or you go to the LARP and you're supposed to be playing this very like all smiles all the time, happy friendly character, and like, but you've bled your kind of bad mood into the character, and you're like, “Ugh, I just can't be all smiles all the time the way I'm supposed to be with this character.” Bleed-out is the other way, which is when you have been so in your character's state that it has that kind of like...it affects you when you leave the table, right? There is a sort of, um...what's the word I'm looking for? Uh...I forget the word I'm looking for. It's fine. So, when something has like...it's porous. There's a porous, you know, relationship between your gameplay and then your real life. Those aren't two separate things. It's not like you step into the magic circle and the world disappears 'cause now I'm playing my game, and what happens here doesn't affect me! It totally does. And so bleed-out is when that happens from your gameplay session out into the rest of your life. So, the game is giving Gint some bad bleed-out.

“Which definitely isn't helped by my ongoing depression. We're working on a reasonable exit for my in-game self from the spotlight, because the people are good and not part of the issue.”

Which is good to hear.

“So, my two questions are: have you had strong experiences with bleed, positive or negative, and do you have ideas on how to spot problems like this ahead of time to avoid and/or prepare?”

Have either of you dealt with this issue before? Not this issue, but dealt with this feeling.

Janine: I think I get more bleed-in than bleed-out.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Personally. Like, I think it...I...when I feel...you know, for me, I talk about this a lot, 'cause it's like a big thing that I'm aware of as a player, but when I feel like I've made a big misunderstanding or a big misjudgment, as a player, then it sort of...you know, I feel like I kind of close off a little bit, and then as a result, it's harder to engage with my character and what's going on, and there are definitely certain settings...I think mostly...well, no, I can think of times it's happened in Hieron and in Twilight Mirage. Where it was just like, if I hadn't been in that headspace, I think my character would have behaved very very differently.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: But because I get in that headspace of just like, "Well, clearly I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, I should just let everyone else figure this out." That isn't good. [chuckles]

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: That's more common to me than having something that sort of happened to my character bleed out into, you know...yeah.

Austin: Into your life, yeah. Or to your emotions.

Janine: Mm-hmm.

Austin: This was something that I was like...super, super characterized my college-era play. I'll say what we do here specifically is like so...I mean, it's different for a bunch of different reasons. One is I am 34 and not 20. Not 19. And it means I have a lot of other things going on in my life in terms of stressors and in terms of places where I'm mostly invested. Which has nothing to do with just my age, because certainly if I'd lived a different life I could easily have that happening at 19. But at 19, when I was playing in college, I was like going to classes and playing roleplaying games, and that was fucking it. And also, sometimes I was cutting classes to play in roleplaying games. [chuckles] And so there was a lot of my sociality was through that space, and so I would lose weeks feeling miserable because something happened in a session that I played in, because something bad happened to a character of mine.

And I will say, to the second half of this, the people I was playing with who were my age—we didn't have good practices in place to address or anticipate these feelings. And, two, there were people who were running games who were a little bit older who I think should have taken precautions around this and instead leaned towards the bleed in a way that was not necessarily,

you know, safe or cautious or caring. Who really wanted us to feel deeply in that way. In a way that I think I especially at— you know, we're talking now 2005, 2000— really we're talking— I'm talking about 2003, 2004, really, when I think about the years. So this was 15, 16 years ago. Where a lot of this language was just hitting. You know, people were just talking about RPGs in the way that we're talking about them now. And so it's not like a handwave for what I think was probably poor play and kind of borderline misconduct in some instances, but I do want to like contextualize that in terms of like there weren't a lot of resources available. We didn't fucking know. When I was doing the LARP that was like "Hey, this is what if we were a family of elves doing American tragedy in the vein of like Tennessee Williams," we didn't fucking understand that we were playing with our own emotions in a way that would have a lot of bleed-out and that would have impact on the rest of, you know, that week or month or year. Or that like...we weren't like talking about the fact that we were playing with...that we were touching up against real relationships, real emotional investment and stuff that went beyond the kind of playspace. But we dealt with it a lot.

And the two things that it taught me: one is it can be really powerful and positive when everyone happens to align in the right way and the space feels safe and there is a lot of exchange of this sort of like...this sort of connection that only happens when you're being extremely vulnerable and bought in. But the importance of like a huge range of consent questions, a lot of check-in, a lot of space to be like, "Hey, we're going to take a break. We're going to be out of character for a little bit. Do people still feel like playing? Here is a space narratively where it makes sense if some folks want to go home or take a break longer than this, et cetera." And then in regular tabletop and not just LARP space, like, the sort of conversations that come around what now we talk about as lines and veils and topic matter, because one of the things that I, for me as a player, has hit me is when I don't know what bleed I might hit. I've talked about this example before, but playing Burning Wheel with Adam Koebel a few years ago, there was some content that I had no idea was coming up. It hit me out of left field. I thought that we had kind of pulled a line— I thought that the line— sorry, I thought that the veil that we had set up was more like a line, and at the very least I thought the veil was more opaque than it was. And I just was not prepared at all, and so it was in a moment where there was kind of really bad bleed in both directions. And that is one of those things where it's like we have to be clearer about expectations ahead of time. And so I think that's a huge part of it for me, in terms of spotting stuff like that ahead of time.

The other half of this, for you as someone writing in, is I hope...the thing that I've read here is it thankfully did work out in a good way. It sucks where you are in a situation where like you feel like you can't continue to participate, but I'm happy that you recognized it and that you are taking a step back and that the people who you're playing with are good and are not part of the issue. It feels like, in some ways, this is the safety mechanisms working, and I hope that you are able to kind of move forward, both in terms of your own depression but also finding other games to play that don't necessarily affect this so much. To that end, too, one of the things you say up top is this is a game that is a bleak setting and you're playing your literal selves. Make— I hope that there was a big conversation about that up top and that wasn't just...again, thinking of my

own college history, when I was playing games nonstop, that's exactly the sort of thing that someone would have like, "Oh, you know what would be a cool idea? What if we play kind of a bleak end of the world game where we're playing our literal selves. Doesn't that sound dope?" And then, because we're 19 and aren't thinking of what that might actually, you know, trigger in us, are just like, "Yeah, that sounds cool. Let's do that!" and just jump headfirst into it, [Ali chuckles] without having a larger conversation if people are actually, you know, interested or ready. And there's all sorts of social pressures. You don't want to be the person who says no. And like, building a relationship with the people you play with to where you're really having that conversation and are really able to say no or "Eh, actually, I would love if we did an End of the World game, but I don't want to play myself. It's cool if everyone else does, but I want to play this different character." Or, "I'd love to play myself, but not in that setting," or something like that, right? Like, having those conversations up top is really important. But also, I just want to note, I am not up to date on like the hottest newest LARP discourse and LARP scholarship. That stuff is out there. And so, while I think I have certain experiences and have read some stuff and can kind of speak to the state of things and my own perspectives, definitely look at folks who are actually doing work in the LARP space, for sure. Whoops. Did not mean to change the thing. Ali, do you have any thoughts on bleed?

Ali: [sighs] Not really like any constructive ones. I... [Austin chuckles] Yeah, I don't know. It's not something I experience a lot of. I feel like I've seen it go both ways, but I haven't...I don't have any like large scale coping mechanisms [chuckles] with it so.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: Yeah. It is what it is.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: Yeah.

[0:55:57]

Austin: There's a...as Luke in the chat says, that Nordic LARP and the Jeepform communities have documented a bunch of online resources for this stuff. So, yeah, go check that out. Alright, next question comes in from Miles, who says:

"I am soon going to be running a monthly campaign of Blades in the Dark with my friend group who has basically only ever played D&D."

[chuckles] We got a theme this month, and it's people playing Blades in the Dark after playing D&D. [Ali chuckles]

“It’s essentially my first serious attempt at DMing, beyond a couple of oneshots. I really like the setting of Duskfall in the Blades book, but I also didn’t feel super confident fleshing it out the way I would want, and my group didn’t feel as pumped about it as I was. So, as an alternative, I’ve been writing up my own factions and city to find a great common ground between Duskfall and the settings the group is more used to. However, I can’t quite keep myself from just wholesale hijacking certain ideas like the ciphers and the ghost field which seem pretty integral. This is getting long, but here’s the TL;DR question. What are your feelings on basically plugging in certain ideas to new, separate settings wholesale?”

I have two answers to this. The first one that’s easy is: just do it.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Just do it. It’s fine. Especially for your home game. Like, this is what I was kind of gesturing at before, that’s like...we don’t do that, because I say at the top of every episode that it’s about critical worldbuilding, and also because, long term, I would love to make a show about— I would love for there to be a COUNTER/Weight show on a streaming service, right? Or on TV. And so it’s important that we just don’t have newtypes straight up in that setting. [**Ali** and **Austin** chuckle] ‘Cause we would get sued. But if you’re playing a game at home with your friends? Absolute— or if that’s just not what you want to do. If you’re releasing actual play podcasts but you don’t care about trying to like turn this into your job one day, who cares? Do it. Fuckin’ lift that ghost field. That’s your ghost field now. That’s in the book. They want you to fuckin’ play with it, you know?

Ali: You bought that book, yeah.

Austin: John Harper’s not gonna be mad. You bought that book! [**Ali** laughs] That book said “ghost field does this.” You can use that now! That’s your ghost field. Yeah, I don’t have any immediate bad feelings about that at all. I’m curious if either of you have feelings about lifting these sorts of things. I have my second, more nuanced, answer coming, but I want to wait and open up the space for other support before I go like, “But also...”

Ali: Yeah, I—

Janine: I mean...

Ali: Oh, yeah, go on.

Janine: No, you go ahead.

Ali: I was just going to say— yeah, I— especially if it’s just a thing that you’re doing for fun with your friends, like why not. Especially if those things sort of like, I feel like you’re in this kind of in

between place where you're like "Oh, I really want to play a game in this," and then there was...you know, you had an idea of how you were gonna run it and are moving away from that, so if they're like...if you're taking only pieces of that to kind of stay on the track that you were on, then fine.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: Like, you know, no one's gonna fault you for that. I don't know. I, like... [laughs] Again, I've had so many experiences in my life where it was like "what if this was Final Fantasy IX but a little bit different?" or like—

Austin: Right.

Ali: "What if this was Red Dead Redemption but with these other people?" Like, I don't care. Have a good time.

Austin: [laughs] Yep. **[Ali laughs]**

Janine: I mean, that's the beauty of making shit for yourself and your friends, is just like, who cares? Just do it.

Austin: Who cares!

Janine: Just have fun.

Austin: This is like—

Janine: Here's the thing. The game that you— the game in the setting that you enjoy is a million— is worth a million times more than the game in the setting where you're like, "I enjoy this, but I'd enjoy it more if it was closer to this thing."

Austin: Yep!

Ali: Mm-hmm.

Austin: Yeah! Make the fuckin' thing you want to play. Like, tabletop roleplaying games fuckin' rule because no copyright lawyer, no intellectual property lawyer is gonna knock down your door **[Ali chuckles]** and then take your house from you or kick you— you know, send you out in the streets because you put Batman in your fuckin' Sherlock Holmes thing or whatever. I guess Sherlock Holmes doesn't— Sherlock Holmes is out of— is in public domain, so that one's bad. But put Batman in your Sailor Moon thing, right?

Ali: Mmm.

Austin: Like, it's okay. You can do that. You could make, uh, Selina Kyle be a nemesis to Sailor Moon, and Selina Kyle has some sort of cool cat cafe but it saps all your—

Janine: There were already two cat nemeses, so we can't really...

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Okay. I'm sorry.

Janine: There was...it was Tin Nyanko, right? And then Catsby?

Austin: What about Poison Ivy?

Janine: Uh...

Austin: Could it be Poison Ivy?

Ali: There's a few leaf ladies. There's that whole movie that's about the—

Austin: Okay. But, okay, what about—

Ali: That's the whole movie!

Janine: Yeah, that flower alien.

Austin: Harley Quinn? Harley Quinn?

Janine: No, there's a whole season that's evil clown people. [**Ali** chuckles]

Austin: Is Harley Quinn one of them?

Janine: Basically. She...there's like a...

Austin: Okay.

Janine: There's like four Harley Quinns—

Austin: You know what? Let's flip it.

Janine: —and they end up being Chibi Moon's Sailor Scouts, sort of.

Ali: Oh, yeah.

Austin: Okay, well, we flip it, then. What if the Sailor Squads wound up in Gotham? And also—

Janine: I'm sorry, the Sailor Squads? [**Ali** laughs]

Austin: Sailor Scouts. [**Ali** and **Janine** laugh] Wound up in— Sailor Senshi wound up in Gotham.

Ali: Mm-hmm.

Austin: And Batman was dead, and so someone had to step up.

Ali: Oh.

Janine: Sounds great.

Ali: Yeah, this is...

Austin: See? And now it's great. And—

Ali: [chuckles] This is better, yeah.

Austin: No one—

Janine: Crystal Gotham? [**Ali** and **Janine** laugh] I'm so on board for Crystal Gotham.

Austin: Crystal Gotham!

Janine: Holy shit.

Austin: Here it is! It's great, right?

Janine: That's pretty good. That's okay.

Austin: And no one can stop you from doing this! You could just do this! I mean, you could just do this in fanfic, obviously, already, but like, you could tell— with your friends, you could just do that thing! Do it! It's great! [**Janine** chuckles] The thing— my one like caveat here is sometimes there are things that are subtextual or thematic about elements like this that don't...that will sneak up on you, and you'll be like, oh shit, I lifted this thing, and I didn't even think about how it was deeply tied to a gross scientific— quasi-scientific, you know, racism that's underneath it because— I'm not saying that's true about Blades in the Dark. But if you're like, "I think there should just be orcs in Gotham City." Like, okay, what do they do? "Well like, they're a ravenous horde who just kicks—" okay, okay, slow down. Slow down, because I know you like orcs, but

you're gonna stumble into some shit here if you don't address what that means. Or, also, just in general like, sometimes ideas aren't easily transferrable without modification or without some sort of like...okay, but what's that— okay, how do we play with that a little bit? How do we make that fit into place? How do we sand something down or add something to it? And just be...be thoughtful about the ways in which bringing something like that in can be...and I don't mean thoughtful in a moral sense, actually. I mean it in a creative sense. Think about the ways that introducing the Force to the DC universe would shift things around. It probably wouldn't only give Batman a lightsaber. It probably would do some— in fact, Batman should not have the force—

Ali: Mm-mmm.

Austin: Because that's— he's Batman. That's the whole thing, right? Is like he doesn't have superpowers. And so you should think about things like that and ways to make that super cool and make it mesh, if that makes sense. That's my advice. But do it. Fuckin'...what is a cipher? I forget what a cipher is in *Blades in the Dark*, but I bet it's dope. [Ali makes amused sound] Anyway. Ready for the next question?

Janine: Mm-hmm.

[1:03:27]

Austin: This comes in from Doggos(???) who says:

“Hey, gang. I feel like I'm an okay GM, and some of my games have gotten good feedback. However, I've run like two campaigns for groups that formed from the fandom and just totally fudged them up. I keep assuring them to hang on for another session because I was focusing on a character for the first arc and should have seen the hints that people were being sidelined— that people being sidelined was not enjoyable, but I didn't. I did a lot more during the campaign of I think six or seven sessions before we finally called it. My question is less ‘how do I learn from this?’ which I think I have, but how do I not be haunted by it? All the prominent memories of it are me messing up. Is there a way to actually walk away from your mistakes and make sure they don't follow you?”

Janine: If you find out, you let me know! [all laugh]

Austin: Yeah. The reason I wanted to include this is because I want to emphasize that this is not a you— this is not— you are not alone in feeling that way. Like, yep! I just talked in detail about a Scum and Villainy moment that I think no one else remembers at all, because I feel like I fucked it up. I will never let go of the elevator at the beginning of *Twilight Mirage*. I will never, ever, you know, forget about the conversation on the boat in season one around Hella's alignment. They are...I will never forget, like...I will never forget about the time I got pulled into

the office in fifth grade because I was mean to somebody, you know what I mean? Like...
[Austin and Ali chuckle] To be clear, Jesse was being a jerk.

Ali: Mm-hmm.

Austin: And words had to be said. But, but, there's like...I think that this feeling of being haunted is not a unique thing for you, you know? I don't know if either of you have more here, [Ali laughs] besides "I don't want to feel like this."

Janine: I mean, I...yeah. I'm the kind of person who like I will be kept up at night thinking about a time that I laughed too hard [Austin makes sympathetic sound] and no one else was laughing or something.

Austin: Yeah. [Ali chuckles]

Janine: Like, the stupidest shit will sometimes just follow you, and like...my strategy for dealing with it changes from month to month.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Like, you know, years ago, the thing I used to tell myself was like, "You know, embarrassing myself isn't gonna kill me. This feeling isn't like— I'm not gonna die because of this. Like, it's fine." And that stopped working 'cause I did it so much, and then it became a thing of just like, "No one else remembers this." And then it became "You won't remember this in two months," which is often just not true. [Ali laughs]

Austin: Yeah. Yeah.

Janine: But in the moment, it does feel better.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: You know, a lot of it, I think is...you need to remind yourself that you did learn from it.

Austin: Yes.

Janine: Like you say in this thing, in your message itself, that you...that maybe in the— you didn't realize quickly enough, but you did realize. Like, you...you know, you are not a mindreader. And you were trying to do something. And maybe if you were a mindreader, you would have picked up on things more quickly. You did not, because you are not that. That is not a realistic expectation for you to have of yourself. And also, you know, this is also why we emphasize that players should communicate with their GMs, 'cause they could have also talked to you about this, and...I'm not saying that the solution is if people have a problem expect them

to come to you and otherwise carry on. But, just in general, like, by the time you recognize there is an issue, you started to correct it, and you feel like you did as things progressed, but you still regret that early stage where you didn't anticipate things. And like, you can't always anticipate. Like, again, you were trying to do something. You were being ambitious. You had ideas. And this is a...that's a learning experience. Like, that's a thing that you...you don't learn by doing everything right all the time.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Whatever— you know, that's cold comfort, I know, but.

Austin: I think it's— I think that it is honest comfort, you know, right? Like, I...I don't know that... [sighs] I don't think that it's like...there are so many degrees of what it means to be haunted by bad memories, and so I would never want to say that like, "It's good to have bad memories!" [chuckles] because it truly is not, [Janine chuckles] for a lot of folks in a real way, including me. But I do...if you have been able to process them, and if you have been able to take steps to find kind of learnings from something and think about better ways of handling things and remind yourself of kind of what your goals are, you shouldn't— I say this so much. This is like one of my go-to things, but it's like, it is okay to beat yourself up. I'm not gonna ever get mad at someone for beating themselves up. I'm gonna get mad at you for beating yourself up for beating yourself up, right? Or, not mad at you, but I'm going to ask you— I'm gonna say, "please, don't do that." Don't let it spiral in that way, because having that reaction is not pathological. Where it can get harmful and where it can— where you can start digging yourself a ditch, is when you start to let that loop. Or when it starts to loop. I don't want to say when you start to— when you let it, because I know it is not often a conscious choice. [chuckles] Though, with me, it has sometimes been a conscious choice. Sometimes I will dig that ditch for myself and crawl in it, because I feel like that's where I fucking belong. And so, this is me telling other people who are in that moment that I have been in: like, hey, you fucked up, it's okay that you fucked up, do better, but you won't do better by lingering on that feeling and punishing yourself for punishing yourself, you know? So, yeah. Generally...generally just like, keep trying to get better at something. Keep trying to recognize the ways in which you could be better at it. And I think the other big one here that is good is that like, what you also indicate here is like...you didn't...you didn't wait for something to explode, you know? [chuckles] You recognized something was not working out. You walked away from it, and for that, you should give yourself credit for getting through it and moving on. That is the other half of this stuff, is like, it's so easy to have something bad happen where you feel like you're the cause and to only see the worst read of it and to not think about how much worse it could have been or the ways in which you managed to mitigate harm or ways in which you made the right choices eventually, you know, at the right points in time, because of early mistakes. It can be really, really, really hard to give yourself any credit after a mistake. So, try to do that, and good luck! I hope you feel comfortable GMing again sometime soon. Whether with that group or a different group. I know that it is stressful. Alright. I think that is the last question of the month. Yeah, it is. If you have questions and want to send them in for January's show, you can do that by sending them to tipsatthetable@gmail.com. We are in need

of more questions, always, so please send them in. Alright. That's gonna be it for us. I hope everyone has a great remainder of your week. Everyone stay warm. I say that 'cause it's cold here. I'm sure a lot of you are in warm places already, but I'm looking at snow on the ground.

Janine: Yeah, like the entire southern half of the planet is probably doing okay.

Austin: Yeah. Yeah. Stay comfortable. How's that? That's better.

Ali: Mm-hmm.

Janine: Oh, that's good. I like that.

Austin: Stay comfortable. And also just stay comfortable! That's just nice. It's nice to say comfy.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Alright. Have a good one, everybody. [**Austin** and **Janine** chuckle]