

Tips at the Table – Hookah Immersion

Transcriber: @dekudekarts [0:00:00—0:05:22]

Austin: Welcome to Tips at the Table, a Q&A podcast about critical questions, hopefully smart answers, and fun interaction between good friends. I'm your host Austin Walker. Joining me today, Alicia Acampora.

Ali: Um, hi! My name *is* Ali you can find me at @ali_west on twitter.com!

Austin: Andrew Lee Swan.

Dre (chuckling): Uh, hey, you can find me on Twitter @swandre3000

Austin: And Keith Carberry.

Keith: Hi my name's uh, Keith Carberry you can find me on Twitter @KeithJCarberry, and you should find the Let's Plays that I do at [youtube.com/runbutton](https://www.youtube.com/runbutton). I also just real quick wanna note, I think I mentioned this before, one of my favorite things is that Austin always introduces Ali as "Alicia Acampora", [Ali chuckles] and then Ali says "My name's Ali Acampora", [Ali starts laughing] and it always seems like you're corre— like, "Uh hey I'm Ali we do this for years and I'm— all you still don't know my name ack—"

Austin (over Keith): You should actually, you should go listen, nope, you should actually go listen to past episodes, because it's literally the opposite. For years I announced her as "Ali" and what she would say is "I'm Alicia Acampora." So—

Keith (over Austin): You're right, no you're right, it is—

Austin: —I switched, *one hundred* percent.

Ali (in the background): Auuustiin...

Keith: —you— it's— Ali is just always trying to make it look like Austin is getting her name wrong.

Austin: Yep.

Keith: Like no matter what you can't win.

Austin: This is also like a thing in our actual friend group, which is that like, half of our— hal— [mumbling] the— the— part of my friend group with Ali that does not do Friends at the Table just calls her Alicia. That is like—

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: —what our—

Dre (talking over Austin): Oh, whoa.

Austin: —my college friends call her. So—

Keith: That's bizarre. Yeah.

Ali: Mhm.

Austin: —so Ali when we're with them it's always weird.

[Ali chuckles]

Austin: I call the— I call you Ali to them all the time, because it's like, that's how I know you? But...

Ali: Yep.

Dre: Hmm.

Austin: Um, I also say Andrew Lee Swan, uh, which is— even though we call you Dre, so—

[Ali laughing]

Austin: —that is also...

Dre: And this is the only corner in the world that anyone calls me Dre.

Austin: Right, right, exactly. Which—, which is a weird historical, like, blip in your life. I'm sure.

[Ali and Keith laughing]

Austin: I don't even remember how we got there during Stream Friends, I don't even remember what—

Dre: I—, tsch...

Austin: —fucking, bullshit—

Keith (over Austin): Wait, was there a point in Stream Friends where you were literally Andrew?

Dre: Yeah!

Austin: Yeah!

Ali: Yeah!

Dre: Also like the preceding—

Keith (over Dre): Did you like, introduce yourself as liter—, like hi, I'm literally Andrew.

Dre: —like the preceding, like every year of my life I was Andrew. [laughs]

Keith: Well yeah, sorry, I've— I've thought maybe you— you were Andrew for your entire life and then came to Stream Friends and was like “No, now I'm Dre.”

Dre: No. Austin enchristined me.

Keith: But no you s—

Austin: Yeah, I don't remember what we were even streaming.

Ali (over Austin): Yeah. You were blessed with it.

Austin: Probably *Cube World*. Y'all ever go to twitter.com/wall_lay and think—

[Ali laughs]

Keith: Oooh nooooo...

Austin: —what if there was a *Cube World* update? 'Cause I do literally three times a week.

Ali (over Austin): No. I don't do that anymore.

[Dre groaning over Austin and Ali]

Keith: It's been— I feel like—

Ali (over Keith): No...

Dre: Yeah I did that [voice drowned out]

Austin: I did that twenty minutes ago. So—

Keith: —do you know how they say— you know how they say that like, every handful of years all the cells in your body die and replace themselves? I feel like that with *Cube World* updates.

[Ali laughs]

Keith: I was— I was physically— I was biologically or chemically a different being than I am now the last time there was a *Cube World* update.

Austin: It's never gonna happen but I still check it and it's just— because I guess I like suffering.

Ali (over Austin): I had my time with it.

Austin: I didn't have enough.

Ali (over Austin): I enjoy— I loved *Cube World*. We had a great time together.

Austin: Yeah...

Ali: It was like summer loving and then... now... I've—

Austin: And then no?

Keith (over Austin): It was so beauti— my first moments in *Cube World* were so beautiful.

Austin: Mmmm. I'm gonna shrink this really quick, and then make it big again... We are gonna do a *Tips at the Table* episode! It's gonna be fun and we're gonna answer questions and it's gonna be cool. Uhh, first up, let's just dive into it, uh actually, briefly, thanks for supporting us if you're listening to this or watching it, you are supporting us. As a reminder to those of you who are listening to an archive, you could join us live and— and join this chat filled with people talking about The Sims LPs that we used to do, [Ali chuckles] and talking about what what Patreon tier gets Keith fire insurance asks Sophie, good question. Good question.

[Ali and Dre laughing]

Keith: That's— that's on the— that's on the Run Button Patreon.

Austin: Yeah, yeah, fair. Um, the—, the— you can— you can join us live and send us notes like that if you join up at the fifteen dollar Hacker tier. As always that is at friendsatthetable.cash, but also hey, if you're listening to this in any capacity, thanks for your support. It really means a lot to us, it lets us do this, it lets us— you know, do more shows. And we like to do shows. So, thank you so much! Let's dive in with a quickie really quick from Angelina and then we'll get to a real one from Angelina.

Ali: Oh!

Question 1 (00:03:45)

Austin: Angelina says: "Do you put yourselves on mute when you're not speaking and if so, don't you miss out on a lot of the cool background laughs? For example, I love it when Keith laughs!"

Ali: Awww!

Austin: Uhhh. I don't mute myself ever. In life.

Ali: Yeah that would be—

[Dre laughs]

Ali: —bad.

Austin: It's actually bad, right?

Keith: Yeah it's bad.

Ali: I—

Keith (over Ali): For editing.

Ali: — when, yeah—, yeah d— oh boy if you're doing a podcast and you're not talking? Do not mute yourself.

Austin: Need that dead air so you can actually zero it out.

Ali: Yeah.

Dre: Mm.

Keith: Yeah.

Ali: You can mute yourself on the call if you don't want your friends to hear you cough or fart or whatever, but...

Austin: But...

Ali: ...you gotta record it.

[Dre and Keith laughing, Ali also starts to laugh]

Ali: Sorry!

Dre: Yeah I don't think so!

Ali: Sorry.

Dre: Yeah.

Austin: Put that on the— put that on that main, you know what I mean?

[Keith Ali and Dre laughing]

Keith: Um—

Dre: Yeah, the only time I ever mute myself, and I don't do it in Audacity, Ali, I only do it in Discord, is when I'm getting up to like, leave the room to use the bathroom or something.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Right.

Dre: 'Cause I don't want that slamming door to be on the r— yeah.

Keith: And, even the other thing is— even if you can't like— like— even though the noise in your file is so bad that you can't really remove it, it's still really jarring to have like, when you talk you can hear all the background noise and as soon as you mute it is gone from the file, it's very weird and bad, yeah.

Austin (over Keith): Yes.

Ali (over Keith): Yes.

Austin (over Keith): It sucks. It's super weird, it's super bad, I think someone did it once and we had to be like, "don't do that again".

[Ali chuckles]

Transcriber: Kārlis (@townout on Twitter) [0:05:22—]

Austin: The other thing is just, like, the feeling of background noise that I think it's just— like besides just being jarring when it's not there, is important for the notion of this digital table we're at. The little like... you know, noises we make and little micro laughs and, like, you can hear someone smile sometimes (chuckles), you know, or something like... And like that stuff is important for conveying that everyone is there, even when they're not necessarily speaking. So, that's my quick answer, Angelina.

Question 2 (00:05:30)

Now a real one from Angelina, who says— I think this is the same Angelina. The name Angelina was on both of them. "I GMed for the first time today and I'm having a problem. I wanted to give players a lot to play with so I had a lot of options of what they could do. But I think my players are extremely shy and were extremely hesitant to go out and do *anything*. I guess the question is, how do you make more directed action so the players feel like they have something to hold onto? I feel like my mistake is making the world *too* free. What's the balance between railroading and directing players towards action? Thanks so much and free Hadrian (chuckles). Best, Angelina."

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: #FreeHadrian, that's what I'm trying to say.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: This is a really good question. And I think— I mean, the answer is, there is no universal answer. And it's a *lot* about knowing your audience, right? I think a lot about— and obviously we've talked about this a lot in the last couple of months, which is that the Quire-side game was *very* much— part of its struggle for the kind of ground game at the beginning of this season, was that it was too open and did not have a lot of direction. And so it was a lot of like, "Hey, where do you want to go?" So I think, even with really seasoned and fantastic role players, you end up

hitting that problem sometimes. And what you end up needing to do is like— or for me, at least, what I needed to do for them, was like find some sort of intrigue that would be interesting enough to drive them forward and get them asking questions. And then asking them back, “Okay, how do you go about digging into this?” And reminding them that they can invent things, to some degree, right? Like, “Hey, you can invent how you look into this. Is there a guard tower on the southern wall? Yeah, yeah, sure. Let’s go there. Let’s go to this guard tower. Oh, you want to follow someone who might know something? Totally. Let’s figure out who that is.” That is a huge thing that you have in your back pocket.

The second answer, though, is like, it’s okay to run really directed games. I don’t personally love doing that; we’ve talked before about why I wasn’t as thrilled of running *Golden Sky Stories*, even though I think it’s a really beautiful game and a really fantastic session. That’s a very directed game that has like— you plot out what your five scenes are going to be and then you do those five scenes. But even in a lesser sense, you look at something like *Marielda*, where it was like, “Alright, this job came in,” right? And even now, with *Scum and Villainy*, it’s been very similar. “This job came in. This is your job. Here is your mission.” Now, that can go a bunch of different directions once you put it into play and you can kind of seed certain things, but it’s way closer to, like, video game quest design or something, than open-ended, “go do whatever you want” stuff. I mean, even looking at *Hieron*, their goal was to get to that tower— or the Boat Party and the Winter— uh, both of their parties, like, go to where these towers are, right? Go to the Mark of the Erasure, go to this other point on the map. And what happened in between is kind of where there was lots of freedom and new direction and stuff like that. So, don’t be afraid of a little direction, is what I would say. But hold on loosely, right? Like... Let there be room in the margins, but you put the page on the table.

For y’all, like, what do you think, on this, as players who’ve played across all of these different games with various degrees of freedom and open-endedness, versus kind of directedness.

Ali: I feel like when I was a shy player or even like in sessions now where I’m like, “I don’t know what to do—”

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: Sometimes, like... being able to hook one person but then encouraging it to be a group activity is—

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: —a thing that helps. Just being—

Austin: Yeah. Do you have an example of that?

Ali: Well, I think like— I feel like the *Hieron* game picked up once we all wanted to talk to Calhoun, right?

Austin: Right.

Ali: And we were all like, “Oh, let’s *all* have a conversation with him after Fero just was”?

Austin: Right.

Ali: And then, I think, more recently in *Twilight Mirage* stuff it’s been really easy to be like, “Well, who wants to go with Fourteen Fifteen on this thing?”

Austin: Riiight...

Ali: And just being able to say, like, “Yeah, I’ll go do that,” instead of like, (hesitating) “I don’t have my own scene to do” helps more.

Austin: Yeah. That’s been huge, I think. There’s a sequence coming up in an upcoming episode that really benefited from having— like, it ended up being... It was Fourteen, Grand, and Tender. And it could’ve just been a Fourteen scene. Fourteen could’ve just done that the way that they did in the first half of the season, like, “Oh, I’m gonna go call in this old buddy.” And sometimes those sequences don’t always lend themselves to like, “Oh, and I’m gonna tag along,” but in this case, it was like, “We’re going to do it.” Or even in the episode that just came out, for the refugee side of the game, the group that’s leading a group through the Stitch, with Dre, Janine, and Sylvia¹, there was that sequence where Echo and Even went to go meet with Cascabel. That could have just been an Even scene. But Even brought Echo along and it’s a better scene for that because we got to kind of hint at some of the Echo and Ballard relationship stuff, or Cascabel’s relationship with Ballard, and kind of some distance there. Which is really interesting. So, which people, uh— (chuckles) People who listened to *Drawing Maps* last night, or watched it, will know is more complicated than that first blush may be, so.

I guess, Dre, actually, I’m kind of curious because... I think about the *COUNTER/weight* faction game was this, like to a thousand degrees.

Dre: Yeah...

Austin: I’ve been thinking about that faction game a lot lately, because we haven’t done anything quite like it in a long time. *Drawing Maps* ends up being a little bit like it, actually, which is interesting. But the... You, Sylvia, and I literally just had a blank page, and it was like, “Here are all of the stats we have for all of the various factions—”

(Dre chuckles)

Austin: “—what do they do?” And so that was *really* open ended. Do you remember how you thought about deciding what, like— You were in charge of Snowtrak, which ended up being the big antagonist, in a major way—

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

(Dre laughs)

Austin: —kind of indirectly for that season. Different than maybe it seemed like they would be at the start.

Dre: Yeah.

Austin: But like, how did you— thinking about some of the big decisions you made, how did you decide that without a ton of prompting from me as the GM?

Dre: Yeah, I think as a player, it's... I just found the thing that interested me the most. And I think that's kind of like... I think of, when I'm GMing for friends locally, I feel like that's my biggest job is, "Okay, just figure out what they're most interested in," and run with that. And so yeah, with the faction game. I got really interested in... Oh man, I'm forgetting her name was it Natalya?

Austin: Yeah. Natalya Greaves.

Dre: Yeah! I got really interested in her story and, like, how a person like that, you know... what their life looks like when they get stuck into this, for lack of a better word, corporate machine.

Austin: Mm.

Dre: And so like, yeah, there was stuff going on around all that that we had to worry about, because, again, it was like this big faction game. But I think... I latched on to that and Sylvia latched onto a couple of their kickass punk spacerat pirates and—

Austin (chuckles): Mm-hmmmm...

Dre: —that's, I think, what kind of pulled us along and that's, I *think*, when we started really getting momentum going in those sessions, when they stopped feeling as kind of choppy or confusing—

Austin: Right.

Dre: —was when we really just focused on that stuff.

Austin: Yeah, I think that, like, very hard-to-find focus— but like once you *find* whatever that key thing is that gets the table excited, zero in on it. And sometimes it's not as simple as them being like, "Yeah, this is the thing that excites me!" But like... Partly it can be knowing the people at the table outside of play, like knowing what type of stuff gets them excited. There is a sequence in, again, an upcoming episode, where I describe a character and you can literally hear Janine, like her eyes getting bigger—

(Dre laughs)

Austin: —at my description of this character. It's like, "Oh, I got buy-in," and like, yes, I designed that character explicitly for Janine to get excited about, and that is one of those things that's like,

“Okay, how well do you know the people at the table?” And that can be a really hard task as a GM, especially if you’re just playing with people where all you do is play games with them. And being a GM should not be like... I love that I run games for my friends, but the requirement of being a GM should not be, like, “your best buds”. You can just do this thing the way that some people just get together to watch sports or to play basketball at the gym, you know? But if you have the opportunity and you like the people you play games with, don’t be afraid of thinking about what their taste is like and what they’ve said they’re interested in. I cannot under—

(car horn blares in the background)

Austin: —thanks, bud, outside of home—

(Ali and Dre laugh)

Dre: (in a deep voice, imitating the honking driver) “YOU TELL ‘EM, AUSTIN!”

(Austin, Keith, and Ali laugh)

Austin: “That’s right! You let ‘em know! And remind them the next thing you’re gonna say, which is—you should have a Discord together!” I can’t undersell how important it is to have a space where you can just like link dope things that you think are relevant to your campaign. Like, whether that’s like a Pinterest board or a shared Discord, or a blog, or just like a Twitter account—whatever it is, have a place where you can just drop in stuff that you think is cool. And like, “Oh, this is what my outfit looks like” or like, “Oh, I really want to go to a place that looks like this,” or not even that specific, just like, “Ooh, this is a thing that reminds me really broadly of what we’re doing”. It helps communicate and figure out— it helps you communicate what the tone of the, whatever, the show— not show, the game is (chuckles). And it also helps you gauge interest in various things. Like if you drop in a big, gross troll man and everyone is like, “That sucks, actually,” you’d be like, “Okay, maybe we’re not gonna do troll men.” But if you drop and one of them is like, (higher voice) “Oh, that sucks!!! I hate this troll man!!! He’s so gross!!!”

(Ali laughs)

Austin: You’d be like, “All right, I gotta put this troll man in.”

(Keith laughs)

Ali: No.....

Austin: (laughs) Like if people respond in that way, it’s good!

(Ali chuckles)

Keith: Yeah.

Austin: I think that like that's worked a lot. God, I cannot wait for people to hear, like, both sides of the fucking current *Twilight Mirage* arc are about to get—

Keith (over Austin): Ah, fuck off!

Austin: —so fuckin' lit. I *can't* wait. It's so good.

(Ali and Dre laugh)

Austin: Uh, continuing.

Keith: There is a "gross, we hate this thing—"

(Austin laughs)

Keith: —in the last thing, and it fucking sucks.

Austin: It's so good! I love it so much.

Question 3 (00:15:45)

Austin: Okay, this one comes in from Che, who says: "So, last time you answered a question that popped up in the chat about how to get out of a game that isn't fun and that you're not enjoying. I'm GMing (maybe) a *Dungeon World* campaign for a couple of friends that's recently gone south. Highlights include a player refusing to speak to anyone else, because he hasn't gotten his out-of-character way; a different player texting us not to start until he got there and then arriving almost an hour late; and the first player *screaming* at me because I said Jason Momoa was more attractive than the classic blond-haired, blue-eyed—"

(sighs) Yeah, I get it!

(Ali laughs)

Austin: Yeah, I *agree* that Jason Momoa— (car honks in the background) Guy outside on the horn and I agree, Jason Momoa *is* more attractive than the classic blond hair, blue eyes, white Aquaman.

(laughter)

Austin: "And I'm looking to extricate myself/fix the situation. Any advice on how to handle unruly players or pull out of a group when you're GMing?"

Keith: Before we answer, I just want to commiserate with how bad it is to try to get out of doing a tabletop game when you're the GM.

Austin: Yep!

Ali: Ohh...

Keith: That is like way ha— Yeah, because like, that's way harder than if you're just a player.

Austin: But if you're a player, you can just be like, "Oh, guys, something's coming up on Thursday nights and I just don't have time right now. Work is just real busy right now." But if you're the GM, you're like ruining five people's night, basically.

Keith: Yeah, yeah. And I can't explain how many times I've been a GM of a group *of friends* where we were all playing and I was just like, "I fucking hate this. You guys are making this really hard for me and I don't want to do it anymore." So I— so... help me too, I guess.

(Austin, Ali and Dre laugh)

Austin: Are you in this situation, Keith?

Keith: No, no, I was like, three years or four years ago.

Austin: How did you get out of it?

Keith: Um, I think I just, um... I pushed off scheduling it like two times in a row, and it sort of just fizzled into nothing.

Austin: Hmm. Okay.

Ali: Mmm...

Keith: So maybe try that—

(Dre laughs)

Keith: Maybe just try kind of like being, "Ah, this week's not good." And then when we get to next week, be like, "Ah, this week's not good". And then maybe they'll forget?

Austin: This is definitely one of those questions that makes me want to walk back all the things I say about good, open communication and being able to trust your table and just say the thing you want to say and if— You know, try to be as open as possible—

Keith: Yeah.

Austin: —because this is really hitting all of my deep anxiety bells, like all of my social anxiety—

Keith: Yes, yeah, yeah.

Austin: —is just like, "Get the fuck out, figure out how to deal without having any conflict or any confrontation."

Keith: Because like, you can be as open as you want, but it's tough to be like, "Okay, guys, Zack is not taking this seriously, he's ruining my time and all of your times."

Austin: Right.

Keith: Like, "Nate, you're too willing to—" This was real.

(Austin and Ali laugh)

Keith: —"Nate, you're—" (laughs loudly) "Nate is always trying to go off on his own and do stuff without other people. All Vlad wants to do is, like, kill people and is ruining the group dynamics by killing people that other people don't want to be killed. And Zack, you brought a whole fucking Hookah setup—"

(Dre, Ali and Austin laugh)

Keith: "And like, you're trying to fucking hookah up my barn and we're trying to play D&D!"

Austin: Wait— two questions now. One, did his character also have a hookah setup because if so, that's immersion. That's— he's getting in character.

(Ali laughs)

Keith: No! No, it didn't! No—! Because that would have been— that would have been, like, fun, I think.

Austin: Two. What's up with the barn?

Ali: You know about the barn... (laughs)

Austin: Yeah but the audience doesn't, I'm throwing— this is, I'm opening a door to the Silent Hill barn.

(Ali and Keith laugh)

Keith: My childhood home was a big—

Austin: (laughs) Was a barn.

(Ali laughs)

Keith: It was a barn. No, I lived next to— I lived on a property that my grandparents own, and there's a big ass barn and it's creepy as shit and there's a ghost upstairs. It's the only ghost in the whole world, lives in that barn.

Austin: Oh my God. The deep cut here, which is—

(laughter)

Austin: You mentioned the Sims LP a second ago from the old Stream Friends, in which Keith goes *off* about how there are no such things as ghosts. And the fact that, inside of continuity, you've recognised that and needed to be *very* clear that that is the one ghost, is very good.

Keith: (laughs) It's the one ghost, yeah. It's— so, it's this old ass barn, it's super creepy. It's mostly filled with storage and there happens to be my grandfather's old TV that he got rid of by putting in the barn. And so I used to use that barn to play— to do our *Silent Hill* Let's Play until the TV died completely.

Austin: Right.

Keith: And so, for I think one and a half games worth of *Silent Hill*, Kyle and I recorded from this creepy ass barn, which was very, very cool. But it also was creepy and weird and I did a couple different D&D campaigns from in there.

Austin: Right. I gotcha.

Keith: I had like a wrought iron chair that looked like a throne that I sat in.

Austin: Oh, God.

Keith: I put candles and there was weird like... You know how when you live kind of in the woods, you find animal bones everywhere? So I put animal bones and candles all over, uh...

Austin: Three minutes ago, Dylan Carey in the chat said "I can't believe Keith is literally just Fero", and we've only gone deeper in that direction since then.

(Keith and Ali laugh)

Keith: I kind of am literally just all the characters that I—

Austin: Uh-huh.

Ali: You don't say.

(Austin laughs)

Keith: Well, I think it's pretty clear. And I am not shy— I'm not shy about it.

Austin: No, you are not.

Keith: But! I like to think that each of the characters is different enough that it represents a slightly different aspect of how I am.

Austin: Right, and Fero is definitely the one who gets mad at the— no, see this is the thing, Fero would never get mad if someone brought a hookah to the D&D game (laughs).

Dre: Yeah.

Austin: So.

Keith: Yeah, well, it wasn't that he brought the hookah, it's that he was doing that instead of playing.

Austin: Gotcha.

Keith: That's what it was.

Austin: That's an important distinction.

Ali: (laughs) Fero hates distracting hookahs.

Keith: I hate distracting hookahs. I'm trying to do my thing, this is important to me—

Dre: Now, important constitutional-reading hookahs...

(Ali laughs)

Keith: Now, this is also the same Zack I mentioned before when I gave an example of me making bad choices as a GM during the GM *Tips at the Table*, where he decided that what he wanted to do was just like, *attack a guard in a city, unprovoked*. And they just killed his character.

Austin: (laughs) Good.

Keith: Yeah, yeah. Well—

Dre: Well—

Keith: I had them... I hadn't... I hadn't planned out how strong that these guards would be.

Austin: Sure.

Keith: Um, so I basically invented on the spot out of vengeance that they were strong enough to kill him easily. But also it was like his first game. He was like level one.

Austin: (sighs) Right.

Keith: So. You can't just—

Austin: And also remember, no— yeah, yeah, no, yeah, it's tough. Anyway, this is not that question—

Keith: It's tough, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Austin: Let me wrap back around to Che's question, which is, if someone at the table is screaming at you, one, they probably shouldn't be at the table. I don't care if they're screaming at you about Aquaman or about dice rolls or what, but like... that person is not making that table safe or fun for anybody. And, two, if everybody else at that table is like... if you talk to the other people at that table and they're like, "Oh, it's totally cool that Zack yelled at you," like, you should not feel bad about stepping away from that game in any way. That doesn't mean that it's gonna be an easy thing to do, as Keith said, like stopping and being like, "Oh, I'm not up for GMing this," is a frustrating thing that can really make you feel like shit, but also not as much as dealing with this bullshit. This stuff sounds bad and it's not your responsibility to deal with people who scream at you. It's not your responsibility to, you know, like, give up an extra hour of your day so that the other player can waste it while you're waiting around. Time is a limited resource, and it's yours. And you should use it the way that you really, really want to. And it's often really hard to recognise that until you've wasted a lot of it. So this is me saying *please* recognise—

(Ali laughs)

Austin: —how important your free time is. And, you know, what I'm seeing here is a pretty negative group dynamic that... Sometimes, again, it's not only that you need me to say "extricate yourself from this," but sometimes it helps to hear that. Pull yourself out of this and if that means doing the, like, less-than-completely-honest thing and saying just like, "Oh, I just can't fit in my life right now" or something, if that's the only way you can deal with it, that's fine.

Keith: Yeah. Lie to your friends, man!

(Ali laughs)

Austin: That said, also, like, don't... Someone shouldn't be screaming at you, full stop. And if that person can't take that criticism that says like, "Hey, I really don't appreciate that you screamed at me over that in front of everybody. And also, that was just not a particularly kind way to be," there's a larger extrication that might be worth thinking about. I know that this stuff is not cut and dry and that people have bad days and all that stuff. But it's probably worth beginning to think about like, "Hey, do I want to spend time around someone who's doing this to me," in general. That might be my personal experience around some of this stuff, but like, seriously, value yourself. You're worth valuing.

Ali: Yeah. As someone who has like basically made their career over, like, flattening out wrinkles in social groups and overextending myself—

Austin: Mm-hm!

Ali: —this is all a red flag. (laughs) And you should just probably get out of it. Or like, if you still want to be friends with these people, be able to say very cleanly, like, "This is not just a hangout for me, GMing is also a job and you are all making this very hard for me and I don't want to do it anymore."

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: "If you want to play *Monster Hunter*, I'll see you on Tuesday" or whatever.

Austin: Right, right. That's a really good thing because then you can basically say, "Hey, here are the social interactions in which we're still cool. We're still gonna play *Monster Hunter*. We can still go see *Black Panther*. But like, we cannot go see *Aquaman*." (laughs)

(Keith and Ali laugh)

Austin: "Because I'm not gonna deal with your fucking bullshit."

Keith: We can't talk about Aquaman. You can't even think about Aquaman when you're near me.

Austin: Exactly.

Ali: Yeah. Don't want to even see a picture of him.

Austin: Um, Dre. Do you have anything here, as a sometimes GM?

Dre: Oh... I think it's just like... I think it's— you should be... Not "you should be". But like, I hope that you can feel empowered to state to others the expectations that you place on the way other people deal with you.

Austin: Mm.

Dre: I mean, kind of like you said. Someone screaming at you, especially over something that's as fucking trivial as which Aquaman you like better, is a huge red flag.

Keith: Yeah.

Dre: But like, I think we have probably all had those friends in our life who, for whatever reason, just don't get why certain interactions are not cool or aren't funny or something.

Austin: Right...

Dre: And so, I mean, you know, if this is a friend that you want to keep a friendship going with, I think it's perfectly fine to say like, "Hey, I'm not trying to read into what you were saying or what you meant, but like, it really wasn't cool that you did this."

Austin: Mm-hm.

Dre: And I think it's also fair to say that to, like, the friend that's getting there an hour late. It's like, you know, as Austin was saying, it's an *hour of your time*!

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Dre: That's a lot of time. Yeah, I think like... I think friend groups, in general, get better when people are honest about the way they want to be treated, because either they get stronger—

Austin: Yes.

Dre: —and you all respect each other and are more supportive, or you learn that there are people who don't want to do that. And you don't want those people as your friends.

Austin: Exactly.

Question 4 (00:27:15)

Austin: All right, let's keep moving. This one comes in from Virginia who says, "Hey, y'all—" That's not true. Virginia says, "Hey, *all*."

(all laugh)

Austin: I almost made that "y'all". Uh—

Keith: Hey ya's (laughs).

Austin: (laughs) Hey ya's. Yeah, exactly! He yous. "Do you have any recommendations for staying interested in your characters over the long term, both in tabletop games and writing projects? Thank you."

Dre: Become a vampire.

Ali: (laughs) A-ha!

Austin: (chuckles) Yeah, that works. That did work.

(Dre laughs)

Austin: I mean, there's something there, right, which is like, reinvention and not forgetting that people change over their lives, especially if you're playing a young character who has a long life. Like, 20 year-old characters and 30 year-old characters look very different and it is in your power to be like, "Oh, I think I had a couple birthdays since the last big arc," or, you know, whatever. Like, "Hey, can we do a time jump?" is totally a thing worth thinking about saying. Especially if things aren't precarious in the world state, if it's not like the world is going to end or whatever. But even sometimes *then*, is a cool idea to do a time jump. Anyway, Ali, I know you've played a character over a *long* period of time, outside of *Friends at the Table*.

Ali: (laughs) Yeah, my *Star Wars* RP has been running for, like, 11 years in May?

Austin: That's a *long* time.

Dre: Wow.

Keith: Nuts.

Ali: It *is* a long time. Um, there's been like arcs to it though. So it's really just, like, kind of what Dre said, which is— and what you said, which is just, like, letting your character grow over time and realising how they're different.

Austin: Mm. Have you played multiple characters in that RP or do you just have one main—?

Ali: Oh, yes, (laughs) yes, yes, yes. And that also helps because the focuses shift a little bit.

Austin: Riiiiight.

Ali: So the main, like, Jedi lady who's the main character who started the thing has like... Sometimes she's not always on screen, and yeah.

Austin: Right, right.

Ali: Someone just said that RP is in middle school and, yes, they are.

(Austin laughs)

Ali: Um, I just had that conversation with Justin the other day, where we were like, "Yeah! That's rough."

Austin: Yeah, life is long, life is... a strange thing.

Ali: It happens. Um, but yeah, it's definitely like... because if it was always like... You can have a story that happens for a really long time that's just in one year of a person's life.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Ali: And like, I think even with the *Friends at the Table* characters that I've played, that I feel like I haven't played enough of, being able to move them forward was such a big help and being able to keep them feeling fresh, right?

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Ali: Like even thinking of Hella's life and arcs of being like, "Okay, this first arc, these were her priorities. And then there was this big life event and after that her priorities have shifted this way," helps a ton. I think in tabletop games, changing Bonds and stuff really helps—

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: —keep characters developed in that way, you know, because it's always like, here is a way that their opinion has changed.

Austin: Yeah, it's one of those things where I'm often pretty... I'm not cautious, but... ambivalent about hacking in systems from one game to another game. Not because I don't think that those can do really cool things, but often because a system like Beliefs, for instance, or Bonds in *Dungeon World* is built and balanced around something that sometimes is missing from the other system. And so you won't necessarily get the same effect by just bolting it on. But if you're playing a game that does not have a system like Beliefs or Bonds, or Priorities or something that tracks how your character feels about the world or the people in it, consider figuring out how to add a system that does that. And it should be a system, it shouldn't just be a list. Like, listing those out is interesting and totally okay. But being able to be able to be awarded XP when they come up, incentivizing them to come up or even making them be a possible place where complications can come from the way that they work in, like, *Burning Wheel*. Beliefs and Instincts can cause lots of trouble, or even the Sprawl did this, right, like, "When you let your desired to blah blah blah get in the way of the mission, take XP." That stuff really helps you think about your character as a character and, once you're doing that, you can do what Ali said, which is like, continue to grow and change with them over time because when those beliefs change, your XP triggers change, the way trouble can come up changes, and that can lead to a real feeling of development.

We were just talking to Jack about this, and Jack is— both Jack and, independently, one of the Friends at the Table fans in a different chat, I think during the *Drawing*... I think, actually, during a feedback in the Discord, Mateus was saying like, "Hey, getting your character's first condition or trauma or whatever you want to call it inside of *Scum and Villainy* or *Blades* is really useful as an XP trigger, because it's like, hey, this is something that you could play towards now," right? Like, think about how Jack played the the brothers—

Ali: Hitchcock.

Austin: Hitchcock. I remembered Ethan, I couldn't for whatever reason remember Hitchcock. Played the Hitchcocks in *Marielda*, like, the moment in which one of— I don't remember if it was Ethan or not, becomes like softened as a character, loses that killer edge, is really important for that character feeling like he's developing. And then that develops the relationship between those characters in a really cool way. And so, having systems that track that sort of change will encourage you to feel that time moving.

My other note, as always, is I think that it's totally valid and good to do this and like dig in to a single character over a long time. I think that gives you a very specific, cool, positive, rad thing to think about and deal with. Also, it's okay to bounce on a character. It hasn't happened yet in play for us. We haven't had a season where a character or a player plays one character for X number of episodes and then switches off. But that's not a thing that I would say no to. If a player was like, "Hey, I think I want to hang this character up for a while and switch characters," I would do it. And you should be willing to do it as a player because sometimes you get bored of things and sometimes you're not feeling like you're in the skin of the character as much as you want to. You think it's a good idea for the character to step away. There are, in a lot of games, actual mechanics for doing this where like, "Hey, you know, retire this character and switch to a

different one” or something like that. But also you can just do it. Like you can just say, “Hey, I think this character is gonna go deal with some stuff on their own for a little while. But I still want to play with the party. Can I roll up a new character?” Explore doing that if you find yourself getting bored and, when you’re not, come back to the other character and maybe they’ll be under-levelled or whatever, but it’ll be alright. You’ll have a good time. So that’s my advice here.

Ali: Yeah, I think, like, even in *COUNTER/weight* being able to play Jace for a few stretches—

Austin: Yes, totally.

Ali: —was kind of refreshing to go back to Aria and be like, okay, both how is she different from this information and, like, I had this experience of trying to be someone else for a little while. Um, another thing about playing in RP for 11 years is that sometimes me and Justin take a break and do a *Mass Effect* RP instead because those are the people we are (laughs).

Austin: Good. Yes.

(Dre and Keith laugh)

Austin: Uh-huh.

Ali: So, if it’s a tabletop group, like switch a system, do a one-shot once in a while.

Austin: Yeah...

Ali: Just if things feel a little boring, yeah.

Austin: Stay fresh. That’s a good idea. The Lives and the Bluffs have been really good for that, I think—

Dre: Yes.

Austin: —of just like, “Oh man, we have all these—” I’m not sitting on ideas in the same way that I was before which is like a constant faucet, instead of being just kind of filled up with ideas that I don’t know if we’re gonna get them out on the page, which is frustrating and scary sometimes. Like, “I really wanted this thing to happen and it won’t happen for another two years.” We’re not going to talk about those other Discord channels that we have—

Ali: (laughs) We’re not.

Austin: —for planning two more seasons that are fucking forever away. Anyway, I’m gonna advance to the next slide unless someone has something else.

Keith: I have a sort of semi thing—

Austin: Sure!

Keith: I think one thing is, like, if you are a GM or if you can talk to your GM about it, putting your character in situations that mirror situations that you were in way further back in your campaign, that can show you how your character has already changed without you even realising it. Just based on like, “Oh, I’m naturally doing different things than I was three years ago.” That’s worked for me before in games and might work. Like, you might not know how... You might not realise the way that your character is different than how you used to play them, until you get to a thing where you’re like, “Oh, this was like a thing that we did three years ago and I’m doing it differently now, just naturally differently.”

Austin: I love that idea. I think that’s a really cool one. I mean, it’s definitely one that we’ve done very quietly, you know what I mean? We’ve definitely had the like, the “wrap back around on a similar situation to see if a character makes the same sort of moral choice or something”. But I think that’s a really good idea, as a player, you know, one of the things I’ve talked about a lot recently is, like, advocate for the sort of thing you want. And I think it’s— In real life, we don’t get to go, like— I mean, I guess to some degree in real life, we get to say, “Hey, I want to give this thing a shot again,” like I, you know, dropped out of grad school and then five years later or whatever, four years later went back to grad school, and gave it another shot and turned out, you know, not perfect, but okay. But in tabletop games, specifically, we have the ability to tell our GM, “Here is a thing I’m interested in with this character, I want to wrap back around to it.” That’s a really good idea. So be willing to do that.

Um, cool. Someone in the chat noticed that I said the word “slides”, Asmodeus and Dylan Carey said, “Wait, there are slides, am I missing something?”, “Hm, there are slides?” And there are slides and I just was not showing them this whole time.

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: So, now the slides are live. Let’s advance to the next one at this point.

Question 5 (00:37:30)

Austin: So this one comes in from Connor, who says “Hi, friends. Hey, friends. I have a question regarding setting precedents at the table that you end up regretting. I have a longtime player who is someone I respect a lot and is someone I enjoy being a GM for. She was a GM first, in fact. It’s become an inevitability that she’ll end up, at some point during my campaign, coming up with a new character or wanting to switch out of her old one. She will generally have compelling reasons to do so and I’ll generally let it slide, as long as it’s done in a way that’s narratively satisfying for my own sanity. I’m worried, though, that it’s made it so that’s a precedent for players in my game to consider changing their character mid-campaign more often than I like to. I’m also difficult at saying no. Just so this isn’t a tip question, what are other times in an RPG you guys have worried that you’ve set a bad precedent, presumably, for a game?”

So this is like a literal build on that last one, which is like... the reminder on the other hand, which is, it can be a lot, as a GM, to deal with not having any stability around a thing. So the big thing that I would advocate for here is that conversation between the player and the GM that says like, "Hey, why do you want to change the character here? Is there something that we can do inside of this space that's still interesting? Or are you just ready to move on?"

I know, Ali, you and I actually had this conversation with Tender coming into the middle of *Twilight Mirage*, right? Which was like, "Alright, is Tender changing, are there aspects of Tender that I failed as the GM to engage with?" You've written about this for the Pusher Updates before. And we ended up sticking with Tender obviously, right? But like, that was a thing that we definitely considered.

Ali: Yeah, yeah. It was. I feel like— it's tough to wrap my head around the question because I feel like this is a different case in that this can be an opportunity to lift up the player's first character instead of—

Austin: Right, right.

Ali: —just dumping them off, which is kind of what we did with Tender.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: Because that really should be the conversation here. Instead of just being willing to, you know, switch off, what is it that you're really missing from this experience? And how can we find ways to kind of, you know, put that in? Also just, like you said, from the GM side, just being like... I don't know... (chuckles) "I prepped a lot for the character you had already (laughs) and having you change is really frustrating."

Austin: Mm-hm. The thing that there can be sometimes too though, there, is like... It's tough because like on one hand, I'm definitely advocating for throwing away prep, right? But there is definitely a difference between what happens at the table leading to prep being nullified because some other cool new thing happened versus like, "Oh, I guess all of these contacts this other character had are not going to come up in play because why would they know that that character is gone". So I think having that conversation is definitely the right idea.

But also, I'm cautious here of being like, "draw a hard line in the sand". I'm cautious about going either way too far here, right? Which is like, on one hand, I think a lot of good play comes from pushing through down periods in a character's campaign life, and figuring out how to find what you like about them. I've definitely done that as a player a lot where it's like, "Uh, is this really what I want to be doing?" and then you push through and you figure it out, and you're happier for it. But at the same time, I'm always cautious as a GM to be like, "No, you're not allowed to (chuckles) change up stuff."

(Ali laughs)

Austin: Which is to say, basically, I'd rather err in the direction of flexibility than err in the direction of having the iron fist of like, "No, you're stuck with what you picked". Because that's not gonna— the precedent that you risk setting *there* is actually the opposite, which is like, making it clear that this is *your* table. And that's not a good precedent to set, either. And so what I would say is like, if you're afraid that you set a precedent that players could consider changing their characters, I think that's an okay precedent to set, so long as you also set the precedent that is, we talk about your characters all the time. "Are you having a good time with your character? Is this a direction you think is cool?" You know, not just "Do you want to change your character?" but like, "Hey, what do you like about your character right now? Hey, what's your character gonna wear? Like, what's your character's interest beyond fighting goblins or whatever?" Having those conversations about the characters is what will prevent them from switching off *or* inform them in such a way that switching characters actually makes a lot of sense. So, think about that for sure. Any other—

Keith: Um—

Austin: Yeah, Keith?

Keith: I wanted to say, also... I don't know the time scale here, I don't know how long these people are spending with their characters. I know for me... I'm, like, almost never— or I can just say never. I'm never excited about a character before we've started—

Austin: Yeah, yeah.

Keith: —that is the— the hardest part for me is conceptualising what a character will be before I get into the game, and it takes me a little while to stretch those shoes out and find something comfortable about this character. Like, nothing is harder for me about role playing than coming up with something about a character before I've played as them.

Austin: Right, right, totally.

Keith: So, if they're like, "Ah, I want a new character," and then they make a new character and they play a game and then they're like, "Uh, this isn't as fun of a change I thought it was gonna be," I don't know, maybe... Like, "Hey, you should try it a little bit longer and then see." Especially if you're not doing this for a show (chuckles) and you're not—

(Ali laughs)

Austin (laughs): Right, right.

Keith: —you're not like, "But what about those three episodes we did?"

Austin: I guess the thing is like, that's also a good reason to go the other way, right? Which is like, it's way easier to change— to be like, "Oh, it doesn't matter— this other character is here now," is totally a thing you can just do in your tabletop gaming space—

Keith: Yeah, yeah, that's— yeah.

Austin: —when you're not sending it off to, you know, people, to an audience who is like, "Wait, where the fuck did Hella go?"

Keith: Yeah.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: (chuckles) "Why is this other character here now?"

Keith: No, you're right. I just mean like, just don't be— don't kill a character before you know who they are.

Austin: Sure. Yes, yeah. Totally, I get that. "Are there other times that you've set a bad precedent in play, either as a GM or as a player?"

Keith: Uh, anything Austin's ever let me do (laughs).

Austin: Yeah—

(Ali, Dre and Keith laugh)

Austin: Accurate, accurate. True.

(Dre laughs)

Austin: I'm trying to think, honestly. Um, I mean, I do think there are specific cases where my reaction to player stuff, in terms of introducing complication, is a reaction to, "Oh shit, did I set a bad precedent by letting them do this?" Right, like, I think it's very clear that Larry is a response to a certain sort of Meko-style solution. In the same way that Fantasma being stuck invisible for kind of a micro-arc is a response to Fantasma always going invisible, right? So like, GMing is constantly about recognising what precedents you've set up and where there is room for you to zero in and like... Like...

Ali: Rub their noses in it? (laughs)

Austin: Not "rub their noses in it," but close gaps of repetition...

Keith: Larry is a nose rub.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: No, I think Larry is a... I don't know that Larry's a nose rub, Larry is really fun (chuckles).

Keith: Larry *is* really fun. It's really fun—

Austin: Larry's like a dance. For me, it's really about closing gaps of repetition. Just because—you know... We talk a lot about how important it is to describe action and to get away from just saying, "I use *Hack and Slash*," saying, like, "I cast *Invisible*", or "I roll *Charisma* to get around this ice," is the equivalent of—or not the equivalent, but it risks falling into the same trap of "I roll *Hack and Slash*," which is— especially if you're running a show like we do, is... The audience has heard this trick before. How do I encourage you to find new tricks? And to some degree, I think it's probably a bad precedent to, like, threaten that when someone finds a really cool thing and, like, let them do it once or twice. You know, you shouldn't shut them down on the first time. Always say yes when someone has a dope idea the first time. Let it work. Let the word eater, you know, hear the word "ignorance".

But if Fantasma had done that shit again to a different word eater, I'd be like, "Uh, this is getting corny," you know what I mean?

(Ali laughs)

Austin: I would immediately start trying to figure out how to push back on that a little bit. Or I would have to start treating it like, "Alright, basically you have a spell that's good against word eaters," right? It would never have that cool impact ever again. And so, for me, that is a big one in terms of precedent, is, like, encouraging new ideas and pushing away the notion of making something very mechanical and dry. There's a big reason we made the switch in *Twilight Mirage* to get away from, like, "I shoot a gun. I shoot a gun again." And I think that pays off in an upcoming episode because I think there's a really— actually, it pays off, again, on both sides of the screen, in both arcs, there are fucking like— Like there are five-star fucking action sequences. There like Match of the Year-style—

(Ali laughs)

Austin: —sequences in both that are *incredible*, and I cannot wait for people to hear it, that only show up because we move away from, like, long-range gunfights and... Or we're encouraged by pushing people away from the bad precedent of, "I'm just gonna shoot at somebody," which all throughout the game we've kind of ran into that stuff. So that's a big one, for sure, is like, push away from non-descriptive action. Or— Allowing that sort of non-descriptive kind of just like, "I roll to attack"-style play was a huge bad precedent I set at the beginning of *Twilight Mirage* and also throughout the beginning of *Winter in Hieron*, which, you know, I found my footing on eventually.

Um, okay, anything else here? Or I'm gonna move on.

Ali: Um, I... I like... My reaction to this question is, I think that I spend a lot of time trying to examine if something is even worth the argument, you know?

Austin: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Ali: And like, I think at the point that you're writing the question in, it might be time to...

Austin: Have the conversation.

Ali: —have these conversations with people, yeah.

Austin: Yeah, totally. That's the thing is like, if it's on your brain this much, it's probably worth talking about.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Yeah, definitely. All right.

Question 6 (00:48:15)

Austin: Next up, uh... And this is gonna be a really long thing, because there's this one from Ronan, and then there's immediately a *very* long one, and they kind of walk around the same space, so I'm going to read them and then we're going to address them generally, I think.

Ronan says, "Hey, FATT crew. I GM a small RPG group occasionally and we recently decided to make the move over from *Pathfinder* to a different system and revamp our setting by playing something like *The Quiet Year*. I love how you do collaborative world building, and it's something that my players have told me is something they'd love to do, too, but I'm nervous about running a campaign based on a world that isn't just my own creation. How do I get over my GM instincts and let my players and I all have an equal amount of control over our setting? And once I've done that, how can I retake some of that control and make important GM decisions about the world in a way that will be interesting and intriguing and unpredictable for my players? I feel like Austin did that really well in *Marielda* and I would love to be able to do something like that for my own group." So that's one.

Two, this is part one from Alex, this is a very long question. I'm going to take a big drink of water before I continue.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: (takes a sip of water) "Hey, table friends," says Alex, "I'm moving to a new school and country and continent in a couple of months to do my Masters—"

Keith: Oh, that's all three.

Austin: That's all three. That's a triple threat.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: "And I thought it'd be a good opportunity to try my hand at DMing, something I've never done before. I've run some of my ideas past my roommates, and they're both pretty enthusiastic. I've got something kind of ambitious in mind, which might be biting off more than I can chew, but hey. Basically, I want us to collectively design the setting from as close to a blank

slate as possible using various systems to model history and dip into play some dynamic historical events before ultimately playing a full campaign almost certainly in *Dungeon World*, with an ethos heavily inspired by your excellent selves in the resulting setting. Putting the *Marielda* cart before the Season One horse is sort of what I have in mind, on a grand scale.

“One thing that’s struck me is the problem of making sure there’s a sort of overarching purpose to the campaign, while still allowing the players freedom to co-author the world. I was thinking about how *Friends at the Table* did it. The first quest the players got immediately involved them in the intrigues of the Gods, or at least it seems like that in retrospect. The Heat and the Dark ultimately proved to be a big bad to overcome or be overcome by, and gave the whole narrative kind of coherence, like everything had been building up to those realisations with cosmic significance all along. Given that Austin has said that before the Heat and the Dark that—” I’m sorry.

“Given that Austin has said before that the Heat and the Dark wasn’t really, quote, “the villain” until, at the earliest, *Marielda*, I was wondering how much of that was planned in advance, how much of it was collaborative or spontaneous, etc, and how you’d advise going about achieving a similar effect?

“I have some ideas in mind for things that could be sort of fill-in-the-blank thematic enemies for the player characters, depending on who they turn out to be, which I think is fair enough since, as one of the people involved in world building, I’ll have a chance to introduce them. But I don’t want to tell my players that the world is all theirs to create and then impose this hugely significant thing that ends up defining the campaign after the fact. Do you have any advice for striking that balance—avoiding the risk of playing a campaign in a world where there’s nothing for anti-heroes or heroes to do versus the DM imposing something for them to do arbitrarily? Was this something you had in your mind and dealt with deliberately? Or was it sort of a happy coincidence that it worked out so well? In which case, do you have any insights on what helped it turn out that way? Sorry for the super long question, and thanks. All the best, Alex.”

So, really broadly for both of these, like... My biggest one is, you *have* to learn to let go. You *cannot*— if your goal is to do like the *Crusader Kings 2* session before you get to *Dungeon World*— if your goal is to play a game like *Kingdom* or *Downfall* or *Follow* or *Microscope* or something like that to build your world, Alex, you *cannot* bring in a specific, fill-in-the-blank, “here is what the bad guy is going to be,” unless you have that conversation with your players ahead of time and say like, “Here is what this big thing is going to be.” Don’t put that in your back pocket if the entire notion is, “We’re going to co-build this thing from the jump” Especially if we’re going to co-build it through systems because otherwise those systems aren’t going to be allowed to breathe, you’re going to suffocate them with your prep. Systemic generation in that way is so important.

Now, there are ways to do that where you do agree upon things ahead of time. COUNTER/weight, the Golden Branch system was procedurally generated using *Stars Without Number*. But like, we knew who OriCon was. We knew who the Diaspora was, broadly. We

knew that there were things called Divines and Riggers, right? Like I knew what a Divine was, basically. And I think even Apostolos we came up with at the table, you know what I mean? Even notions about what Sigilia was came up at the table, in terms of like, we didn't want just like green-skinned human aliens or whatever, right? Things like that all emerged from that world building.

And the same is true for *Hieron*. We have a world-building episode so even though we weren't playing *Microscope* or something to build it, we talked through what the Gods were. We talked through, thematically, what the threats were. The notion of entropy, the notion of fall fading into winter was what we talked about as being the big bad. And it turns out that that is still the big bad. Winter has passed now, but the Heat and the Dark is the winter at the same time, right? The notion of things continuing to degrade, the inevitability of winter following after fall, the inevitability of the end of the universe and of our lives coming to a close is the villain, so far, in *Hieron*, right? The big picture threat, at the very least.

And so... That reflects what that world-building is. So you *have* to, you have to confront whatever this thing is in your heart and say like— and this is for both Ronan and Alex. Whatever you've come up with, you will come up with equally cool shit with your friends. The stuff you're going to come up with them is going to be even stronger, in terms of what you have to play with, because they will be invested in it, too. They are *not* going to be as invested in the thing that you come up with separately, privately, if what you've promised them is collaborative world-building from the jump. So it's in your *best* interest as a GM who wants to seem like a good GM to incorporate things that they come up with, instead of just putting out what you've brought to the table.

It's, again, not universal. If what they're coming— if what you've talked about is like, "Oh, I have a bunch of cool ideas that I want— you know, I have a cool dungeon design for you." Awesome. That's a totally valid way to play tabletop role-playing games. But in this case, it doesn't sound like that's what, either Ronan or Alex, you've pitched here to your crews. Like you've both said, "we want to do collaborative world-building". The only way to do it is to do it. And so really confront that part of yourself, which, you know, can— in some ways, it's very scary because prep is something you can trust, you have it. You look at an idea you've written down, you go like, "This is a good idea." And then, the other hand is like— or doing this collaboratively, is saying, like, "Okay, someone might say a thing that I don't like." And that happens all the time. If you listen to us do our collaborative world-building, there are ideas that people at the table are like, "I'm not sure if I'm into that so much." That's just the truth of the thing. But as the GM, you corral those ideas and you shape them and you mould them into something that, one, hits the full table's interest, and, two, lets you craft something that is special for you as the GM that *does* excite you. Trust your own ability to do that. Don't belittle yourself by saying "I can only work with my own materials". You have to lean into the *Project Runway* version of GMing, which is like, "Fuckin' Tim Gunn showed up and told you you could only use orange silk—"

(Ali laughs)

Austin: And I promise you'll make some dope shit with orange silk! Like, you don't need the chiffon, you're gonna be fine. Like, do it. That's what Tim Gunn says, right? Do it!

Just do it.

—Tim Gunn.

(laughter)

Austin: Right? So that's my very big, broad answer to these things. *Marielda's* weird because *Marielda* isn't the st— I also don't think looking at *Marielda* and *Quiet Year* for *Marielda* is exactly the same thing as this, and so don't use it as a one-to-one comparison. We had Hieron already. I knew who Samot and Samoths were (chuckles) and their love story and breakup was something I hadn't— that I did figure out during season one's play. And so that is a different thing than starting from nothing. So don't let *Marielda* be the alibi you need (chuckles) to keep your special story in your file. Like, don't have it. Go in blind, go in blank. Go in with a blank page and come up with cool stuff with your friends is, like, my very best advice for this, is just like trust yourself on it.

Huh. Sorry, I had to get all that out. Ali.

Ali: No, I, I— it's weird because I have like... It's weird reading those questions and feeling like they're thinking of collaborative world-building as something bigger than it is?

Austin: Right! Right.

Ali: And it's maybe because I've only really done this— or like because I've only been on the player side, but I feel like... I mean, at the end of the day, there is... Anytime you're playing a tabletop game, there's something that a player or GM has that is theirs that they are bringing to the table and then there is that middle space where it's like, "Let's figure out this other stuff together". At the end of the day, there's parts of the plot that are going to be yours, the antagonists are going to be yours, that is stuff that you're going to have to address and, at the end of the day, stuff about Tender is going to be mine and those are going to be my decisions to make. But like... Us sitting down and talking for two hours about what we want the world to look like before we start playing is just as much world-building as being able to be like, what are the clothes that the people in this building wear to the person who is most familiar with this culture, right?

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Ali: And like, looking for those opportunities while you're playing instead of—

Austin: That's huuuuuge.

Ali: —trying to overthink in terms of like, "I want everyone to have an option but also (chuckles)—"

Austin: Yes.

Ali: “—I have to write a plot,” those don’t have to be in spite of each other. They should always be working together, it should always be kind of an ebb and flow.

Austin: Totally. Like I think about that— It’s one of the things in this season we opened with like, “Hey, you each get a ship,” and that was really cool. But at this point I’m not asking you necessarily like, “Alright, I’m gonna do this thing on Gift-3, so Keith, we need to go on the phone for four hours to develop Gift-3”, right?

(Ali laughs)

Keith: Yeah.

Austin: I do that for the patrons now (chuckles), we get on the phone for four hours and develop cool shit on Skein, which is what happened last night. Um, but... What I do still do, is I still say things like, “Okay, what’s it like here? What’s the music like here?” which just happened with Keith, which was like—

Keith: Yeah.

Austin: “Oh, what do young kids on this planet listen to? What do anarchist punk kids listen to on this planet?” And we figured it out and that was cool.

Keith: Yeah, I really like— I am very glad that I found the exact... What I feel like is the polar opposite of what the sort of the Gumption traditional music is.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: Totally! 100%, right? It’s so good. And that’s like part of the way— speaks to what Ali is saying, which is like, world-building doesn’t stop when you finish that first session and you know that you have a city named Duckburg that you need to keep thinking of a name for, like (chuckles). It also is like, “Hey, what do they sell here? What’s it smell like here? Again, what is the fashion like here?” Exactly, um. I had Jack describe what the entrance to the Archives looked like in *Winter in Hieron*. I turned to Keith a lot when we were in Rosemerrow and said, like, “Hey, XYZ, what’s up with XYZ?” But also, as the GM, you do have it in your power to still be like, “Alright, there are five major districts in Rosemerrow, here’s what they look like.” And you’re extrapolating.

So like part of what the GM does, and this is really for Ronan, who wants to know, how do you retake some of that control and make important GM decisions in a way that’ll be interesting and unpredictable, is like, you just do it. You do it! Like, you’re allowed to do it. Doing collaboration doesn’t mean... Think about being the producer on a track or the songwriter, instead of just being... thinking of yourself as another musician in the recording studio, do you know what I mean? It’s not the same thing as like... And I’m not trying to elevate any specific, you know, cast member or anything like this, right? I don’t mean the person who plays guitar on a jazz record is

less important than the producer in the booth, but you have different responsibilities. And so there is a way in which, you know, the producer on an album is helping craft an entire sound and entire structure with all the component parts, right? In a hip-hop album, they're finding samples, they're creating beats, they're putting together the hook, you know, from something that maybe the performer, the rapper didn't even intend to do. They're bringing in, you know, not just samples, but they're bringing in session musicians to create something that they need for for the beat or for the hook or something like that, right? And so like, as the GM, you are not just a collaborator in the booth, you're also this other role, which is about synthesising all this stuff. Let yourself do that and don't feel like that's not collaboration. It's just a different sort of collaboration than what might be happening between two players, you know?

Keith: I wanted to say real quick that like, the first time that I played a tabletop game, as a player— I've mentioned this campaign before, but like... I didn't know the words "collaborative world-building", I don't think that anybody that I played with knew those words. *But*, we were playing -Pathfinder, and tabletop games were pitched to me as like, "You can do what you want to do in the world and you get to play this cool story" and, you know, that's what I was expecting.

Austin: Right.

Keith: And then when our GM had like a fucking three-ring or three-subject notebook—

(Austin sighs loudly, Ali chuckles)

Keith: —full of notes, and it was like, "Okay, here's this world that I made. You have to find the story I wrote for you." It was super frustrating and pretty boring and bad. (chuckles) And, like... The way that you have control of your game is that you still voice all of the characters in it that aren't the players and when they go to a place you are still the one saying what's there, right?

Austin: Right.

Keith: There's no—

Austin: They will turn to you still, that's the other thing, is...

Keith: Yeah, when they don't know what's happ— you still have to be the other half of the— you have to be what... There's no version of playing a tabletop game where you're like, "Oh my God, my players have been talking for half an hour, they've cut me out of the game—"

(all laugh)

Austin: Yeah!

Keith: (laughs) It just won't ever happen!

Austin: And if it does, like, wow, you have some wild, cool players.

(Ali and Keith laugh)

Austin: If they're for real just like running that shit without you, that's really is only going to make your job easier down the line, as long as they're actually like playing the game and are not just bullshitting at the table, so.

(Ali chuckles)

Keith: Yeah, yeah. Um, so... I guess I just wanted to re-highlight, Ali and Austin, you both mentioned this, but like... The collaborative world-building doesn't stop when the collaborative world-building game stops. That happens while you're still playing your new game, probably *Dungeon World*, like you said.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Keith: It doesn't end when you're like, "Okay, well, we've finished *The Quiet Year* and so now I'm (chuckles) your story dictator."

Austin: Mm-hm.

Keith: All the most fun stuff is— the world of three of the seasons of our game— three seasons? How many *Hierons* have we done?

Austin: We've done two and a half *Hierons*.

Keith: Two and a half, okay.

Austin: If you count *Marielda* as a half.

Keith: The world is based on a joke about Austin and Art's dumbass friend.

(Austin and Ali laugh)

Keith: It actually like— the first time that Hieron was said tonight, like way, way at the beginning—

Austin: Uh-huh.

Keith: It just struck me like, "Oh, yeah," I remembered that that was because we were joking about some dude named Ron (laughs).

(Ali laughs)

Keith: And like, now it's just called that and it lost the joke—

Austin: Right, right.

Keith: —because it now is a place—

(Dre laughs)

Keith: —and that stuff never happens... That doesn't happen if you have three-subject notebook full of maps and a story. When you're playing the storyline of a book, you never get the fun of making something with your friends, you just have a— I guess what can be a different sort of fun if you're, you know, still listening to your players or what they want, where it's like, "I have this really cool thing to show you. Let's go do this cool that I want to show you."

Austin: (laughs) "Here are my vacation slides from Neverwinter" or whatever.

Keith: (laughs) Yeah, yeah. And like that can be fun, especially if it's a shorter campaign than the one I did, Greg, you ass.

(Austin does a spit-take, and Ali and Dre laugh)

Austin: Jesus! Stay tu—

(Ali gets drowned out and laughs)

Austin: Yeah, I was gonna say, stay tuned for our next fantasy season, which takes place in Higreg (laughs).

Keith (laughs): Oh, man. Yeah, so I, you know... It's fun to hang out with your friends and make jokes and those jokes become real living parts of the world that you're playing inside of. And that's not something you should be scared of.

Austin: Totally.

Ali: The thing that I just want to add to this a little bit, it's because Keith's thing about Hieron is also opposite of the Mark of the Erasure being a thing created by a weird computer glitch on a website that I don't remember anymore that was were using.

Austin: Me fucking either.

Dre: Oh, wow.

Ali: And like... I feel like... And I always think of my job as a player like this and so it might be easy for me to say this, but I think your job as a GM should always, at its function, be reactionary. We built— we all decided, together, that like, "Oh≤ there's this weird thing here now and it's a spooky place on this world" and then also to go down and sit down and design a whole tower around that.

Austin: Right, that is the Heat and the Dark (chuckles), right? "Oh, shit, okay, why was there a computer glitch? Okay, what— uhhhhhhhhh, okay... (face in his hands) So, before there was everything else, there was nothing."

(Ali, Keith and Dre laugh)

Austin: “Nothing blinked”. I guess— Can I write that one? Okay.

Keith: And, like, how much, Austin—

Austin: I got it wrong, it was “nothing flinched,” it’s not even “nothing blinked,” fuck, anyway—

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: —continue.

Keith: I was just gonna say, how much prep did you throw out when— like how many ideas did you toss aside to make the Ghost Town?

Austin: All of them. What? Like— Or I didn’t, I just delayed them, a lot of those did come back, but the Ghost Town was just like... (sighs)

Keith: Well, you also, we were going to go hang out with David Bowie.

Austin: Right, well—

Ali: David Bowie is Samol—

Austin: David Bowie is still— black David Bowie exists. Samol is black David Bowie, you did eventually go hang out with— Well, you didn’t, you were busy—

(Ali laughs)

Austin: —making half of the fucking world disappear. But (laughs)—

Keith: Come on...

Austin: —the other party (laughs)... The other half of the party did go hang out with black David Bowie. Which, but, like, was not in— was just in the woods. Do you know what I mean? Eventually, eventually he got moved underground into the past in a weird way, through weird time layers. But originally it was just a guy near a tree, you know? It was like a big tower that was a tree.

Keith: Mm-hm.

Austin: And that would have been fine. Like that also would have been a cool game, we would have done that. Red Jack could have showed up if you’d gone by land and it wouldn’t have been the same type of Red Jack that you met. Because—

Keith: We delayed being at Rosemerrow for two years, I think?

Austin: Yeah.

Keith: Like two in—

Austin: Real human years.

Keith: In real human years.

Austin: Yeah, totally. Whereas like... and so yeah, be willing to throw out that prep. And because whatever you stumble into with your friends is going to be so much more memorable. And like that's the thing is, I say a lot of "Hey, there's lots of ways to do valid tabletop role-playing games. You can totally do the D&D 4th Edition combat encounters, tactical combat encounters thing. That's totally valid."

Keith: Yeah, and now you're saying, "No, there's not. There's only one way." (laughs)

Austin: No, I'm saying—

Keith: Nah, I'm kidding.

Austin: But actually what I'm saying is like, I do think that it's valid. But it ain't what I want to do. And I think that that version of what we do, that version of tabletop role-playing is the dominant form. Role-playing games are *Dungeon Wo*— or are *Dungeons and Dragons*. *Dungeons and Dragons* is what role-playing games are in the way that Budweiser is what beer is. The *huge*, vast majority of people who play tabletop role-playing games play D&D, with a smaller number playing *Pathfinder*. And like, that is what the bulk— that is what the hobby looks like. And D&D has changed a lot over the years. The jump from 3 to 4 and 4 to 5 are major changes in what that game is, and so players who have played for a long time do know that there is a variety in types of play. But that's still such a small, tiny vision of what role-playing games can be.

And so let me take this space for a moment to advocate the type of play that we do. And if you're already supporting us, like, you don't need to know this maybe? But like, I genuinely think that what role-playing games do when it comes to this sort of play, this sort of collaboration, this sort of character-driven stuff is fantastic and is unlike what I've seen in any other sort of popular medium, in which amateurs can get together and build something and, using dice, determine things that— you know, collaborate not only with each other, but with probability. (chuckles) But with the parts of their imaginations that can never be unlocked if left to only be prodded at through conscious suggestion. But through this added little bit of chaos, can lead you to make incredible stories together. And so like, why not lean into that thing?

It's totally valid to want to play a 4th Edition game where your character is all about pushing and pulling characters around a map. I get it. It's why I play tactical RPGs. But this other thing, let yourself— really consider doing it. It's dope. (chuckles)

(Dre laughs)

Austin: So, that's it. All right. Yeah, IceCreamJoe in the chat says, "You know how people call 'also does coke in places'? That's D&D."

(Keith and Ali laugh)

Austin: It is! That's why, if someone interviews me, and I say like, "Oh, yeah, I do a D&D podcast," it sucks! But like, that's what people— "You know Dungeons and Dragons? I play like a hipster version of Dungeons and Dragons—"

(Dre laughs)

Austin: "Yeah I'm from Brooklyn, blah blah blah." I'm not even from Brooklyn, I say I'm from Brooklyn because that communicates something. Language sucks and we should all stop talking, next question.

(Ali laughs)

Dre: True.

Question 7 (01:12:45)

Austin: Gary says, "I have a question that I'm curious about from both a GM and a player side. How do you handle a session when momentum is slowing and players start to fade or get distracted? It happens to me on occasion, especially in fights that have gone on too long. Or scenes that I thought could be fun moments but that the players aren't as interested in. As a GM, I try to jump to a new scene or cut a fight short without being too jarring. When I noticed this as a player, I tried to find something in the scene to engage with and draw other characters into. What do you do in situations like this?"

Keith: I cause trouble, my character's cause trouble.

Austin: Yeah, you do. You cause trouble.

(Dre, Ali, and Keith laugh)

Austin: That's true.

Dre: I mean, sometimes you just have to stop.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Dre: Like, if you've been going for a long time, like you just got to stop.

Austin: It's okay to stop!

(Dre laughs)

Keith: Yeah.

Ali: Yeah...

Keith: We have a sickness that means that every time we record we record for four hours.

Austin: (laughs) That sickness is called putting out a show that we have to put out four episodes of a month (laughs).

(Dre laughs)

Keith: That's true, but I mean that, like—

Austin: And also have you seen our scheduling doc? We *never* get to record. Anyway.

(Ali laughs)

Keith: I know, you're right. Well, but that's the thing. But if we say "Hey, let's do a short thing," it's still four hours.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: Oh yeah.

Keith: And if we say "Let's do four hours," it's like five and a half.

Austin: Yeah.

Keith: So we can't— we always go so long. But I have definitely been in groups, especially when I've done it in person, where it's like, we've been at this table, we've been sitting here, and we're like hungry—

Austin: Yeah.

Keith: And we're cranky and we... ran out of tobacco for hookah (laughs).

(all laugh)

Keith: He wasn't even chill— like he didn't even offer it to anybody!

Ali: (high-pitched) What?!

Austin: That's— what?!

Keith: Yeah, there was like three fucking hoses on that thing I—

Austin: That's not even a hookah—

Dre: That's fucked up—

Austin: That's not a hookah.

Keith: I didn't want anything—

Austin: That's not a hookah. Hookah doesn't— you can't solo hookah.

Ali: Yeah, (laughs) who solos a hookah—

Keith: I don't know and he had to like— he like brought jugs of water to put in it too—

(Ali laughs)

Keith: He had to like set—

Austin: I hate this whole thing.

Keith: It was such a fucking to-do, it was insane. I—

Dre: Did he just have like a duffel bag with him for all his hookah shit?

Ali: Did he have like a rolling cart? (laughs)

Dre: (laughs) Yeah—

Keith: He had one of those, like, assassin sniper cases with the egg foam inside but it was for different pieces of a hookah—

(Ali and Austin laugh)

Dre: God.

Keith: Voss water. "I only filled my hookah with Voss water."

Austin: (laughs) I just imagine the image of like, you know how you screw a silencer onto a pistol?

(all laugh)

Austin: (laughs) Agent 47 lifting up a hookah and attaching a hose?

Keith: Yeah... Yeah, I don't know... but— what is my point?

Austin: I don't fucking know anymore because we should take a break soon— No, we're actually almost done.

(Dre and Ali laugh)

Keith: Oh— yeah, okay, my point was that like... taking a break is good, deciding "Hey, let's come back next week" is good. Ordering some food is good—

Austin and Ali: Yes.

Keith: There's a lot of ways to make— especially if you're the GM, like— I always felt when I was GM it was my responsibility to make sure that everybody was comfortable in their chair or had enough of a drink to have—

(Ali chuckles)

Keith: But I guess that really is whoever's hosting—

Austin: Yeah.

Keith: But I was always hosting. So like, I don't know, some snacks and some juice or whatever goes a long way to making sure that things don't slow down. Or slow down in the right way, where people are comfortable.

Austin: Right. There's nothing wrong with like— if you're not making a show and you aren't literally being paid to do this. Take— if you plan on doing it for four hours and you can tell at hour three that people are grinding to a halt, be like "Hey, let's just wrap up here today, I'm exhausted, let's call it, we'll pick up here next time," totally fine.

The other thing to do though is to play with time and scale. Here's one that I would do differently today, but I've never been afraid to cut a fight scene short before it's supposed to be cut. Going back to *COUNTER/weight*, I would say, or probably even back to Hieron season one, there were probably cases of me being like "Alright, it's over. Don't worry about it. We've been recording for too long." But I think about the fight against the Weightless the first time that the Chime fights Tea Kenridge's crew and y'all get chased out into like the wastes and there's like— you're near a MagLev train, one of the Starlight Straights, and it's not going well for y'all, in a way that's like very scary because it had not been going well for y'all all session, basically. And Aria used the distraction fireworks and played music. And I was like, "I think that that gives you enough to get away," basically. And Ali, you go like, "I think you're just giving this to us."

(Ali laughs)

Austin: And I go, "Yeah, I am. And I'm not afraid to say that," right? Now, I wouldn't... I wouldn't... I probably wouldn't *not* say that now. This basically just happened in *Twilight Mirage*, where they failed to fill in the... Dre, you were there, y'all failed to actually (chuckles) like fill in the clock to escape from the junkyard where the Amprunners were chasing you down. And so I had you get saved by an outside force instead, right? And... but what I also did was kind of played with the scale of the scene, I zoomed out beyond where the the context of that clock made sense and showed the border of Seiche nearby, with the jeeps, where the volunteers of Seiche were, where Ballard was, where the mortar goes off, etc. And by doing that you've kind of opened up the feeling of the area and reminded the players that there is a larger world that they can bump into sometimes, and so it doesn't necessarily feel as jarring to have their fight come to an end, or whatever the thing that is causing the slow momentum, to end because it's a reminder that the world is bigger than them.

The other thing I do is the same thing, but with time. Think about how often I say “We see a montage of blank” at the end of an episode. A *lot* of times that’s because we’re exhausted.

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: We just finished a session that had very big, dramatic consequences. I think both sessions end with montages, actually, now that I think about it, of the upcoming ends of these the kind of Gift-3 arcs. And in both cases we could have paused, we could have recorded an entire other episode that was just dealing with the characters there and the aftermath and lingered there. And I consider doing that because that’s what we would have done with the Veil, I think we would have paused the game and slowed down and just come back to it, but with *Scum and Villainy*, I really want to keep up this high intensity, this speed and drama and like high adventure feeling. And so we still wanted to touch those things and as a GM, a thing you can do is say, “Okay, that fight comes to— this part of the fight comes to a close, let’s montage out what happens after that.” We don’t need to see the entire journey back to town. We don’t need to— we don’t even really need to see the entire delve into the cave system. You can say, “Hey, this is— you know, you finish this fight and then this is what the rest of this— happens in this cave system. We get you climbing down walls, we see you swinging from a vine.” You don’t need to make every one of those things roll. It can be okay to just jump ahead to, and then you’re in the final chamber. Or then we see you coming back out with the trunk filled with loot or whatever. So yeah, that’s a situation where, like, it is totally... That is one way to kind of massage what would be a jarring hard cut otherwise.

Ali: Yeah. I feel like having the words like “Let’s zoom out here” is—

Austin: Yes.

Ali: —kind of the most important thing you could have in your repertoire for this, because like, I feel like sometimes as a player I’m either not... I’m getting so tired that I’m not understanding the movement of the scene anymore and so I can’t react to it. Or like, I know what I want to do three steps ahead.

Austin: Yes.

Ali: And it’s like, “Oh, I can kind of see how my character would get out of this situation” or I kind of know what like the... how I want to end this but there’s too much like middle stuff (chuckles) going on that doesn’t really need to be there? And being able to recognise when some of that stuff is just being like... you know, okay, how do you get out of here? Or how do you— Do you want to talk to them? Or like, what’s really— like, really, what’s your endgame here is also really—

Austin: Asking that really directly is huge. Like, I keep using this example because it’s so evocative and simple. But like, I just did the *Beastcast Apocalypse World* game recently, in which they were— it was like Escape from New York, basically, they break into like a post-apocalyptic New York City. And one of the elements that I introduced was this notion of

train snakes, which are like living subway cars that one of the major factions had allied with. And Dan was like, “I want to throw one of these train snakes into Madison Square Garden where the bad guy is and kill him with the train snake.”

(Ali laughs)

Austin: And I was like, “Okay, it’s cool that that’s what you want to do—” (chuckles)

(laughter)

Austin: “How do we— how do we get there?” And that’s all role-playing games are, is like, there’s an impulse and the GM’s job is to figure out how to build a— draw a map on the way to that impulse. Or like build a bridge to that impulse and see if the players can cross it. And so make sure that while you’re playing, you’re asking that bigger, like Ali said, zoomed out question, which is like, “Hey, what’s the thing you really want to do here? Like in the long run? Is there a reason you can’t do it right now? And if you can’t, then how do we get you to that thing?” That ends up being so much more useful than just like, “What do you roll? How much damage are you doing? Like how do you attack this thing?” Also will end up feeling more kinetic and will look more cinematic in your heads, if what you’re talking about is like long-term goals and then figuring out how to obtain those goals or how to act on those objectives will actually be so much more compelling than, “All right, we killed all the enemies in this room. Now we’re moving on.” I don’t know that we’ve had a combat encounter this season that ended with like, “Well, we killed all the bad guys, we win.” I think in every instance that I can think of, it’s been—

Keith: I can’t think of one.

Austin: —it’s been like, let’s get the fuck out of here or someone else flees, outside of like holiday thing, which is interesting for sure.

Katie in the chat says, “Do you record those montages in the same session? Or is that a later pickup situation when you realise you’ve gone too long?” Normally the things that I’m talking about in this case are in the session, it’s when I’m like, “Alright, this is the end of the session. How do we wrap this up? Okay, we zoom out a little bit, and then we see this and then, oh, you can’t leave without seeing this character, then this character raises their hand and says, ‘We did it, all together! Thanks, friends.’ And then we jump from there to this.” That stuff is pretty loose, and you can tell. Every now and then I’ll do a pickup montage for something like that, like the end of Godspeed Glory had a montage— had a couple of sequences that I re-recorded because I wanted to clean it up. But they tend to, even then, in those cases, be just a cleaned up version of what I did at the table, you know? I can think of a couple instances where it’s like, “We’ve gone for five and a half hours,” and I just go “And then there’s wrap up. It’s all going to be— like...”

(Ali laughs)

Austin: “We see the characters.” And that’s like one or two or three instances over the last three years, you know, three and a half years or whatever? Also, oh my God, it’s been like three and a half years, huh? Wild.

Ali: Has it?

Austin: Yeah.

Keith: Has it not been slightly longer than that?

Austin: It was September of 2015, right? No, September 2014—

Keith: September 2014, okay, yeah, so three and a half—

Austin: Three and a half years. (sighs)

Ali: Yikes.

Austin: Next question!

(Austin, Dre, Ali laugh)

Question 8 (01:23:30)

Austin: Next question is, “What the fuck is time?” JR says, “Me and s—

Keith: “You’re all dying.”

Austin: (laughs) Yeah, JR says, “How do you stop the impossible, ongoing march of time? Do you feel yourself slipping away? Because I do.”

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: JR says, “Me and some friends set up a play-by-post role-playing game, a text-based game in Discord, earlier this year where we played *Monster Hearts* pretty consistently for a few months. The game was easily the best I’ve ever played and we were all very, very into our characters and the NPCs and that entire world. For those who haven’t played, *Monster Hearts* deals with trauma and manipulation under the veil of a CW-type show.” CW here not being *COUNTERweight*, but being like *Vampire Diaries*—

Keith: The CW.

Austin: The CW. *Gossip*— *Gossip Girl* was CW?

Keith: I think so?

Austin: Is *Riverdale* CW?

Dre: Yes.

Keith: Yeah, *Riverdale*'s CW. What's the other one? What's the—

Dre: *Supernatural*.

Keith and Austin: *Supernatural*.

Dre: All the DC TV shows.

Austin: Right. Was OC CW? Or was that MTV?

Keith: It's a lot of, like, superpower melodrama.

Austin: Superpower melodrama is exactly— yeah, that's a good way of putting it. "There came a time in which my character handled the situation poorly and then, as it began to spiral, it just kept coming back because none of us could just move past it. Even though the game has been done for months, I cannot stop thinking about relationships and stuff that happened in that game to fake people and fake characters. Have y'all ever been affected by character bleed in this way? Do you have any tips for moving through it or finding a resolution?"

Ali: This is so hard for me because liiiiiterally yesterday I was having like a yelling argument with Justin about how one of his characters is a really shitty person.

Austin: Mmm.

Ali: And he was like "no, yeahhhhh" and I was like, "but it's so bad!!!!!" and eventually the way that I settled down was being like—

Austin: When's the tumblr callout post for?

Ali: Um, tomorrow. It's scheduled. (laughs)

(Austin laughs)

Ali: The way that I settled down is by being like, "I know but because of the story he has to be able to look back on his life and regret this for the rest of his life—"

Austin: Right.

Ali: And Justin was like "sure, whatever" (laughs). But this is tough because I don't— like getting over it? I don't know, I still think about Aria a lot. I think of Hella all the time, but obviously I'm gonna go back to her. Like I don't know that this feeling is a bad thing?

Austin: Yeah... I'm curious how it's all gonna feel post-Hieron, right? Like... Yeah, we're gonna do this next season of Hieron and then that's gonna be it for those characters as playable characters. Like, who knows. Forever is a long time but I have no plans and like if we did it would be a weird charity one shot or something, you know what I mean? It would be very cheap

of us to do— whatever happens in that season. I have no fucking idea. But whatever happens, I don't want a fourth season with those characters. And I'm very curious to see how that feels. You know, for y'all.

Keith: I mean, I know— I'm sure that everybody feels close to their characters, but I feel very close to my characters. I just feel like each one is like as a sticker, like a circle-shaped sticker, sort of creating ellipses of themselves?

Austin: Mm.

Keith: If that makes sense, visually? Like, and so like whenever there's like— when Meko is done, I'm like, "Wow, that's super rough" (laughs).

Austin: Yeah.

(Ali laughs)

Keith: Especially with how Meko was done. The end of *COUNTER/weight* is maybe the hardest I've ever been hit by something that happened in *Friends at the Table*.

Austin: Yeah, it was rough.

Keith: Yeah. And so there's like, there's a weird part— about character bleed, I think that... I very specifically, I think maybe, am constantly making choices that are choices that me, the player, would make in a situation with less deviation than like... I don't think Ali would ever strangle her friend to death— (laughs).

(Ali laughs)

Austin: No...

Keith: I don't think Ali would ever strangle anyone to death!

Austin: Me either!

Keith: Um, yeah, yeah. Me either.

Austin: Gonna go on the record and say, Ali—not a strangler (chuckles).

Keith: And so like, when I make a decision, I try to make a decision that is informed by how I am feeling. And so it is *real*, in that I'm using my own emotions to inform how I'm playing. But it also is acting because it's all fake and in a fake world and none of these people exist? And sometimes that can be hard to set— we talked on the tips that Ali hosted, we talked about, like me yelling at, or Fero yelling at Lem and Throndir. And like you get a lot of fucking adrenaline when you yell at someone, even if it's fake—

Austin: Mm-hm.

Keith: Especially when those decisions are motivated by how you're feeling about something. But if you are used to doing that, or if you have practice with it— I don't know how it's done, I'm not like an acting theorist, but like when it's done, you feel all pumped up but then you're like, after the thing is over, then you're just like, "Okay, we're done! I'm gonna go have a snack and then go to bed."

(Dre chuckles)

Keith: It just sort of separates from me as a... I don't have anything more useful than that, I think.

Austin: I will say that there are major differences, like... With rare exception, we have not played a game like *Monster Hearts* that deals so directly with trauma and manipulation and social standing.

Keith: Yeah, I'm really— I've mentioned this before, I'm really like... I know that every, like, like— we have had a, like— we're gonna do something with *Monster Hearts* at some point, and I'm like, very much not anticipating it at all—

Austin: You're not going to be in that game, right, right. That'll be a *Bluff City* thing, so we'll make sure that it's people who really want to do it and that we'll have, you know, all of our lines and veils very clear. But what I wanted to say is, I definitely had this in college. I played a lot of games with— I played a lot of games. Art can attest to this, that we played a billion things, from a bunch of different GMs. And there was one GM in particular who was like very influential, very mentor-type relationship with me that ended up blowing up in a really shitty way that I have regrets for but also still hold grudges over.

And a number of his games in various *White Wolf* systems, which are... (sighs) are worlds that encourage sort of interpersonal play. These are games like *Vampire the Masquerade* and *Werewolf the Apocalypse* and *Changeling the Dreaming*? Maybe? *Mage the Awakening*, *Changeling the Dream*—, they're all like bah ba-bah, dah dah-dah-dah-dah, whatever. They're all in their worlds and in their text of the books, they encourage this sort of interpersonal drama and politics and romance and very much about betrayal and love and all that. And the rules don't do a great job of that, the rules are very much like, (smooth voice) "And now I'm casting my level three super charisma magic" (laughs), like it's not— it doesn't. You know, being in a gunfight works exactly the same as being in a social situation, *except* that it really brings out— the setting and all of the kind of fiction really brings out this part of you that connects very closely with your character and encourages you to— even when you're not literally LARPing, to be a little bit LARPing. And *also*, we did some LARPing.

(Keith and Ali laugh)

Austin: So I was very close to a lot of those characters, and that GM had a really great way of bringing out those sorts of connections. And I definitely still, every now and then, think about those characters, and this is over a decade ago at this point, right? This is— Partially because

they are connections that I had with real people, real friends who I played the game with. I met Art via Japanese class in college, but we bonded over playing a D&D game with this GM, where he and I were like the only two people at the table who agreed on what— who were like, who could see through the GM's shit? We were like, "This is clearly an evil goddess! What are you fuckers doing? Why would you ever believe her??" And, like, the other six people at the table— also, there were eight players in that game, which is bad— were like deeply devoted and it ended very poorly for them. We were totally right. And it was good.

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: But! But I think about those characters when I think about Art and I, and how those characters interacted. And I think about like, that was a game all about faith. And sometimes I see echoes of that, in Hadrian, and the ways in which we have kind of carried that forward. I was playing a character who belongs to a strange, monotheistic religion in that game. And so I think a lot about that character when I think about Hadrian. It's not all the way to character bleed, but it's a lot of that sort of like, "Okay, there's shared territory here that we can... that I can pull on a little bit."

But when I think about the— when I think about, like, the *Vampire* characters that I played, very, very close to them still, in a weird way. Still know what they would do in situations, like so I definitely get that. But I guess that's the thing is, I would challenge that... that there's this notion of things that happen to fake people and fake characters. They're characters, they're not fake characters. They're no more fake than what happens on a TV show, or on, you know, in a game or in a book. And in fact, because of what Keith just said, like you're in it, you're doing the thing, you're making those decisions, and you didn't get a chance to do it the other way. It's nice to be a GM because I get lots of excuses to disperse myself across characters. But I still think about what would happen if Ibex did X instead of Y, you know?

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: Totally! I still think a lot about— like, there are lots of ways for so many of these shows to have shaken out a different way. There are so many— like, Paisley is a really big one for me, which is like this different thing because—

Dre: Oof.

Austin: Yeah! And like, there are ways that that could have gone differently if the rolls go differently. That sucked! It, like, sucked. And maybe more than any, I think, is probably Mother Glory.

Ali: Yeah.

Austin: I could have played Mother Glory a different way. I could have played Mother Glory a different way. And I didn't. And I'm happy with that. I think I played— I think I played her to the end, the way she needed to be played. But like, I'm *still* not over that shit. That sucked.

Dre: Mm-hmm.

Keith: Oh, yeah, that's sucked for me too.

Austin: It will always suck! It'll always be a rough thing. And I don't think that that's a bad thing. I think I've mentioned here and on other, like, live shows and stuff before, that *Winter in Hieron* was really hard. We talked about it in the postmortem, that it was really hard and a difficult and dark show to do based on the time and what was happening in the world and US politics and stuff. But I was, also as a creative, not particularly fond of the work that I did throughout that season.

Keith: Sorry, which season?

Austin: Two. Hieron, *Winter in Hieron*.

Keith: Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Austin: I think there are lots of things I would do differently as a creative than as a GM in terms of— I wouldn't even do them different, I don't know what I would do, but I'm not happy (chuckles) with what we did in some instances. Not because players did anything wrong or anything like that. And I think that that's just part of creativity. Like I don't... I wish I didn't feel this way but also feeling this way isn't invalid. Feeling this way doesn't mean I'm broken. Feeling this way is just what happens when you finish a creative work and you look back on it and you go like, "Uh, I did I hit my goals?" That sort of bleed between a character and you, so long as it isn't debilitating, so long as it isn't keeping you from sleeping, so long as it isn't keeping you from going about your day is I think actually very healthy. I think it's very good to have that sort of empathy for your characters and what it means is that that was a really special... you know, series of play for you. That was a very special game for you. And this is like what it can feel like.

I guess I'll say like, if you don't like that feeling, that is also valid and it's probably totally worth, you know, seeking out, talking to somebody who can help you work through those feelings—

Dre: Yeah.

Austin: —or just modulating what you do in the future, you know? Think about why you feel that way. What could you have done differently in terms of the the meta structure of play to make sure that maybe lines weren't crossed? Or that you felt like you had the opportunity to take that back because you weren't happy with it. Those conversations are all viable and should be thought about.

Dre, you had something kind of on that, the "talk to somebody" angle.

Dre: Yeah, because I— you know, I'm not... I don't really... Obviously I don't want to project here as to what happened, like we don't know the context of what happened—

Austin: Totally, totally.

Dre: But like, vicarious trauma is a real and legit thing. And so if something heavy did go down in your game, or really in any kind of like media or even sometimes just in life, like when you turn on the news or you just see something fucked up happen in real life, like... it's... I mean, it's not great to feel that way, so I don't want to say "it's okay" in like a, you know, "everybody feels that way," but like, you're not abnormal if something sits with you for a long time and affects you for a long time. And it's not like... Going to talk to somebody, like, you should do that. It's okay to take care of yourself, it doesn't make you abnormal because something just happened to hit you in a way that it doesn't hit other people. We are all wired totally differently. So yeah, I don't want to like read too deep into this and assume as to what's going on, but if it is something like that, like Austin said, go talk to somebody, that's a totally valid thing to do to take care of yourself.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Keith: Um, another thing that I wanted to say was like, if you are... if you want more about this, on the tips that Ali hosted, we talked more about character bleed as in feeling these ways about other players?

Austin: Right.

Keith: And we talked a lot— I had a lot more to say about that. And I can't remember— I remember liking what I had said and not wanting to retread on that.

(Austin, Ali, and Dre chuckle)

Keith: So like, if you want to hear more about character bleed in terms of how it affects you and other people at the table, in terms of just internally, that's a good episode to listen to.

Austin: Yeah. That was all good, I really liked all that.

Alright, last question, if we're ready, if people are good with advancing here. Do you have something else, Ali?

Ali: Yeah, I just— I don't know, I like... I feel like that there shouldn't be shame or the desire to move past thinking about a character because it can just be, you know, a part of your life, like what you were touching on a little bit before. I have really strong attachments to scenes and things that I've written because I remember where I was in my life when I was doing those things.

Austin: Yeah.

Ali: And like, I don't think that thinking about those things should be something you have to find a resolution for, right?

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Ali: Unless it's— you know, unless it's something that is bothering you enough that you feel like you have to get out of that feeling. But don't think that like, "Oh, it was just a character in a game—"

Austin: Right.

Ali: —that, you know, that it isn't worth having that attachment to. Because you're putting just as much of yourself down as you are writing a thing.

Austin: Totally. Awesome.

Question 9 (01:39:10)

Austin: All right. Last question comes in from Riley, who says, "Hey, Friends! This past summer I was a counsellor at the best camp ever. It was a Jewish science technology camp because yes, that does exist, where I got the chance to DM D&D one shots a few times for my fifth-seventh grade campers. It was really fun and I'm so glad I got to inspire these young kids to love RPGs and storytelling, but the plots for the games were pretty standard—goblins or bandits attacking the party in the woods. After listening to *Friends at the Table* in the past month, I've been thinking back and wishing I could have included some more interesting or complex plots or storylines, because that's my favourite part of playing games. I'm planning on going back next summer, so do you have any advice for creating interesting storylines in a short time and also maybe making sure that children can understand it and have fun? Thank you so much for introducing me to a bunch of different game systems that aren't D&D, because there's no better way to realise all the flaws in that (chuckles) system than trying to teach a roomful of children—"

(Dre laughs)

Austin: "—how to make a character sheet or do combat. Thanks, Riley."

Dre: Oh man.

Keith: Oh boy, I bet doing a collaborative—

(Austin chuckles)

Keith: —world-building session with a bunch of kids would be rad. That sounds...

Austin: Yeah!

Dre: Yeah.

Keith: Like, the stuff... I mean, kids are just as capable as anyone else of telling you what they're interested in. And the stuff that kids are interested in is often *wiiild*.

(all laugh)

Keith: So like, like that— like, I think that's a great, like— just like do a fucking session with them all about what they want to do.

Dre: Yeah.

Austin: Lots of questions, is my suggestion.

Keith and Ali: Yeah.

Austin: I advocate people go watch that Waypoint stream, the Waypoint D&D— or *Dungeon World* stream with Adam Koebel. Not saying my coworkers are children (chuckles)! But it was the first time that they did it, and we played a very childlike game. So— that was literally filled with like, fantasy baseball teams and skeletons who were weak to farts. So like—

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: One of our— our bar had like a synth— like a portable synth and a flying robot hawk. You can do— stuff that is in that childish space will still end— But it was also still a game that ended up being largely about, you know, coming to terms with the idea that maybe undead people aren't so gross. You know, I was playing a character who had like internalised undead self-shame (chuckles). It was very good.

So, what I'll say there, too, is like, think about how... you know, I'm not the biggest Pixar fan in the world, necessarily. I like a lot of their films, but sometimes I'm frustrated by the ideology in them, but they actually do a really good job of communicating big ideas to broad, often young audiences, right? So like, think about— I would look at children's entertainment, especially really smart children's entertainment— again, like other things, other things in here too, fifth to seventh graders, you know, look at *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, look at *Steven Universe*. How does something like a 30-minute *Steven Universe* episode or 15-minute episode, right, or 12-minute episode because they're often split, communicate something— I think *Steven Universe* splits like that sometimes? Anyway, communicate something about loss or about, you know, helping people in a very short amount of time. And often it does mean painting in broad, cartoonish brushes or strokes. But I think it's okay to do that sometimes. Like I think that, especially if your audience is young, especially if they're also trying to wrap their heads around collaborative world-building, to just find some single idea or lesson and start figuring out as you play how to tie that in. Figure out who your bad guy is, and your bad guy can't just be the bandits, right? Like bandits don't exist in a vacuum. Why are they bandits? Think about that big picture thing. Why are the goblins doing the thing that they're doing? And, with an audience or player base that young, I bet you can figure out a lot of that ahead of time, and it'll be surprising and cool for them to have to confront that. Fifth to seventh graders are like totally in the headspace of wanting to be anti-heroes (chuckles)—

(Ali laughs)

Austin: So lean into that, right? Like lean into them being the Mandalorians and not the Jedi, so to speak, you know?

Ali: Yessss...

Austin: Because that's exactly where you're gonna find a lot of purchase, I think.

Keith: Another thing is like, it's fucking super hard to be that age (chuckles). Like, it's super—

Austin: Yeahhh...

Dre: Yeah.

Keith: It's super hard to be any age, and that's like— but like, when you're a kid, you have a lot of problems that, as soon as you hit a part of your life where you feel like an adult, you forget that those problems feel like problems at all? Like, I've— the amount of times I've seen adults listen to a kid's issues, and then laugh them off—

Austin: Yes.

Keith: It's like, (in a demeaning tone) "Oh man, you don't even know about bills!" And it's like, fuck, like, how would they know about bills?

(Dre laughs)

Keith: That doesn't mean shit! Um, there's this, like—

Austin: Yeah. And they have shit that *feels* like bills. Like that's the thing.

Dre: Yeah!

Keith: Exac— that's what I mean.

Austin: Homework is bills, my guy.

Keith: Yeah. There's... I can't remember where I heard this— you know, when you don't know where something comes from, and you go like, "Is this part of my life? Or did I hear this somewhere? Is this from Mr. Rogers?"

(Ali laughs)

Keith: "Or is this from something that happened to me?"

Austin: Yeah.

Keith: But like, there's a story that I have in my head of like a kid, at a amusement park, who like, lost a balloon, and like, the dad was pissed off that the kid was crying about the balloon. And it's like... To this kid, this is like if your wallet just floated up into the sky.

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Keith: Like, everything that you owned is gone because that's this kid's whole world, right now. And we're talking about three year olds now, not fifth to seventh graders, but it's the same principle. The amount bad that you feel when you, like, don't know how to talk to someone in your class that you want to talk to. Like, "Oh, I want to be friends with this person, but I don't know how to talk to s— like, I haven't learned how to make friends with someone from scratch yet," in a— one level up from like, we're both in the sandbox so we're friends. That's the age where you have personalities and ideas about yourself and about the world and you don't know how to connect those with other people. And like, that's a fucking lot of pressure. And then as soon as you're, you know, older you go like, "Ah, those kids, they think they're having a bad time of it, but *I'm* having the *real* bad time of it." So take kids' problems seriously. And then that's how you— that makes a good story. A story that connects to how kids feel about their own world.

Ali: Um, I think in terms of the games that I've always wanted to try out with kids, I've always wanted to do either *Follow* or *The Quiet Year*?

Austin: Mm-hmm.

Ali: I think those are really good games because they're just so clearly about, like, "This is the thing that I have ownership of. This is the thing that is going to force me to interact with someone else at the table." There are very clear turns, so you don't have to worry about, you know, toe-stepping and things like that.

Austin: Right.

Ali: I think those are good. And they just— they're so open that it can be whatever solution they want to a thing, right? You can kind of pull back a little bit and stop having your adult way of storytelling (chuckles)—

(Dre chuckles)

Ali: —lean on what the system is and what it should be.

Austin: And also, don't beat yourself up—

Ali: Yes.

Austin: —if you didn't find the big picture idea thing. You introduced a bunch of kids to a new method of storytelling and play. That's dope. Like it's not— You don't have to save them, you know what I mean? It's cool if you also figure that out—

Keith (over Austin): Yeah, they can explore that stuff on their own, too.

Austin: Yeah, it can't all come down to you. I hyper-appreciate the hustle, you know? Good hustle out there, but like... If all you did was open up their eyes to a new thing, like, that's rad.

Try not to have like savage orcs (chuckles). Try at the very least to be thoughtful about stuff and not to reinscribe some gross shit.

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: But if, you know, you find yourself stumbling and using tropes and stuff, try not to (sighs), you know, beat yourself up too bad over some of that.

Alright, I think that's going to do it for us this week. And remember if you have questions, you can send them to tipsatthetable@gmail.com. As always, you can find us on the internet @friends_table on Twitter, Friends at the Table on Facebook, there's a really good fan group called Fans at the Table on Facebook, we have a Discord, which, Ali, you've linked recently-ish, right?

Ali: Yeah, you can also find it in the Twitter profile on twitter.com/ali_west because it won't fit in ours.

Austin: Oh, weird! Funny. Okay. Good!

(Ali laughs)

Austin: You can follow— yeah, so the Discord, if you don't know, is a live chat group. Everyone there is really great. Our mods do a fantastic job. It's really productive and healthy and (coughs) positive (coughs). Excuse me, *I'm* not healthy, clearly! Positive space. I started choking the other night I was getting dinner with Vinny Caravella from Giant Bomb and we went into this, like, real—

Ali: Nice name drop (laughs).

Keith: Yeah, I know.

Austin: I have to be clear because—

Keith: Do you need a bag for that name?.

Austin: Yeah, I do! Because he's my bud and we're buds and y'all can deal with it. I needed to paint a picture *because*—

(Ali laughs)

Austin: I need you to picture the specific face, who you know, across from me while this is happening. So we went to this shitty— we went to this, like, okay bar/restaurant and it was packed, and we were like, "No... There's that other place near here." So we went to the other place. And it was a lot like walking into a basement or a bingo hall. Do you know what I mean?

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: Like not even like a bingo hall where they're playing bingo. Like a bingo hall if it was in the Twin Peaks movie, if it was in *Fire Walk With Me* from like the gross town instead of the good town. And it was just, like, bad music playing. And we got like— we got seated, I guess, and then no one came over to get us drinks for like 25 minutes? And there was another 20 minutes before anybody— Like, we were like “Hey, can we get some menus?” and it was 20 minutes before the menus showed up. So menus finally show up and we order food, and food comes and I get wings. And I was like, “Oh, can I get them with—”you know. They're like “Yo, do you want mild, medium or hot,” and I go “Hot!” And so they come out and it's just like a little dipping bit, a dipping bucket— duh, bucket's wrong. What am I—

Keith: Ramekin?

Austin: Excuse me?

Keith: A ramekin?

Austin: What's a ramekin?

Dre: Oh.

Keith: It's like a little dish for sauces?

Dre: Yeah, that's the word you're looking for, is ramekin?

Austin: Oh! I guess it's a ramekin. I don't know about ramekins.

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: Yeah, ramekin! A little dipping ramekin! Of sauce. And I start eating these wings and they're not that hot. I want to be clear, they're not— like they said hot, they're not that hot. And a little tiny crumb just like goes into the middle of my throat. And I'm like talking and then it's like, I'm like... Whatever I'm talking about, “So the thing at Waypoint right now is—” (choking sound and high-pitched, breathy voice) “I can't,” I'm like this.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: And Vinny is like, “Oh my G— Austin, are you okay?” I'm like, (breathy voice) “I'm fine. I'm—” and I kept pushing through and be like, “I'm totally fi—(goes high-pitched)—ne. I'm fine!”

(all laugh)

Austin: And Vinny's like, “Austin. You're choking.” And I go like, “Ohhh, that's what this is.”

(all laugh loudly)

Austin: “This is— I literally can't breathe better than this! I'm okay, I'm okay! But this is— I'm actually choking right now!” And I go to drink and because the service is so poor, they've left me with an empty beer and an empty water cup (laughs) so I have *nothing* to drink. And no one will

come get me anything. And so I'm just like, "ahem! Ahhhhem!!!" And Vinny is like, "So what's—are you okay?" He's like— And I'm like, (breathy voice) "Yeah, I just want to talk about how hard it is to deal with *Kingdom Come Deliverance* this week (laughs), because it's such a weird, complex thi—".

(Ali and Keith chuckle)

Austin: He's like, "Austin, you're *choking*, stop trying (chuckles) to have a conversation with me." And like, meanwhile, behind us, this band is setting up to play live music, and is doing their bad sound test, it's like just a guy on this big solo stand-up bass like "badoom, doom, doom, doom" (laughs), and I'm like, (breathy) "Ahhh! I really need wat—" badoom, doom, doom, doom. And it was *very* funny. Uh. Vinny was very concerned for me because he's a good friend. And I eventually got water and then I was okay.

Ali: He did not have a drink?

Austin: He should have just given me his drink, in retrospect.

Ali: (whispers) ...did he— he didn't...

(Dre laughs in the background)

Austin: He didn't— He *did* try to wave down the waitress.

Ali: Okay... well...

Austin: Also that band, when we were leaving—

Dre: But then Vinny wouldn't have had a drink, what if he choked??

Keith (over Dre): Is he a germ guy? Is Vinny like a germ guy?

Ali: (chuckles) "I'm just gonna drink all of it?"

Keith: Is he like a non-share...?

Austin: Yeah, that's a—

Ali: I'm just a better friend...

Austin: (pause) That's true, I would.

(Ali chuckles)

Keith: Some people are germ people! Some people are, like, I...

Austin: Yeah, he might be a germ people. He might be a germ people, I don't know.

Keith: He might be a germ people. Vinny's very nice—

(Austin chuckles)

Keith: I remember one time when Verizon charged me \$18,000 to my bank account by accident?

Austin: (laughs) Oh, I remember that! That was funny.

Ali: (gasps) Oh my God...

Keith: And you— and Vinny happened to see you talking to me about it.

Austin: Right.

Keith: And was like, followed up later, and it was the sweetest thing that's ever happened.

Ali: Awwww!

Austin: He's a very good, sweet friend. I promise, it was— it was a very good dinner. He's a good— He's a good boy.

Keith: Yeah.

(Ali laughs)

Austin: When we were leaving, this band who was playing like adult contemporary, but way too fast—

Keith: Mm-hm.

(Dre and Ali chuckle)

Austin: —was like, uh. The lead singer was like, "You know, I'm an 80s baby, so this one's gonna go out there for all my other 80s babies. You have to be from the 80s to know this one. This is my favourite *Blind Melon* song." Which, already...

Keith: Which one? I mean, the whole album is great.

Austin: So, the song that came to mind for me was...

Keith: Probably *No Rain*, right?

Austin: Was *No Rain*, which—

Dre: That's it.

Keith: Yeah.

Austin: —which came out in 1992. So (chuckles)—

Keith: Yeah, yeah.

Austin: Okay. “80s babies” is like, okay, you’re born in the 80s, I guess. But it was like around for the 90s. They started playing... *November Rain* (chuckles) and—

Keith: That's not...

Austin: I *cannot* decide if that was a troll, or if they were—

Keith: It must have been a troll...

Austin: But they weren't a trollish group! They had an upright bass!

Keith: That's so weird.

Austin: And it was played by like a 46-year old, do you know what I mean?

Keith: I just wanna— I gotta let everybody know right now, if you're trying to play a song by *Blind Melon* that isn't *No Rain*, it'd be *Sleepy House*. That's the song to— so.

Austin: Okay. That's the other one.

Keith: I think that's about a bunch of people doing heroin in a house together. I'm pretty sure.

Austin: Great!

Keith: Yeah, so—

Austin: tipsatthetable@gmail.com is our email address.

(Ali and Dre laugh)

Austin: Thanks again for supporting us. And if you want to support us at a different level, or if you want to just catch up on old stuff, friendsatthetable.cash. I will use this opportunity to one more time shout out that we've had some really great updates at some of the higher tiers. The Pusher tier has some really great content on it looking into the switch to *Twilight Mirage*. There's a... I actually just realised that I'd waited— I'd held one of these questions, this whole thing with Alex and the campaign bit, until after this big switch for *Twilight Mirage*. And, so just *very* briefly on that, the thing to add to that, Alex, is look at some of that Pusher stuff if you're at that tier, or at the Mapmaker stuff, and look at how much I threw out. At the Mapmaker tier, you get a list of, like, all of the— I think you get the list of all the places that existed on Old Choir, and if you're at the Pusher tier, you get the— maybe you only get the full list at the Pusher tier, I can't quite remember. But I threw out so much prep because it wasn't as good as the stuff that we were going to come up with together, in some real way. Collaboration is key. Write it down. Make it a chart. K=C. Nope, C=K. Collaboration equals key, Major Key Alert. friendsatthetable.cash.

(Ali does a nose exhale laugh)

Austin: That's gonna do it for us today, we should go to time.is. There's a cat here now.

Ali: Oh!

Dre: Oh.

Austin: time.is. When do y'all want to clap?

Ali: Ten.

Austin: All right.

(all clap out of sync)

Ali: That was bad.

Austin: That was not good.

Keith: That was not good.

(Ali laughs)

Keith: We all agree that it's not good, that's the key.

Dre: It was not good.

Austin: I was trying to explain how the math works around that stuff—not good. That one was not good. 25?

(all clap)

Ali: Ooh, that was early. Wait, what?

Austin: No, that sounded alright. I was trying to explain... Someone was like... There's a really good bit in the chat somewhere where someone was like, "How do you know— Like, how are the claps not synced?" Basically? Like, how come it sounds sometimes, like Austin will say, "Oh, it sounds good" and then it's not good? Or sometimes everyone will be like, "Oh, that was a good one" and then it won't be a good one. I was explaining that, like, there's enough lag so that sometimes, like, a millisecond or whatever— a microsecond will be off. And so it will sound synced up or won't sound synced up. And so you'll think it's good, but it's bad or you think it's bad, but it's good. But when it's *really* bad, you can all fucking tell that it's really bad.

(Ali laughs)

Keith: Yeah.

Austin: Like when it's off by like—

Keith: Because it sounds like— it sounds like a... a round. It sounds—

Austin: Right!

(Ali chuckles)

Austin: There's a difference between like (two claps one after the other) and then (two claps with a half-second pause in between).

(Ali laughs)

Austin: And like that second one happens sometimes, and you're like, "Oh, this is a bad one, that was not just lag".

Keith: Yeah. We used to play this game when I was at day camp, where— it was at the end of the day and you'd go in a circle— a big circle, and you would squeeze the hand of the person to your right when you felt your hand being squeezed?

Austin: Right.

Keith: And you try to make it as fast as possible, like going around. And it would be like, "Wow, we just went through 80 people in like, a second and a half."

Austin: That's awesome. That sounds cool.

Keith: Yeah. But sometimes it was like *four* seconds.

(Austin laughs)

Keith: And like you always *know* it's a bad one (laughs). You always— because it's like, "Oh, wow, I had time to think before this thing reached—"

Austin: "Because fucking Jeffrey took forever to squeeze back. Thanks, Jeffrey."

Keith: I know! And he was scratching his nose, like, in the middle of it—

(Austin and Ali laugh)

Keith: Like scratch your nose before or after, Jeffrey!

Austin: Come on! All right.

Keith: Come on!

Austin: Let's go— I'm gonna hang up now. Thanks, everybody, have a good night.

Ali: (laughs) Goodbye.

Dre: Byeeeeee!

Keith: Bye!