

Side Story 02: Tim Rabbit, The British Bugs Bunny

Transcriber: vesta

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Opening Narration / Recap

[“[Side Story](#)” by Jack de Quidt begins playing]

[music ends]

Introduction [00:00:00]

Austin: What's good, Internet? It is April 15th, 2025, and this is not an intriguing mystery left to you by your grandfather. It's Side Story, a podcast about games and the stories we tell about them, presented by Friends at the Table and supported by our patrons at friendsatthetable.cash. Maybe that's you— it could be you.

Importantly, if you go there and you give us \$10, you get access to a Let's Play that's coming out every other week, off-set weeks with this— which means the first and second episode are now live. We're playing Outward— I'm playing the game together with the same people who are here again this week, Jack de Quidt and Janine Hawkins. Hi.

Jack: Hi, I'm Jack. You can find me on Bluesky at @notquitereal and you can get the Side Story theme at notquitereal.bandcamp.com. When we recorded our first episode, we did not have the theme yet. I was betting that I would still remember to make music. Once again, it turned out that I did.

Austin: You did.

Jack: You can get it now. It's like— well, you just heard it, you know what it sounds like.

Austin: It's great. Yeah. There are two versions of it here on the show. Actually, there's three versions of it, kind of.

Jack: There are three versions on the show, and there is a fourth version that was the first one that I wrote that is so loose and dreamy and weird, that it is for the version of podcasts in the world where gravity is just very slightly less. Unfortunately, we live in this world, so we get this theme.

Austin: Have you considered making one in the world where gravity is very slightly more? Because I feel like we're headed towards that world somehow.

Jack: Yes. If you would like to hear that sound, I recommend listening to Friends at the Table's *PARTIZAN*.

Janine: [chuckles]

Austin: [chuckling] Yeah.

Jack: A series with a harsh industrial score.

Austin: Yeah. People should go to notquitereal.bandcamp.com and listen to all of Jack's music, both the songs featured here on Side Story and the stuff from Friends at the Table and elsewhere. Speaking of a world where things are a little looser and a little dreamlike.

Jack: Wait no, hold on.

Austin: What's up?

Jack: Who else is here?

Austin: I said both of your names and only you said anything, Jack.

Jack: Oh but I thought we were— I thought Janine was then going to introduce herself.

Austin: No, because we don't really do intros on this show the way we do on Friends at the Table.

Jack: Ah, fuck!

Janine: [laughs]

Austin: But It's fine, we can do it now— now that you've set it up, Janine, you're also here today—

Janine: [frantic sounds]

Austin: Which I did say—

Janine: I'm bringing Plurk back.

Austin: Ohhh, finally, a good social media site.

Janine: I'm not..... I don't go to... no...

Austin: But the horizontal— the horizontal timeline might save us. People don't know Plurk— I think the only people in the world who know Plurk are the two of us and Jeff Gerstmann.

Janine: [chuckles] Yes.

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: So—

Janine: And the Second Life community, and I think like, **[Austin:** Oh my god your Plurk is gone.] it had a good like, Filipino or Malaysian community— is it gone? It doesn't exist anymore?

Austin: I just clicked on— you know, I had from years and years ago before I went to Plurk— I went to Plurk— I went to your thing on Plurk and it is *gone*.

Janine: Oh well, that's ca— yeah, I closed my— Plurk still exists.

Austin: You closed *your*— Yeah, I meant your Plurk.

Janine: I closed my Plurk.

Austin: Okay, I see. I don't— maybe I didn't— I don't know, did I? What did I even use on Plurk? I'm double checking.

Janine: I think I got rid of all the shopping. There used to be a bunch of shopping.

Austin: There was shopping on Plurk? **[Janine:** Oh yeah.] Jack, do you know what Plurk is?

Jack: I do know what Plurk is, although not, as I'm discovering, with the same intensity as the two of you. **[Austin:** Yeah.] My main experience of Plurk was a social network that appeared and then just fizzled in my understanding. But as I understand, there was shopping as well, and both of you were there.

Austin: That's right. This was like, at the same time I was on Twitter, I was on Plurk. I was mostly posting on Twitter, but—

Janine: This website now looks like the Hoyoverse social media thing that they tried to do. [**Jack:** Oh it does!] [**Austin:** Oh, that's a shame.] Which is very— is a mistake.

Austin: Yeah. You know, what if you could capture your audience entirely, you know? That's kind of the Hoyoverse strategy, it seems. Anyway, I was going to talk about a thing that's kind of the opposite of a Hoyoverse game in many ways. You know, the way like we've talked before that opposites aren't really opposite, and you kind of make them be whatever you want because like coffee is at the opposite—

Janine: This is— the opposite of a Hoyoverse game is a physical library.

Austin: Yeah, it's like a boat or something. [**Jack** and **Janine** chuckle] I really just want at the beginning of this episode—I'm not going to go too deep into it because I think to go too deep into it is to take away some of the magic—but the day we are recording, the Blue Prince comes out.

Jack: Yeah!

Blue Prince [00:04:54]

Austin: It is so good. It was one of my favorite games I got to play during the IGF jury process last year. I think everyone should try the Blue Prince. It is a first-person puzzle game in the vein of— I don't want to say what it's in the vein of because I don't want to say Myst and then everyone's like, oh it's— I'm bad at Myst. It's not really like Myst in direct ways, or the ways it will eventually be like Myst comes so deep in that you will have already found a fondness for and an on-ramp into thinking about the game in ways that the Myst style puzzles might start making sense.

Another way to think about this game where you primarily play something that feels like a board game in first person for like five hours, and then eventually you realize you're solving a mystery on top of that. It is a game where you play the heir to a familial fortune in the— that is kind of comprised by a strange mansion in the mountains. And it turns out every time you go in the front door of this mansion—that's not actually true—every day that passes, the mansion changes what it looks like inside. The rooms get reallocated, or the rooms get shuffled up. And in fact, you are the one placing the rooms— if you've played a board game like Betrayal in House of the Hill, which the three of us played the legacy version, Betrayal Legacy of a couple of years ago, all the way through. I still have that version right up there. I'm curious if I'd flip through all of the tiles, if I would see any Blue Prince style— if I would see any like relationships between the two sets of tiles. It's sort of like that, where you're— or like Arkham Horror does this

too, I think, the Arkham Horror TCG or LCG? Jack, you've played some Arkham Horror card game, right? Am I wrong about this?

Jack: Yeah, I have. It's an LCG.

Austin: Does that also have room placement, or is that just regular Arkham Horror that does that?

Jack: It does have room placement, but what it considers to be a room could be something like carriages on a train, [**Austin:** Right, sure.] or it could be stations up a mountain, but yes, it has that mechanic.

Austin: In the Blue Prince, which I have to tell you, I've been playing this game on and off now for six months or something. Today was the day I got the pun.

Jack: *Today?!*

Austin: Today.

Janine: Oh. Oh, *Austin*.

Jack: Austin, it's in the logo!

Austin: Well, I was playing an early build, I didn't see a logo. I wasn't paying attention to logos, I was paying attention to the deep lore in which colors matter a lot. [**Janine:** Don't the—] You have to remember, I'm the person who named a character Oscar Season.

Janine: Don't the things like drop down on a blue—?

Austin: Yeah, it's a blueprint. It says blueprint, but I was thinking about the Blue Prince because you're the inheritor of this family that's deeply connected with the color blue because red has a deep political meaning in the world— you know, I just wasn't thinking on that register. I was taking it at face value. It's not a very punny game. It's not a game filled with other puns, you know? Like—

Jack: No. It is a game that is funny in parts. [**Austin:** Yes, absolutely.] There's a lot of really good stuff early on where other characters seem to be frustrated as well that the mansion is changing shape all the time. [**Austin:** Yes.] There's a bit of you going into it that you're like, well, the mansion is changing shape for me, you know, something weird is going on. But the more stuff you uncover, you'll get letters from people being like, oh, the mansion changed shape again. Or like, oh, I'm really glad that I saw *this room* and I feel like I never got to see that room last time I visited, which is really charming.

Austin: Yeah, one of you from the patio— and it's like, well, why didn't you go to the patio before? The answer is it wasn't there before. **[Jack: Yeah.]** Every new session, it's kind of a run-based game and every new run is a new day. Every day, you have 50 steps— I believe it starts at 50. I don't remember now because it's been so long since I started the new game. And you go into a sort of foyer and then from there, every time you open a door, you get three cards to draw from.

And those three cards are options for what the rooms are. The rooms may or may not have doors on each of the four sides of— or each of their four walls, for instance. They all have— there may be a different type of door, you know, or type of room where there's like some garden rooms connected to the outside, like the patio. There are some that are like bedrooms. When you go into a bedroom, you get steps that is you know, kind of more card draw— it's not even just card draw, steps is anytime you enter a new room. So if you go between two rooms four times, you're going to end up spending eight steps or there about, depending on what the rooms are and if you're gaining them back or if you, for instance, find an apple to eat, which will recover your steps, etc.

And the rooms also tend to have things in them. So a very early room you might get is the parlor room, which is a sort of L-shaped room, you come to know that that parlor room is going to be this kind of L-shaped room. You can see it when you draw it also, it's not like hidden information where the doors will be. And in the parlor room, there is like a basic logic puzzle, a sort of like, there's three boxes and two of them might be lying in one— there's always one that's telling the truth and the others may or may not be telling the truth, and inside one of them are some gems and you can then spend those gems to get slightly better rooms on a particular draw. There might be you know, three rooms that come up and there's a really good one, but it costs you a gem.

And so you have a grid that's like a five by nine grid, and you're slowly building the layout of the manor every new run. And you will be struggling against how many steps you have left. How many— you know, do you have exits that you can actually open, because there's a chance that you'll hit a door that's literally locked unless you have a key to open it. You're going to run out of gems such that you pull three cards and they all have a gem cost, or you pull three cards and one of them is a dead end, like a utility closet that might give you an item, but is a dead end and that was your last you know, door that you could place because of the way you built your layout?

So there's already a lot happening at that level. Then I just, I don't know— Jack, you played this back in from the demo or during IGF also. Janine, you've seen me play some of this. But for me, the thing that really captured me was the way that that, what I've just laid out, eventually is something that you can zoom down into to a bunch of smaller puzzles, and then from there zoom back out into much larger ones, if that

makes sense. I don't want to give particular puzzle things away, but there's like, you know, you could imagine—and this is I think not a room where it wasn't in the build I played—but you could imagine a room that was like the game room, and there's a chess board in the middle, and there's a series of chess puzzles, right? And you would come to learn the rules of the chess puzzle so that each time you go through it, you could maybe solve the chess puzzle and get some keys.

But it might be the case that the chess puzzle is also actually referencing something larger in the entire manor, either on a run-based thing or in a, you know, a sort of overall— your goal is to not just kind of get to the final rooms, this antechamber, at the very north end, but to also kind of piece together a larger drama of the family and of the political history of the place that the manor is in— whatever happened to your mother, you know, whatever happened to your grandfather, what's really going on on the grounds of this place.

And for me, the thing that was so magical were those moments where you realized, oh, I don't just want to throw the breaker so that I can turn on the lights in the dark room, another very early type of room you get, because the dark room without its lights on prevents you from seeing what cards you've drawn, which means you're placing— inside of that room, you're placing new rooms blind? But also when you turn on the light in the dark room, the red light comes on, and you can see the photos that have been developed, which gives you more access to larger mysteries and questions about the story. And that, for me, was like, oh, this is a great— this is a great video game.

Jack: Yeah, I'm so glad that I loaded up the show notes today and saw that we were going to be talking about Blue Prince, because I am at a point where it is about to be a big Blue Prince week for me.

Austin and Janine: [chuckles]

Jack: You know, I can't talk much about the game now. I played it like Austin during IGF Judging, and I reckon I played about, you know, I poked at the first level of the mystery in that game. You know, as Austin talks about it, you know, that kind of like, that first bite of the apple that suddenly turns into realizing that you're eating a fruit salad or something?

But I am so excited now that it is out to be able to take the time and sit down and really go for it. When I was a kid, I was always so compelled by and so wildly disappointed with the board game Cluedo— called Clue, in the US.

Austin: Yes.

Jack: Because you have this beautiful, dioramic mansion that you can look down into and you can see the kitchen with its brass pots and pans. You can see the secret passage behind the bookcase in the parlor or whatever. And what you really do in that game is you roll dice and move around and check things off on a little piece of paper, and you know, it's wildly unsatisfying.

And whenever I was playing Clue, the thing that I was always thinking is like, firstly, these rooms are gorgeous and I want to be in them. **[Austin: Mhm.]** And secondly, what is going on in this house other than them? Why is this guy being killed, you know? What is happening here? And I feel like Blue Prince *is* the game that puts you in those spaces and lets you kind of like marvel not just at the secret passage behind the bookcase, but also that great sensation of like, there is something going on here and I'm going to be the one to figure it out.

Austin: And the way you end up figuring it out is this great marriage of story and mechanics where you come to learn the structure of a run, but also the sort of broader structure of what runs can be? And so you start making decisions about the future in some limited ways. There's a bunch of rooms that let you change something going out of one run and into another one.

Again, I'll just say a very basic, very early one. There's a coat check room that lets you leave an item from one run to another run, right? You have to like draw the coat check room the second run, or the third run— or the fifth run, whenever you finally get it again, it will have whatever item you put away. So maybe you find a special key and you put that key, you're like, I'm not going to be able to use that key in this run, so let me put it in the coat check room.

And eventually, there are broader mysteries that start to— and puzzles that start to reward you if you plan like that, and there are rules around— you know, I don't even want to say too much, but there are ways to game the game, is I guess the way to say it, right? There are lots of ways for you to make sense of the space and to interact with it in some really widely different ways. And I think that it's— it's telling that it's getting the response, it's getting including from people who I don't think of as— for people who don't know, it's reviewing really well. But it is reviewing really well for people who I don't think of traditionally as like puzzle game people.

And I think it's because it does such a great job of on-ramping you through something really legible, which is, ooh, I want to try to maximize how many steps I can take in this place, or I don't want to hit a dead end. I don't want to hit a dead end. That's like the first clearest thing. If I have three pathways, I want to make sure at least one of them stays generally open for me. And giving the player those little digestible bits means that it's a little easier to then like, commit to the bigger bits long enough for you to start asking the

big narrative questions, which in turn drives you to start paying different sorts of attention to the world around you. And you start going, oh, wait a second, who was that in that photo? Or are there any clues in this picture that I didn't put together?

There's stuff, you know, this is one of those games where you watch it, or you play it for 20 hours and then you go watch someone else playing it, and you're like antsy in your seat because they're walking past big things that there is you know, information to be gained, or you're in on the secret, you know what I mean? It feels a little bit like Jack talking to you about Hunter x Hunter, mediacub.plus, about some stuff that's like, you know, over the last year I guess, of approaching new big things and I'm like, whoo hoo hoo, but does Jack notice that XYZ? **[Janine chuckles]** So if you enjoy that feeling at all, let me tell you, go play Blue Prince, which now I can only hear it as the other word.

Janine: It's— I think the thing— so I've watched, as you said, I've watched you play it, and I haven't played it myself. There's so many, like, you know, I'm glad you resisted the urge to draw too many comparisons, because you could kind of draw infinite comparisons **[Austin: Mhm.]** and none of them would really amount to that mu— like there's— it's the degree of things that I see in this game that I recognize that I could mention that would be absolutely useless to someone who's trying to use them as like a guiding thing of like, should I play this or not?

Austin: Is this for me? Yeah.

Janine: Like, I see like nuggets of like, you know, what remains of Edith Finch.

Austin: Sure.

Janine: But also like Hades, but also like, you know, Betrayal at the House on the Hill, but also like— just all this stuff where it's just like, you can see these little glimmers of it, but it's not enough— it's not like a thing to hang your hat on because the thing it's doing is so clever and cool?

Austin: Yeah. And I want to say, Jack, you mentioned a thing which is, I think Janine from watching this, you can confirm, it just looks good?

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: You mentioned the Cluedo, Clue like tiles that look great. Each of these rooms is so intricate. It's stylized, it's not going for like photorealism or something. But it is— it is just a joy to walk around the space. It can be really majestic in certain places and it can be really haunting in other places? It is like— it hits its atmosphere extremely well. **[Jack: Yeah!]** You feel like you are— you feel at once like you are alone in this manor. And also like when you turn your back, someone might have walked right past you. You

know, you're finding notes from— not notes to you necessarily, but you're finding notes between the staff that takes care of this manor, or between other people who have been here over the years. And there is a sense that like, you know, you'll find a security room. It's like, well, there's a security room. Someone sits in the security room and watches the camera feeds, you know? You know, someone is watering the flowers in the garden— in the you know, greenhouse, right? And those people tend to actually be characters who come alive in the notes and stuff like that. So really high on this game. It's— it's \$27 on Steam right now. I don't know if it has any console plans, but extremely worth your time.

Jack: It might— I'll check before I say anything.

Austin: Yeah. So that's the, that is Blue— the, the Blue Prince? The—

Jack: Blue Prince.

Austin: Just Blue Prince, no the. Blue Prince. It's like “blueprints”.

Jack: It's available on consoles.

Austin: It is.

Jack: Yep.

Austin: Is it on Switch?

Jack: Nope.

Austin: Breaking my heart.

Janine: It may take time. Sometimes it takes time.

Austin: Yeah, I know. I just don't want to bring my Steam Deck on a trip, but I want to have Blue Prince with me.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: That's how it goes.

Janine: Give it a few months.

Austin: Yep, absolutely. Speaking of building houses that are kind of confusing— actually, I don't know, does InZOI have house building?

InZOI [00:20:45]

Janine: It does. I didn't, I didn't fuck with that. I just moved into an apartment.

Austin: Okay. Did you like change the layout at all? You bought furniture presumably.

Janine: K— kind of? It comes pre-furnished.

Austin: Weird, but okay. I guess some Sims games—

Janine: The game starts you out with enough money to buy a gorgeous two-bedroom apartment that is completely furnished.

Austin: Just like real life.

Janine: You have to make no compromises or sacrifices at all, that's InZOI.

Austin: InZOI is a Sims style— tell me what InZOI is.

Janine: It's like a “life simulation” game? Quote-unquote.

Austin: A life simulation game, sure. I-N-Z-O-I.

Janine: Yeah. It's— you know, I think it's— I want to, you know, okay, I'll say right out of the gate, it's in early access. I want to be cognizant of that, sensitive to that. But also, I'm going to say this anyways, it's more of a life sim than the Sims, but like in a bad way.

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: Wow. Okay.

Janine: Where like, the thing you do in InZOI is you go to work, you eat, you poop, you sleep, you post on Instagram.

Jack: Ah, the full gamut of human experience.

Austin: [chuckles] That's it.

Janine: Yeah, uh huh. Maybe you read, maybe you play a game.

Austin: Okay. I have a question that is maybe not for me, but maybe for a listener.

Janine: Yes.

Austin: How is that different from the Sims? Isn't that what the Sims is?

Janine: Things happen in the Sims. There's like things to do, there's reasons to grow, there's stuff to unlock— and again, early access, a lot of that stuff could come along and absolutely probably will come along. But I can only talk about the thing as I've played it right now. [**Austin:** Wait can you— can you give me a—] The thing I've played right now is an idle game.

Austin: Right. Can you give me a material example from the Sims of like, what is the thing that happens in the Sims? [**Janine:** Yeah, in the Sims—] That is the sort of thing that doesn't happen in InZOI?

Janine: In the Sims, you can be a veterinarian who you see— you see animals at your practice, and they come in and maybe they're blue, or they're like making a weird honking sound, and you diagnose them and you treat them and then you get money, and then you take that money and you go home to your tiny— your one bedroom rectangle, and then you maybe build a second story and then you, you know, go out to the club and you meet a girl who's a kleptomaniac because they still have that trait in there for reasons. [**Austin:** Uh huh.] But you know sparks fly and the next thing you know, you've, you know, you're up sizing to a nicer house and etc. etc.

Austin: But your new partner is stealing from you or is stealing from other people.

Janine: It's a personality quirk, let her live.

Austin: Okay. [chuckles]

Janine: There's also like— there is, I mean, there's a whole bunch of stuff you can do in The Sims. The Sims also has rabbit hole careers where you just like have the job, you go to the job, maybe an event happens.

Austin: Rabbit hole careers are called that because you go into like an instanced rabbit hole that you don't get to actually zoom into.

Janine: Yeah, you go into a building that's a fake building, so it's referred to as a rabbit hole. Because you just disappear into there. But then they, you know, they added events and stuff to like make those a little more dynamic, like stuff can still happen.

Austin: But InZOI is just that style of job? Because presumably there are jobs in there.

Janine: Yes. And stuff— there are events that can happen. I chose the criminal career. [**Austin:** Oh, okay.] And an event that happened for my character in the criminal career was that someone was refusing to pay back a loan, and she had to go shake them down. And when she did— let me find the exact wording that they gave me here, I have it on—

Austin: It's very funny that your criminal career— I guess shaking down people who have loans is a classic like, [**Janine:** That's a classic— yeah yeah yeah.] loan shark thing to do. But it is also just a capitalism thing to do too, you know?

Austin: That's true.

Jack: Yeah, that is just a job.

Janine: A small show of force was enough to scare the debtor, and they ended up paying off all their debts, which won me a commendation from my team lead.

Austin: At the loan shark—?

Jack: [chuckles] Crime?

Austin: Crime— crime HQ?

Janine: Yeah. I forget the exact term, the exact title, but it was like hoodlum or gangster or some shit. It was like, you know, thug. She's like an entry level— and she's getting a commendation from her team lead.

Austin: That's very funny.

Janine: They have made notes about they're going to improve the quality of their localization. And like, I will say, I didn't find a lot of stuff that was like— I didn't find a lot of stuff that I would identify as localization mistakes, although I guess they could be? But there is a lot of stuff that is just weird. And again, Sims is weird. Sims is weird in a way that like, you know, it pulls the strings and stuff. This is weird in a way that like doesn't go anywhere. It's just weird. Like, you can have conversations with people and all of the same options will be available to you all the time. There's no like, real contextual variation. Sometimes things will have like a bit of emphasis on them based on your mood? But, you know, you can walk up to someone, introduce yourself, and then tell them, for example, quote, "life's best teacher is death."

Austin: Uhh... that's not true, I just want to be clear.

Janine: You can tell them to humbly accept the fate one is given. You can—

Austin: That I don't agree with, but I get where a person could believe it. Life's best teacher is death is— unless you're talking about does life itself somehow learn? That feels like translation, a localization problem to me.

Janine: Yeah I, so— so that line— yes, maybe. You know, when I see something where I'm like, is this a localization error, like— What's it supposed to say?

Austin: Life's like— suffering teaches you a lot, is kind of what it feels like to me.

Janine: Maybe.

Austin: But death explicitly kills you, so you can't learn if you're dead, you know? Unless you're Vegeta.

Janine: Yeah. But death is also— yeah, maybe it's like failure.

Austin: Right, failure, exactly.

Janine: But that feels like, I don't know. I— there's a lot of stuff I'm a little bit like about, but that line came up to me when a lady came over to my apartment. I forget what she was— she was like I think complaining about a noisy neighbor or something, and she came over and sat on the couch, and they were just talking, and then unprompted, my ZOI— that's what they're called, they're called ZOIs.

Austin: InZOI, so like in-person.

Janine: They said that life's best teacher is death, and then the girl immediately left. So whatever it is supposed to be is still probably pretty dark. [chuckles]

Austin: It is negative. Yeah.

Jack: There are a lot of bits of this game that I am fascinated and repulsed by, and I don't quite know the order to begin with them. But the first that I want to talk about is this game is pushing for a kind of photorealism in a way that The Sims absolutely isn't.

Janine: Mhm.

Jack: Could you talk a bit about that and how that sits with this bizarre simulacra of life?

Janine: Yeah. So they're trying to— they're definitely trying to make it like pretty photorealistic, but like photorealistic in that sort of polished Daz 3D kind of— kind of way, [**Austin:** Sure.] where you get like those visual novels and stuff on Steam, where like it all kind of looks a little bit like that. You know, and they— they want you to have a pretty beefy computer for that, and also for other reasons that we'll get into shortly. [chuckles] So it's— I think it's fine in that regard, but there is also all this weird stuff, that is like attached to this desire for fidelity. But it's like— I don't know why— I don't know who— I don't know why you have this right now, but don't have all these other things.

Jack: Yes.

Janine: Like I don't know why I can open my trunk, turn on my hazard lights on my car, [Austin: Right.] or turn on my turn signals, roll each window down individually— [Austin chuckles] individual window roll down controls?

Austin: Yes. This would be so much—

Janine: I don't know why I need that. I can drive my car around like myself. I can control it, [Austin: WASD.] but there's no way to really go or anything to do— you're just doing it. You *can* do it, but why would you want to? I don't know.

Austin: This drives me so much of a thing in tabletop game design, where if you're making a tabletop game that is like in the line of something like D&D or Blades in the Dark or whatever, kind of traditional— but even if it's something like Dream Askew or Primetime Adventures, you know games that are not about killing things, let's say, right, necessarily, one of the questions you have to answer as a designer early on when you're coming up with your kind of like core dice mechanic, and any time you're thinking about like how do the players and their characters interact with the world, is, are you trying to do kind of like task resolution or are you trying to do kind of conflict or goal resolution?

A good example for this is like, when— you know, if you're telling a story about there being secret you know, bomb plans hidden inside of a spy base or whatever, when you roll dice to pick the lock, when you roll— when you're like, I want to open a safe because I'm trying to find these plans, are you trying to roll the dice and you get a success— if you roll the dice and get a success, are you getting your goal, which is I'm going to find the plans, or are you succeeding at a physical task, like I'm picking the lock to the safe, right? Safes don't tend to have locks that you can pick, but you know what I'm saying, you're cracking the safe, I guess.

In the task resolution version, the world is kind of set already and you're kind of playing a simulation of the world, right? You're like, oh, I can crack the safe, I can roll to search for clues. If there are any clues, I can find it. I'm rolling to like punch someone, and if I succeed, what I'm succeeding at is my fist hitting their face. But in a sort of more kind of goal resolution focused thing, you're kind of outcome focused, you're not rolling to see if you crack the safe, you're rolling to see if you get the information you want, which means a mixed success or a failure might mean you crack the safe, but the clues you're looking for aren't there. Someone already got them, or someone heard you opening the safe and so now they're coming up to bother you or yes, you punched the person in the face successfully, your hand hit their face, but all it did was make them angry or something, right?

And InZOI feels— Sims kind of feels goal oriented in that sort of rubric where you're really zoomed out and thinking about things like I want to woo this person, not I want to deliver this particular line. Now, Sims does have some— I want to be clear, it's not, this doesn't map perfectly. The Sims does have lots of little funny interactions you can do, but I think partly because of the sort of desires that will pop up for Sims in Sims 4, where you have like the longer term ambitions, but also short term things, you're kind of always aimed at these big picture things and the kind of slightly more cartoonish aesthetic and slightly more cartoonish set of actions feels less simulation-y? Watching you play InZOI was like I'm watching someone play a milsim, but instead of mil, it's life sim and like really in that milsim, ARMA-style degree of, you know, particularity.

Janine: Are you just saying that because I made my town filthy and ruined? Because there's a slider to how filthy and ruined you want your town to look.

Austin: No, I really meant the wind— the windows. Like the last time I wanted to roll up a particular window in a particular car was [Janine: Sure, yes.] playing something like Hell Let Loose, you know what I mean? Where it's like, okay, we have to aim the turret this way exactly, you know? But yes, tell me about your ruined town.

Janine: So I do— right. So there are things that— this is again in the category— actually, I'm going to pause and say, this also does have desires. Your ZOI can desire to do something to fulfill their whatever. [Austin: Okay.] That is still there, but there is also another system that I want to talk about in a second. [chuckles] But I will say that like, there are some— again, in the vein of verisimilitude, but why, there's a lot of ways you can edit your town— there's three towns. There's one that's based on Korea, one that's based on Indonesia, and one that's based on pretty specifically a part of California.

Austin: It's like the Santa Monica pier area, right?

Janine: Yeah, exactly. And you can— there's literally a slider that you can slide, that will take your town from green and lush, to all the trees are dead and everything's covered in a layer of filth. And even on the— even when you zoom out and look at the mini-map, which is a tablet on a desk, the tablet is all filthy, the books around it are all filthy— that's probably a bug, but I do think it's funny. So I made my town filthy, just because I could. There's also— you can change what bushes are around. You can put stuff on billboards. The things that they suggest are a couple royalty-free, ambient landscape videos off of YouTube that are just from random YouTube accounts. I put Collins Bear animation up because it's funny. So you can do all of these little things, but again, it's sort of to the thing of like, but it doesn't do anything. Like you don't— your character doesn't notice the city is covered in mud.

Austin: Right. It feels—

Janine: They don't notice the Collins Bear animation billboard. [chuckles]

Austin: Well, it feels almost like it's giving you more options for selfie backdrops, if that makes sense.

Janine: Yes. Yeah, it's a whole— and that's a whole thing. There's a photo studio that you can turn into things like a subway set and things like that. There's a lot of that stuff.

Austin: It feels like content both narratively in the world, but also [**Janine:** Yeah.] a style of— there is, you know, there's a ton of Sims content in the world. There's a ton of it. When I say content here, I'm using a terrible word to mean the sorts of videos—

Janine: Material?

Austin: Yeah, like, you know, the stuff that a YouTube— someone on YouTube might make, a YouTuber might make, that is like, hey, I'm gonna be playing The Sims and today I'm playing with this challenge or I'm checking out this new pack or I'm telling a soap opera style story about my people. And then also I'm gonna do photos— I'm going to take in-game screenshots as if they were real photos, and I'll put those on my social media.

There are ways in which those decisions in the game around things like the backdrops and the city condition stuff feel almost built for that, but in the way that's not actually built well for that sort of content creation, but like, built with that stuff in mind mechanically or like materially, [**Janine:** And—] but not like in terms of how people actually do it.

Janine: I would say like, there is a vision of that maybe long term happening because there is, you know, every ZOI no matter what career you set them on, no matter what their goals are, no matter what their personality is, they're doing social media like all the time. [chuckles] But currently, unlike the Sims, where in the Sims you can like take a selfie and you see the selfie, you can do stuff with it depending on the expansion packs you've purchased etc., currently it's just like an action you do and nothing really comes of it.

It's just— and I could— that's one of the things that I can imagine most likely to change because it seems like it's so focused on this idea of social media being part of their lives, that like maybe something will happen there. In that sense, it makes sense to have this world that is kind of like a big photo studio, but that stuff's not there yet? So it is just a lot of like, okay well, I can do this, but it doesn't matter. I tell people I eat trendy desserts, but I can't go get a cronut or whatever. Or I can't actually decide I don't like it or— none of that stuff has any bearing on anything yet. Maybe that'll change, but right now it is kind of strange. It feels very like empty and alien.

Jack: This sense of like, an empty gesture at interaction or narrative—even just interpersonal narrative—reminds me of the way large language models construct stories in dialogue. Where you have something that ostensibly sounds like a story or ostensibly sounds like character work, but kind of isn't really. Is that uhh— could that be for any particular reason?

Austin: [chuckles]

Janine: So, you know, this is a complicated thing, right? Because I don't actually know that it's using— it's using— okay, so this game has quote-unquote “AI”. That can mean a lot of things. And it's doing a lot of things where some of it, I can confidently say, is doing based on some sort of local something. Because it will tell you if you don't have the newest Nvidia graphics card, this is going to take you a long time or it won't work at all. So there's— or they'll tell you, don't do anything with your GPU while we're doing this, because it might crash. So it's clearly doing something at home.

But there are also things where it's like, I could imagine it's doing this— you know, it has image generation if you want to generate a poster for your wall or something. And it works kind of like that Dall-E Mini that was going— that was sort of viral and all over the place a few years ago. Like the output looks a lot like that, which is to say it's bad and really clashes with the photorealistic stuff, like it doesn't make sense— I tried to use it. I wanted to know, you know, I wanted to be informed. And everything it made just like looked bad and out of place, especially when I could also just upload a picture that would look good. As you know, that's not new technology, just let me upload a thing, I'll you know, let me pull an image of a banana off of Google, whatever. That's people been doing that since time immemorial.

There's also a thing that will let you turn a photo into a 3D object? And this also works terribly, but it takes a very long time. **[Austin:** Yeah.] And it will kind of guess at what that shape is, and it'll kind of guess at what the back might look like? And you have to tell it very explicitly what part of it should be touching the ground. And then it's huge. And you can't actually— you can't make it particularly small— and the smallest you can make it is kind of like bread loaf sized. **[Austin:** Are there any—] I tried making carrots and it just made a pile of orange, so. Yeah.

Austin: Good. Are there any 3D modeling tools in there that aren't just “you put a photo in and it tries to make a 3D object”?

Janine: No, you— it has— **[Austin:** Okay.] I mean, it has the pre-made stuff. It also has like, a thing where you can combine certain elements of stuff to make things. So you can like pick out the seat part of a gamer chair and then put like dining chair legs on it? And that's pretty limited right now, but you can kind of see the vision there at least. And

that stuff's kind of neat, but the making a 3D object thing, you also can't even like do anything with it. It's just like there. I made a few and it's just like, you can't even like view it. There's no, there isn't even an option to have your ZOI like, look at it apprecia— appreciatively like a like an objet d'art, you know? [chuckles] It's like— functionally doesn't exist. Functionally, it's just for you as the player to view. Which is again, sort of more in that vein of like, okay, this is to make, this is a platform for making content or like— what's— why? I can do this, but why?

Jack: There's also something going on here with, you know, you see like the C-suite of **big** game studios getting excited about the possibility of generative AI in games. [Janine: Yes.] And one of the things they always say, you know—this is the person at the top of the board, at the top of the board, at the top of the board saying—you know, imagine if you could play an RPG and you could talk to a character like they were a real person, you just have a real conversation.

Setting aside even temporarily the plagiarism, and the environmental cost of AI, something that game designers immediately bring up when they talk about that is it's like, and then what? Are they going to procedurally generate a quest, a location, [Austin: Right.] you know, they're like, you could just talk to someone and it's like, okay, but what does that actually mean for how we play? What does that actually mean—

Janine: So I have a great example of that exact stuff too. Where this game also has a function called SmartZOI that you can toggle on—

Austin: Right, this is what I was going to ask about.

Janine: That you need to have a pretty good computer for. Thankfully, I just updated my graphics card, so I was able to run it for a while before it turned— before it started going bad.

Jack: Oh, it just gave up?

Janine: Um, it started *really* struggling. So there's this thing called SmartZOI— I don't really understand what the underpinning of it is, but the surface—

Austin: It's a small language model. It's an SLM instead of an LLM. Or that's the claim, yeah.

Janine: Yes. And they make it sound like it's going to affect decisions or something in some way. But the thing that I've seen it do is it will let you see your ZOI's and other ZOIs' inner thoughts. And like, there's something appealing to that, you know. The Sims has gestured at this, but it's like via a picture. Your sim will be like, thinking about the toilet. It's like, ha ha ha, they're thinking about the toilet.

Austin: Which is pretty useful, or like pretty f— like it is pretty— it works. **[Janine:** Yes, yeah.] It's pretty effective in the sense that you're like, oh, funny, they're thinking about the toilet. That might be all I need.

Janine: So I made a normal character, and then I did a thing that I never, ever do in these games, which I think is a sign of how dull my time with this game was. I made a little weirdo.

Austin: Oh?

Janine: I made a little weirdo freak named Hobart Goblin.

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: Oh, you never do this. Yes, a hundred percent.

Janine: No, I never do this. I'll watch other people do it, but I take things seriously. Even if I make a person who is like normal, but like kind of a disaster socially or whatever, I don't make a little goblin person, with like, blue hair and stuff.

Austin: Like literally, you make them into a visual little creature versus, you wouldn't do that. You might make them emotionally a creature—

Janine: Yeah, yeah. And I tried to pick all the like worst traits? I made him an authoritarian, **[Austin:** Great, uh huh.] which is a thing you can do in this. That's where I think the localization might be— there's the like, traits and stuff, some of them I'm not sure that it's exactly what they're supposed to be. Anyway, I made him an authoritarian in contrast to my first character who was— I forget the exact word, but basically like kind of anxious, nervous. Their style of thought is not really different.

When I'm looking at— I'm looking— I have examples up because I took some screenshots. **[Austin:** Great, I'm glad.] I'm looking at them back, like side to side right now, and the only difference I can tell is that I told Hobart that— because there's a little thing that lets you basically add something to the AI memory for this, so that their thoughts can kind of reference that and be a little more personal. The only difference between these thoughts is that I told Hobart there was a wasp following him. And so sometimes he mentions the wasp.

Austin: [wheezes]

Janine: I told the other character that she was hiding a gunshot wound, and she mostly didn't think about it. It came up once or twice.

Austin: That's the first step of *really* hiding something. Leave it out of your mind.

Janine: Yes. [chuckles] Yeah. So she— you know, I'll read a couple of examples from her. "Cleaning helped me feel a bit more in control. Still, that lingering unease about the gun's presence lingers".

Austin: [laughs]

Janine: And then she said, she thought, "I hope the mirror doesn't notice how empty my stomach feels. Maybe I should take a quick break."

Austin: What? That's nothing.

Janine: Mhm.

Jack: This is maddening.

Austin: Yeah, it is.

Janine: Yeah. So on to Hobart and the Wasp. He thinks, "Looking sharp is key. Can't let the wasp see weakness."

Austin and Jack: [laughs]

Janine: Okay. I kind of get it, right?

Austin: Yeah, this is why people like this stuff to begin with! This is how it went down this slope!

Janine: "That bibimbap hit the spot. Now, got to focus on standing out somehow. Can't let the wasp think I'm just a slacker."

Austin: But that's not doing anything.

Jack: Oh okay, so it's having different feelings about the wasp.

Austin: But then like, does that generate the action of like, go make preen myself in the mirror?

Janine: No, maybe alludes to what they have just done or what they might do next.

Austin: I see.

Janine: “This table is clean. It feels good to see things in order. Can't let the wasp see my shortcomings though.” And my favorite one— “Sitting here, I can't help but think this wasp's got to be a good guy.”

Jack: Eugh. Um, firstly, this is part of the thing that you see all the time with LLMs, right? Which is that they are sold with the capacity to be exciting and different and say new things. And yet every LLM essentially sounds the same, you know, the same hallmarks, the same choice of words.

Janine: Yeah, it has— and in games has very little, if any, bearing on—

Jack: On what is actually happening.

Janine: What can be done, How you can interact.

Jack: The other thing is that like the— I can see that there is— I can see that there is an appeal on some level, like a conceptual appeal with watch a computer, try and figure out a person's life, you know, that kind of like that depiction of a ZOI. But I think that there are two things going on. First, the game wants to have its cake and eat it. You know on the one hand, it's saying, we've got these bizarre photorealistic ZOIs, we've got the car where you can wind all the windows down, and, but the inner thought stuff is just producing either very bland, you know, non-characterful, classic LLM sort of depictions of personhood, or just like outright broken. I saw you tell a ZOI that they were a dog trapped inside a human, and the first thing they did was just go out and do three squats, and it's like, you know.

Austin: Classic dog behaviour.

Janine: Yeah, and then they leveled up their life goal or whatever, because her goal was to lead a simple life, which apparently means do yoga, do not cook food for yourself, that makes you sad.

Austin: [sighs]

Jack: Right, and that joy of watching an algorithm try and puzzle out a life, like a sort of a simulacra of a life, is present already in The Sims, and has been handmade by Maxis' AI designers, right? AI in the way we used to refer to it for so long, right? [

Austin: In the sense of— yeah.

Jack: Where it's like moving through a series of algorithms, moving through a series of different AI packets, and that is— there is an argument that you often hear delivered in bad faith of like, well, that is no different than an LLM making these decisions— I

absolutely reject that. It is categorically different, right? To say, you know, the Maxis designers have sat down and have created essentially like a flow chart [**Janine**: Yes.] that we move through. And the joy in playing the Sims is watching the Sims go rolling down into the gutter of that flow chart and getting lost.

Janine: They know what their options are. [**Austin**: Mhm.] Like, they know what their verbs are, you know, versus just being like, well, the world exists and I'm in it and these are all the things, and none of them really come to bear.

Jack: And I'm going to gesture at a conversation about that wasp or whatever. Whereas if you compare that, for example, to like a Crusader Kings character who has a very specific handcrafted trait attached to them that changes their entire life, it's you know, it's such a different thing.

Austin: Well, I think that's also something really important to me about thinking about you know kind of generative AI in those sorts of roles is, the thing about the CK3 character, they have really particular goals that are in a really particular context that give the player a very specific set of verbs, which is to say that they are carefully designed towards historical, thematic, and you know, player experience goals.

An LLM will never quite get there. You can kind of pre-you know, you can kind of pre-prompt it. You can say, hey, make goals appropriate for a 13th century duke. You can say, you know, consider the fact, remember, gunpowder hasn't been invented or widespread yet in Western Europe or something. But you can't get to the precision that a set of designers will get to by having a particular outcome in terms of the player experience, in terms of the kind of affect of sitting down with Crusader King's character. And instead, there's a sort of just—and I think that reflects an attitude in the way that I've seen people who are really excited about LLMs in this particular use case—that they get to thinking that it's a universal tool. But like, all attempts towards universality instead of towards precision or towards particularity and kind of grounding in material, you're betraying the fact that you're supposed a universal perspective or your universal tool actually also has biases built into it, right? And so like, I— if you set the InZOI, SLM, Smart-ZOI stuff, you know, if you really look at it, it's just going to be the stuff that is, like it's not adding up to a broader picture of anything, you know what I mean? It's not in line with the stuff that the whole game seems to be in line with around influencer culture and stuff. Though Chris Livingston had a write up on PCGamer.

Janine: It's just everyone's insecure, is the—

Austin: Yeah, 100%. PCGamer has an article on the Smart stuff, the Smart-ZOI stuff. Christopher Livingston, who rules and who's been writing great stuff for PCGamer for a long time now.

Janine: The person to go to when a sim comes out.

Jack: Yes

Austin: Yeah, truly, a hundred percent. Wrote about the two—

David and Grace's Smart-ZOI systems, and Grace instead of using the computer, Grace decided she wanted to quote, “clean mouse”. I'm going to make an assumption here, Grace's AI-fueled brain contains a typo and she really wanted to clean house to feel more productive. Either that or all of her investigations at the computer left her mouse filthy. Third possibility, she has a pet mouse that needed a bath. With his Smart-ZOI powers activated, meanwhile, David decided that rather than watching TV, he wanted to quote “splash water playfully”. His internal monologue, which can be seen by clicking on him, said that it would feel “cool”, quote unquote, and make for a nice start to the day.

That says less to me than the person who is watching TV and their thought bubbles keep thinking about the earthquake.

Austin: : Water, rubber duck.

Austin: Or water, rubber duck. Yes, the person who's watching TV and the TV is going, “money!”, you know, “microphone!”. And then they're thinking earthquake, rubber duck, you know?

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Abstraction is functional. It's not just— abstraction is *really* useful in art and especially in games, where you can fill in the gaps, you know?

Janine: So I want to say also, like, I think AI gets presented as a tool. And I think InZOI is a really good example of how it is often the opposite? As I was playing, there's a lot of stuff for like, oh, use our thing to turn a video or a photo into an animation. And then your InZOI can do that anima— your ZOI can do that animation for re— for some purpose. Again, maybe at some point you'll be able to do like ZOI TikToks or whatever, I don't know. But— so they give you these “tools”, quote unquote, to do that, but then if you get an undesirable result, the only thing you can do is redo. You can only like, regenerate and hope that it does it cleaner next time.

Austin: Right.

Janine: There's no way to clean things up. Like even if you're not, you know, even if you're doing something relatively simple like just a single pose for your character for a photo, and you've uploaded this picture and you say, I want that pose, and it does it

most of the way okay, but the ways in which it's wrong are really clear, like the head is turned the wrong way because it read the image this— you know.

Austin: Mhm.

Janine: You can't fix that. You can't—as other things, platforms will let you do when you're taking photos of a character that you're directly manipulating in some way—you can't grab the joint and turn it and fix it. You're not learning any of those skill, you don't have access to any of those tools that are old tools. Old tools that getting familiar with them can translate into skills and other things and other programs. Now, you don't get any of that, like— and that stuff is so available. **[Austin: Right!]** Like, free VTuber software will give you that, so you can take pictures of your 3D models and stuff? Like these things are everywhere. You don't have to license some AI system and build it in and whatever, whatever. It is— it is the absence of a tool in so many cases. And that's the part that like— I think that's the part that in InZOI's case, even if you can be like, well, it's doing it locally and I don't know what they've trained it on, I'm sure it's trained on the same shit everything's trained on. But like, even if you put all of that stuff to the side, to me there is a big thing of like, there are older tools you could have put here that would do this better, **[Austin: Yep.]** produce better results, and also get people familiar with things that they could then translate that skill elsewhere.

Austin: Into 3D modeling software or something, right?

Janine: Yes. Or animating or— you know, so many people, so many game artists got their start doing mods where you're looking like you're at the sort of topographic map thing of the character and like adding textures, because you want like the lipstick to be a certain color or whatever.

Austin: Totally.

Janine: And like, they could have put that in there.

Austin: First thing is, there are mods for games like Skyrim and Cyberpunk that literally let you just move the skeletal model around **[Janine: Yeah, yeah.]** so that you can take different photos. Like it is— this is, you know, well-worn ground in such a way that like, if that's what they wanted to do, they could have done that, you know? Instead of—

Janine: And for the kind of game that they kind of seem like they want to do, I think it would be way better.

Austin: Right? Yes, totally.

Janine: It would like— a Sims game that gives you that level of granularity and lets you focus— and like pitch it about, you know, different kinds of people being different kinds of influencers or whatever. There's merit, there's legs there.

Austin: Yeah, if you were like, oh, there's a music, you know, if the different job paths were all tied to different parts of being in the influencer culture and media culture and you know, oh, you could start as someone who does karaoke streams and then you could end up being a K-pop star. That sounds great!

Janine: That would be really cool.

Austin: There could be all sorts of ways to interact with that. You know, the thing that I would say is the single overriding feeling from watching other people play this game at this point, is I kept seeing people, streamers saying stuff like, okay, but like now what should I be doing? And I've never seen anyone have that feeling with The Sims. I'm sure some people had that feeling with The Sims, but The Sims has been so good at getting people to go, oh, I *can* do this. Oh, I'm going to start this career path and in my downtime, I'm going to work on this other thing. And there is something about the on-ramp for The Sims that's just stronger than whatever is happening here.

Janine: Yeah. That's kind of why I say like to me, this game as it is right now feels like an idle game? But there's sort of an inherent conflict there with like, okay, if it's an idle game, but also all of this stuff is geared towards you like taking photos and things like that— those are two very opposite things.

One of them is like, you leave the game alone and wait for something interesting to happen. The other is, nothing interesting will happen until you move the camera and make it happen. And when you put those two things together, there's a really strong sense of like, well, now what? Now what do I do? And that doesn't get fixed by having a, you know, AI text generation at the end of the day, have your ZOI think about a summary of their day that is... *useless!* [chuckles]

I noticed this happening and I copied one of them. And— well, I copied two of them. One of them, it spelled the name of my other character wrong, which is wild. [**Austin:** That's wild.] Her name is Abby, A-B-B-Y, and it spelled it A-B-I-Y, so I don't know what's going on there. But at the end of the day, they'll just like sum up their day really quickly, sometimes too quickly for you to read. But it has a little button so you can copy the text and paste it for some reason. Again, I don't know.

So the first one of these I saw was, “today started with a simple meal at the wooden top dining table which set a calm tone for the rest of my day. I did some yoga warm-up stretches and then tidied up my bedding and even took a moment to check my

appearance in the mirror. I found myself repeatedly unable to act and it reminded me of my constant struggle with inertia. I did push-ups and spray some fabric deodorizer on the bedding, trying to maintain a sense of order. Although I had hoped for a more engaging day, the repetitive nature of my actions made me feel both reflective and a bit disappointed.”

Jack: God, I hate the way that shit sounds.

Janine: What does— what is it— like, and they're always that.

Austin: To what end?

Janine: They're always just like, I ate, and then I did this, and then I cleaned my bed, and then I talked to this person, and then I ate, and then I felt bad about myself.

Jack: Oh, I did A, I, B, you know.

Austin: I don't understand it at all.

Janine: I'm curious to see where it'll go, but I don't know.

Austin: It's a shame because every now and then there's something in here where I'm like, oh, is this going to be something kind of interesting? [**Janine:** Yeah.] Like, there's this whole weird meta layer that's happening.

Jack: Oh, I'm fascinated by what is happening, [**Austin:** Me too!] Janine.

Janine: Yeah, the Abstergo situation, but it's cats.

Jack: It seems like—

Austin: That is what it feels like, a hundred percent.

Janine: And you have to like— yeah, you have to manage the karma of the people in the town or else the cat manager will call you into their office and be mad or something? I don't know, I don't know.

Jack: Now, this is great.

Janine: Tell me more about that.

Jack: There's something going on here.

Janine: The karma for my time was awful and the only way to fix it was to hit buttons and I never got called into the cat manager's office, so I can't tell you.

Austin: Mmm.

Jack: You know, Janine would share a video of a town that looked like a town in Fallout New Vegas at this point, where no one is reacting to it at any point. Then she opened up a menu of karma and just scrolled through a list of like 60 people all of whose karma was bad for some reason.

Janine: Mhm. Everyone in town— I don't know what I'm supposed to do about it.

[**Austin:** Do you know know what—] Am I supposed to control them? Am I supposed to go find them and like, have good interactions? Like, why is this my job?

Austin: You have all these sliders for what the town is, right? Like the Abstergo— for people don't know Assassin's Creed, Abstergo is like a corporation that's making like player-facing simulations from the Assassin's Creed technology or whatever. And in a couple of the games you play to someone working at their game studio, and so it's the same thing happening in InZOI, where you're playing someone at a computer desk being observed by a cat, watching you run your little town simulation? You're kind of doing a good place is kind of what you're doing, right?

Jack: Yeah. Kind of.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: But like, you— you have all these sliders and decisions to make about like, how often does crime happen in your town? How often do people throw parties in your town or whatever? But like, again, to what end? As far as I can tell, you don't have any—again, it's early access—but you don't have any like meta, you're not being made, given meta goals like reduce crime in the town. That's just a slider you can do. [**Janine:** No.] And you have a character that you're focused on.

Janine: I mean there isn't even— I should say, there aren't even sliders for like how much crime is there. It's like how dirty is it?

Austin: I thought there was a crime one. I thought I saw that one.

Janine: I don't remember a crime one.

Austin: Maybe I'm wrong. But I thought when Tom Walker was playing, that was one of them, but maybe I'm wrong.

Janine: I don't know. I think it's just filth.

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: Well, filth, that takes many, many— in certain cultures, filth actually means the police, so—

Janine: There's also— there's a crime-like career [**Austin:** Right right right.] that you can get to on your phone— on your Samsung phone.

Jack: Or, you get a commendation.

Austin: Oh, or on your LG TV or on your— there's a little bit of product placement—

Janine: Yeah, all your various Samsung computers or your— you got your Hyundai car. All the big chaebols are there because it is a South Korean game. So, yeah.

Jack: I'm— I'm so curious about where this game is going to go because they're— you're right, there is the— it is an early access thing. This game is going to be worked on, it's going to be developed. But at the same time, given their heavy use of small language model and generative AI stuff, so much of the promise of that stuff from people who want to put it in games is kind of like, well, it can finish the game—

Janine: Yeah.

Jack: You know, it can make the game for you, you just have to have the idea. So there's a kind of lack of faith that I'm already feeling, [**Austin:** Right.] that they are going to—

Janine: And there's the other side of that, which is that—and this is the thing that I think is a really interesting question for now and for the future—when a game integrates AI stuff in this sense, again, “AI” in quotes, you know, large language models or, you know, local ones, any whatever. You know, when you're playing an early access game, there's a degree of like, a human could come in here and fix this tomorrow. You don't really have that with AI.

Models can evolve and change and stuff, but when things are running locally, I don't know how much of their AI stuff is like, well, this is mostly how it's going to be, right? So I can't say like, well, the image generation right now just generates garbage that doesn't look at all like it belongs in the world, but maybe in a month it'll be better. I can't say that, like, because that could just be what that system is going to be. [**Austin:** Right, that could be it.] That could just be how that is. So it's like, it's an interesting fucked up kind of thing where it's like, I don't— I'm not seeing a case here for anyone but investors to be excited about how these things are implemented, you know?

Jack: Mhm.

Austin: Yeah. I found the list for control city status. That list is positive slash negative emotion control.

Janine: Oh, right. Yes.

Austin: Civic consciousness.

Janine: Right, I forgot about this.

Austin: Friendships, romantic relationships, business relationships, family relationships, *conversation karma positivity*, conversation karma negativity, city sanitation, fire prevention rate, appliance durability—which is a good one—city safety, which I think is the one that is crime related, health level, dream occurrence rate, and maximum population, and maximum vehicle count. I should love this game. I want to play with those sliders and have them mean something, you know? [**Janine:** I think my worry with that is that—] It does not seem like they do.

Janine: My worry is that what it's gonna be, is that the game is gonna be about controlling one household and then finding the other people in town and having conversations with them and stuff to make their karma better, which sounds mega boring to me. [chuckles]

Austin: That sounds really, really boring. And it actually reminds me of— oh my gosh, what is the name of this game? It was actually just up for— and I'll find it this way, IGF—

Jack: I was just about to bring this up.

Austin: Oh my god, what is it called?

Jack: Is it Place for the Unknown?

Austin: No, it's like Closer the—

Jack and Janine: Closer the Distance.

Austin: Distance, Closer the Distance, which also has a lot in common with The Sims, except it's kind of [**Jack:** The game's cool as hell.] doing all of this in the inverse, instead of trying to use something like an LLM or an SLM to fill in the gaps on you know, particular zoomed-in ideas, or questions, or thoughts that you know, a simulated person is having, Closer the Distance is a game about a very small, particular set of characters. It's like, thirteen people who live in a small village by the sea, and there's a tragedy that hits that village, and you are playing at the beginning of the game, one person, and your starter goal is literally, I want to make people in the town happier, or like make them feel

at ease after this terrible thing has happened. You're being guided by a sort of ghost who can see the entire town, and can read the kind of Sim-style impressions and feelings that people are having.

I mean, as the game continues, you end up getting more of the characters, and they have very particular tasks, like I want to go find the right flowers to pick for the funeral that's coming up. And so you might send them to go talk to people to learn about which flowers might be appropriate, and then go send them out into the hills to go find the flowers. And you have—the whole thing is a Sim-style top-down view of the town, and you can zoom in on people, you can play with the time control in a similar way. It's brilliant and it comes from being handcrafted, [**Janine**: Yeah.] having people work through—I mean, obviously, they might be using other sorts of AI tools in terms of things like animation, right? We already mentioned this, that like, those tools are all over the development tools, and have been for a long time. And they're certainly using old, what we talk about as design AI in terms of setting up scripting and a kind of procedural desires and wants, and all of that stuff that's been in games like The Sims for a long, long, long time and a ton of different games. But it's a great example of taking a swing at some of these ideas, like, what if we, instead of having emoji show up above their heads, we actually had them say like, I am thinking about Laura, right? And like, in this case, it's because someone wrote—

Janine: Or hope he doesn't notice I'm just a guy here.

Austin: Right, sure. I'm saying like, in Closer to the Distance, [**Janine**: Yes.] you can actually do that because someone's actually written ones that are appropriate for the situation, you know? That could just be, “I really want a cigarette right now”. But like, it reflects the fact that the person has like a high stress meter, and they just got into a fight with their wife, and you could make them go take a cigarette, which will lower their stress, but maybe weaken their health score or whatever. Really, really recommend Closer the Distance. It was a real big surprise for me last year, and I think it is like, *terribly* under-represented and underappreciated, so.

Jack: It's by the studio that made Orwell. I didn't know that.

Janine: But you can kind of see a through line there, right?

Austin: For sure.

Jack: Absolutely.

Janine: Like, you can see how you get from A to B there.

Austin: Yes, definitely, a hundred percent. Yeah.

Jack: This intricate, sort of like, system manipulation. Yeah, I should get back and replay Orwell.

Austin: Maybe it's actually—

Janine: That's way more interesting then.

Austin: Yeah, yeah. Anyway, that's InZOI, it sounds like. Any final big thoughts you have on InZOI?

Janine: Um... man, I— you know, it's wild to me that The Sims hasn't spawned more stuff considering how significant it has been for so long?

Jack: Yeah!

Janine: For like a quarter of a century, [**Jack** chuckles] it's been its own thing and its own lane, and people have had so many problems with it, and yet there's nothing else and we keep going back to it. Like, I— all you have to do is make that but not be EA, in a sense.

Austin: Uh huh. Well, is there another one—

Jack: Yeah.

Janine: Like, if you don't need the AI stuff, you don't need— yeah, there's a whole— there's a bunch that are supposed to be coming out, but like, there's one that was like, got canceled, and another one that's—

Jack: Yeah, Paradox's one got canceled.

Janine: Yeah, yeah. So there's—

Austin: Oh, that's the one, right. Yes. God.

Janine: People have been trying. But [sighs] that, yeah.

Jack: And it seems like Maxis are about to shit the bed in a major way with Project René.

Austin: Oh I haven't seen this at all.

Jack: So they're talking about like a new kind of Sims experience, and they've been talking about it for a long time. And the first— I don't remember whether or not it leaked, or whether or not it was released as like, a little teaser?

Janine: I want to say there was like a leak or something because it came from like, there's not going to be a Sims 5.

Jack: Yeah, it's— it just seems like a really mobile focused, like small scale— **[Austin:** I see.] I would also put absolute money that it's not going to be long before we start seeing Maxis introduce generative AI to their Sims stuff?

Janine: Yeah.

Jack: I think that that is the way the wind is blowing. And if you're listening to this thinking, man, I really want to make my own version of the Sims, go. Now is your time. [chuckles]

Janine: [chuckles] I— you know, I always want to be like, your thing's in early access, you know, good luck, godspeed. Have— you know, do your best, I'm rooting for you. But there is like a really strong conflict under the surface of InZOI in terms of like, just what it is doing **[Austin:** Right.] and what it wants to be **[Jack:** Yeah.] that needs to get resolved or else I don't know if it'll be something. I don't know.

Austin: Well—

Jack: Oof.

Austin: Sorry, were you going to say something, Jack?

Jack: No, I was just going to say oof.

Austin: Yeah, oof. Big oof. On that note, let's take a break, get all the oofs out of our system, **[Janine:** Never.] and then we'll come right back to talk about some more— oh, you're right. There will always be more oofs. That's what we can promise.

Janine: There will always be more oofs.

Austin: We will be right back.

[music sting]

[music end]

Break [01:12:54]

Jack: I always wish for luck before the podcast.

Janine: I do that but only for—

Jack: But not for Friends at the Table dice rolls. [chuckles]

Janine: [chuckles] Yeah, I was going to say, it's only for this one, it's not for the one where luck would actually mean anything or matter.

Jack: No, no.

Austin: Ohhh, where luck matters deeply, yeah, I getcha.

Janine: Mhm. When people don't realize, because you know, it's brand new, we haven't explained the mechanics of this podcast yet, [**Austin:** Right, right.] is that before any of us makes a point, we have to roll dice.

Austin: Right, to see how well you do.

Janine: And if we get less than a 10, then we say it badly.

Austin: Yeah, you stumble over it.

Jack: And then we have to go and break one piece of crockery in our house.

Austin: That's right, yeah.

Janine: Yep.

Jack: It's a very punishing podcast. I've sort of like, Pavlov's dog myself into feeling bad about sitting down and talking about video games. And I have even more crockery.

Austin: You should Pavlov's dog you into feeling good about it.

Jack: This is actually secretly—

Janine: Pavlov's dog of in.

Jack: [laughs]

Austin: Why do they call it Pavlov's dog in when you— no, why do they call it Pavl-ov's dog when you Pavl-*in* the dog?

Jack: Woah...

Janine: [laughs]

Austin: Pavlov the bell food.

Janine: Mhm.

Austin: Yum.

Janine: Wow.

[music sting]

[music ends]

Austin: All right, we are back, and we are headed across the pond to Great Britain. I'm not gonna do a funny, fake British voice, because I'm really bad at them. Like, I'm not even good enough to do a fake funny one, you know?

Jack: Yeah, I've heard you do it several times.

Austin: That's such a nightmare.

Janine: [giggles]

Jack: And some years— I lose some years from my life.

Austin: Sometimes you're in a situation where you have to do one, like, [**Jack:** Oh yeah.] legally, and so I'll do it. [**Jack:** Legally, absolutely.] But otherwise, I try to avoid it. I don't wanna—

Janine: It's like when you go to the airport and the TSA flags you down and says, do a British accent right now.

Austin: That's right. Or else— and you go, okay. You say, alright. I was like, "all right, governor."

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: [in a british accent] "All right, guvnah!", see, and then you do it.

Jack: "All right, guvnah!", yeah.

Austin: The Windscale Fire [laughs] of 1957.

Jack: A real fire. [**Austin:** A real fire.] A real nuclear disaster.

Austin: That we never talk about. [**Jack:** In America.] I didn't know about this one over here. Yeah, they don't— that's not the one we talk about over here, you know?

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: We get Three Mile Island and we get Chernobyl, and that is it. And we get the dropping of the atomic bombs, but let me tell you, in American schools, that is not taught as a disaster, that is taught as *at best* a necessary evil. [**Jack:** Sheesh.] Normally, the best strategic choice we could have made at the time, said in solemn voice as if it was true at all. Fucked up.

Jack: Right.

Austin: Anyway, Windscale.

Atomfall [01:15:50]

Jack: We're here to talk about Atomfall, a game that, on the— the easiest way to talk about it is to describe it as a cross between Stalker and Fallout.

Austin: Yes. A lot easier to get here than with the Blue Prince, where I think every— like Janine said, every comparison might actually detract, I think there's a pretty good description of Atomfall.

Janine: Yeah— not detract, but confuse, confuse the point.

Austin: Confuse, you're right. Confuse, you're right, yes. Whereas I think that that gives you a pretty straightforward— and also I would say it's worth remembering it's made by Rebellion, which is a fairly— it's not tiny, you know, I think it's hundreds of people at this point. But it is not a giant AAA studio with giant AAA budgets. It is the folks behind the Sniper Elite series, you know, in the past, they've done like the Alien versus Predator games, they've done a lot of stuff that has the— I've always felt the Britishness in their games? In the sense that like— I mean, I guess they did famously did Rogue Trooper, which is like a 2000 AD comic, right? And so it's there. This is the first game that I've played of theirs that is explicitly set in the UK, I think. [**Jack:** Yeah.] Maybe there's some Sniper Elite training levels in the UK or something, but I don't know.

Jack: The Sniper Elite games have always been, I think, broadly underrated, especially latterly, Rebellion are doing some really interesting things in those games in terms of—in a similar, but not quite the same way, approach that like IO takes with the modern Hitman stuff—of building these big clockwork, massive clockwork levels that they send you through. The later Sniper Elite games have sort of developed a really interesting lane that they have been moving through pretty consistently in terms of like, big, expressive clockwork levels, except rather than switching disguises, you're like finding vantage points, you're trying to manipulate enemies through the use of the sniper rifle. I

think Rebellion has at their heart, some really interesting mechanical design. And you can kind of see some of this coming through in Atomfall.

Austin: With that context, it actually makes a lot of sense.

Jack: Yeah, it's worth saying off the top that Atomfall is accessible on Xbox Game Pass, but Microsoft has recently become a priority target for the BDS movement. [**Austin:** Yep.] So they and us are encouraging you to boycott Microsoft services, things like Xbox Game Pass, things like Microsoft Office, as well as their like, big broad games companies, Activision Blizzard, Bethesda, games like Candy Crush, Minecraft, World of Warcraft, things like that.

Austin: Also, because it's BDS and not just B, it's worth saying too you know, that there is also a larger push for, hey, if you are someone who makes decisions at a university or at a company, around what tools to use or what servers to use or you know, what Cloud computing sources to use.

Janine: Microsoft Teams, for instance.

Austin: Teams, their cloud computer, Azure, like all that stuff, there is a larger campaign there, I'll put in the show notes— I'll put a link to the great Paste article by Grace Benfell, which kind of digs into all of that stuff. I'll also say, I think that the BDS kind of write up, or their own internal communications around this have been really consistent and really like, grounded in the sense that like, they understand we all live in the world? I think I read an interview with one rep from them that was like, listen, you're gonna be on Teams, you didn't decide to be on Teams, you know? You don't have to quit your job because you all use Teams. Hey, you already bought something from Microsoft— you already bought Halo Combat Evolved for your original Xbox. We are not asking you to burn the disc. We were saying, hey, please boycott you know, Game Pass. Hey, don't go buy a new game from Microsoft right now, which you don't have to do with Atomfall, Atomfall is published by Rebellion. It's on Game Pass, but it's not a Game Pass exclusive or something like that, I bought it on Steam.

Janine: Worth— worth noting about Game Pass, it's one of the few services where if you cancel your subscription part way, they will refund you the remaining amount. So you can choose to either cancel next billing cycle, or you can cancel immediately and then get some portion of whatever you just paid back.

Austin: Yeah, absolutely. So— so yeah, Atomfall, which you can get on Steam or I believe on— is it on PS5 and stuff now?

Jack: It's on the consoles, yeah. [**Austin:** Okay, makes sense.] But not Xbox. I mean, it is on Xbox, but don't buy it on Xbox, we just talked about that.

Austin: We just had this conversation. [laughs]

Janine: [chuckles]

Jack: Yeah, I mean, to your point, Austin, of you don't talk about Windscale very much, the first thing that I thought about when I saw Atomfall was announced, when I saw that, you know, it is a story about a quarantine zone being established around a disaster in a nuclear power plant in the north of England? The first thing I thought to myself was, oh, that looks like the Windscale fire. And it was with a real kind of like, sinking feeling in my stomach and also the sort of like anticipatory rush of realizing that they're actually doing this, that the game opens and says, this is the Windscale plant.

A lot of the stuff that I am most interested about with this game is its specificity in its setting? I feel like especially, you know, Britain makes this kind of media as well, but a lot of the ways Americans will characterize Britain in fiction is through a very narrow narrative lens. The like “what-ho, old chap” England, the “how you doing, governor”, England, and that is all over this game. But there is also—

Austin: I was going to say, unfortunately, Jack, the thing you're talking about is all over this game, just to be clear.

Janine: Yeah, this is— this is why I was like, Jack, you need to play some of this before we talk about it, because I need to hear your thoughts.

Austin: Yeah. But you're also right, I think, in what you're about to say.

Jack: There is a kind of hyper-specificity in a lot of what is going on here that goes beyond, this is just a game set in Britain. Specifically, be kind of like, hyper-appealing both to the internal and external markets, this is a game set in Britain of the 50s.

But it goes further. Its tone establishes itself really quickly as part of a long tradition of the British techno-thriller, which I kind of think as coming out of the British sci-fi fantasy space in the 50s, and developing into its own very distinct subgenre. I think of the work of John Winton, who was a British sci-fi and— primarily sci-fi author, who wrote books like *The Day of the Triffids*, which is about a plant invasion of the UK. Or *The Midwich Cuckoos*, which is about a town that suddenly cuts off all contact from the outside world, planes that fly over it crash. And then he made a story called *The Kraken Wakes*, which is about an invasion of Britain by creatures from the sea.

And Wyndham's work, among other things, is really defined by its quiet, parochial spirit, that nevertheless gets increasingly desperate, and increasingly sinister, as the small-c conservative world of Britain is torn apart by something terrible. You could talk about this in a history of conservative sci-fi—and I think that Atomfall is absolutely within that—but I want to call out specifically Atomfall's place as a British techno thriller of the 50s.

This is perhaps most legible to Americans through Michael Crichton, an American author who imported this style into the US in the late 60s, with novels like *The Andromeda Strain*, which is also about like, science going wrong. And Stephen King picks up a lot of Michael Crichton—if you think about the way Stephen King's novel *The Stand* begins, with an outbreak of a virus inside a facility, and the very prosaic, straightforward way that the workers in this facility are now faced with this kind of a disaster. This is—

Austin: And in contrast with the sort of global techno-thrillers of Clancy, right?

Jack: Absolutely. And also the large scale, state of the world post-apocalypse stories that the Red Scare in America produces. [**Austin:** Right right.] The post-apocalypses of Britain are much more concerned about with like, what is going on in this village?

[**Austin:** Yeah, uh huh.] It's still coming from a kind of anti-communist and Red Scare paranoia, but it is being filtered out through a particular kind of British cultural production.

Austin: Right. You know, the thing that I think is interesting here is like, the American, you know, imaginary produces stories about communist—not just infiltration, but eventual total invasion—where the— where you have to be— you were rendered freedom fighter against a newly established red, you know, infiltrated or red occupying army in contrast to— or that is the threat and the threat is still outside, and then when it hits, it's going to hit big, right? We're going to have nuclear war and then we're going to have occupation, get ready.

Whereas this is a game where the British army or an element of the British army is holding the secure center of the village, and is in control. And the anxiety is often not just about, oh, is there something bad happening just beyond the village wall, but it's about the relationship between the sort of bureaucratic national army, which is ostensibly on your side, and— [**Jack:** But isn't.] and then the other forces inside of the village, like the vicar, or the baker, or the you know, the townspeople in general. [**Janine:** Mhm.] And I think that that is not something that pops up so often in American post-apocalyptic or kind of zone fiction.

Jack: Right. The game is structured across these sort of—and we'll talk a bit more about the mechanical structure of the game in a second, because I think it both really

tries to set itself apart using that and at the same time sort of reproduces a lot of fairly standard mechanical things within that—the game is set across four-ish, maybe five if you're counting the Interchange.

Austin: Depends on how you're counting, I think, yeah. The Interchange is its own region, it's big by the end of that game.

Jack: Yeah, open worlds around the ruined power plant, and each one of these little open world hubs explores a particular kind of British techno-thriller— British like, thriller/horror imagery. You begin with the sort of like ruined mines— this is another thing that's all over all British cultural production. This is a game about class, in a major way. Sometimes it succeeds, sometimes it fumbles, but in the grand tradition of British cultural production, it is talking about class with a kind of register and intensity that you don't see in quite the same way in American media. The opening level is a series of like, slate mines, that have first been closed down and then sort of like, subsumed into the scientific project of the Windscale farm— sorry, the Windscale power plant. I was going to call it like a wind farm because it's Windscale—

Austin: Yeah, cause Windscale, yeah, uh huh.

Jack: Then you have the sort of like folk horror of the Wicker Man, of Witchfinder General, of The Blood on Satan's Claw, right? You know, these like 70s British folk horror as you encounter druids in Casterfell Woods.

Then you have the classic, “there is something gone wrong in the village”? This is something that you don't see a ton of in games, I think Chinese Room's— Chinese Room made a game called Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, [**Janine:** Mhm.] which is about a similar but not quite exactly the same disaster that is happening in Shropshire, a different region of England. But it's all over other media. The “there is something gone wrong in the village” is a classic.

And then finally, the horror of the soldiers on the moors, this idea that there is like a military base out there on the moors, that something is sinister— there is sinister experimentation, or the soldiers are taking liberties. You can see this sort of being reproduced in, among other things, stuff like 28 Days Later, this idea that there are soldiers out there who are acting on their own— either their own sort of like base impulses, or the sort of horror of someone has given orders [**Austin:** Right.] to these soldiers that is against what we are aiming for.

And this is what I talk about when I talk about the game's British specificity beyond all the other stuff that we have in here. We have soldiers wearing cricket pads and police helmets. We have people saying bloody hell constantly. [**Austin:** *Constantly.*] We have

people saying things like, “let's not have a barney” [**Janine** chuckles] as they approach you.

Austin: Uh huh. We have ‘vicar’, importantly, a word that doesn't get used over here.

Jack: We have ‘vicar’.

Janine: There are some— there are some Britishisms used in this game that I haven't thought about since I was doing a degree, you know? Like—

Jack: Well, I really appreciate that as well, because sometimes they really go for it with regionalisms of Cumbria, of the Lake District, [**Janine:** Yeah.] which is the real region where the game is set. And I was really impressed when the game began and we had like, region-accurate accents, not just the accents of the north, [**Janine:** Yeah.] accents of Cumbria.

And then very quickly, the game sort of began to— and you know, you encounter Cumbrian accents throughout the game, but very quickly the game began to enter a really interesting regional grab bag. [**Austin** and **Janine** chuckle] Between you know, We have Yorkshire accents as opposed to Cumbrian accents, we have Dales accents starting to show up. Then we have a bunch of Welsh accents starting to show up— Scottish accents. Of course, when we get into the Protocol—which is what the army calls themselves—we have those cut-glass British accents. But I mean, that is part of the class play [**Austin:** Class stuff, yeah.] that's going on here, so that makes sense to me.

We have enemies, outlaw enemies wearing Border Morris rags, they're like the um, ragged jackets of Morris dancers, except Border Morris is not danced in Cumbria. And it's very interesting seeing this sort of like, stuff that you wouldn't see in a straightforward, we're just gonna do a pastiche of Britain— but also kind of misapplied, kind of like ladled into the soup.

Janine: I wonder, like—

Jack: I'm gonna be honest, I find this deeply charming.

Janine: There's— there's— so there's like, a really deep, sad history of mining disasters in the UK too? The couple that come to mind right now are ones that were in Wales. And also there is the whole thing about like, how— how Wales used to be like legally separate? So people who were guilty of crimes or whatever would sometimes flee back to Wales to like, kind of get away— get— you know, get out from under the thumb of the authorities or like, people would elope, things like that, there's some weirdness and stuff there. So you mentioning that makes me think like, is there— like, I want to see—I often

say this—I want to see their whiteboard. **[Jack: Oh, yeah.]** I want to see like, did they pick this and put, make this person like this because this person has this connection to this thing. You know, it feels like a game that's like full of that stuff? **[Austin: Mhm.]** And also just in the fact that it is so much more colorful than the average apocalypse game?

Jack: Oh, it's extraordinary, this thing is so green, and—

Janine: That's another thing, it's like, I want to see— I want to see what they were— I want to see their— their notes.

Jack: Yeah. What you end up doing is after a delightfully brief tutorial— the tutorial takes maybe 41 seconds to complete as a man—

Austin: Hey buddy, wake up, there is— it's bad out there! Help me. Okay, bye!

Janine: [chuckles]

Jack: England's fucked. Bye! And then you exit and you're just like, well sh— it's great, he says—and this is like right out of the techno-thriller as well—he has a note on him that says like, get to the Interchange, the secret is in the Interchange. And then you're booted out of the tutorial with no idea where the Interchange is, really *what* it is, how you find it. And of course, the moment you start exploring, and you start finding clues, and clues start falling upon your head like beautiful autumn things. [chuckles]

Austin: Yeah, this was one of the things that was like, pitched to me as one of the big difference makers between this and something else, a thing that sets it apart, is the quest system in this game is not a simple mark— we will mark a point on your map, go to it. There are some occasions where your map will get updated with the name of a place or something like that. There's a lot—

Jack: A little hand drawing of a crashed convoy.

Austin: Yeah, but there's a lot of— yeah, I heard that there was a cave at the north of Skethermoor where some of the— what's the occupying or what's the army called again? The Protocol. **[Jack: The Protocol.]** The Protocol sent some people, we haven't heard back yet, right? And they're like, oh okay, well, I can go to Skethermoor, I can walk to Skethermoor and I can just head north and see what I find. And there's that sort of thing happening at every scale of play, both the kind of wide, I have to go to a different map, but also like you're in the village and you find the note that says, such and such you know, was spotted going into the basement on the west side of some build— some ruined building on the west side of town. And so you go and do that, and— it's not marked, you go find it, right? There's a lot of “you go find it” happening in the clues of this game.

Janine: Just find the hollow; we told you where it was.

Austin: And then eventually— right, and then there's like the wider version of it, which is the Interchange mystery. What happened in the facility? How was that tied to Windscale if it was at all, all of that— [**Jack:** Yeah, because it becomes—] and we skipped one other thing, which is there is one other major clue giver in this game.

Jack: Are we talking about our dear friend on the telephone?

Austin: We're talking about our dear friend on the telephone.

Jack: Oh my god. I was playing—

Austin: [deep, grating voice] *Mr. Telephone calls you and he says—*

Jack: [also in deep voice] *Mr. Telephone—*

Austin: *Don't you trust anyone but me.*

Jack: *Oberon... must die—* I said, I was playing this with a friend and as we exited the first bunker, which compared to Fallout's like, mid-century you know sci-fi vaults, these bunkers are just like brutalist concrete that are full of—

Austin: Yeah. The— the Fallout vault opening is in this game in a very funny way with the Interchange entrances.

Jack: It's so good.

Janine: It's behind— it's like a World War II bomb shelter.

Austin: That makes sense. Yes, that makes perfect sense.

Jack: We exited and we found an incongruous red telephone box. I don't know why that box was there. The box in the village looks lovely, [**Austin** chuckles] that's where you put them, rather than in— just outside, [chuckles] in the middle of nowhere. [**Austin:** In the middle of the quarry, yeah.] And the phone started ringing, and I looked at my friends and I said, we're going to pick this phone up, and it's either going to be something delivered menacingly down the line, or it's going to be a fellow saying, [nasally British accent] *"I do seem to have gotten stuck in the North—"*

Janine and Austin: [chuckles]

Jack: *"Bring me a bandage."* And we picked it up and it said, [deep voice] *"Oberon must die"*, [Austin: Yeah.] and we both punched the air, you know? [chuckles] It was a really good moment.

Austin: You'll hear from your friend on the phone, basically every time you complete a major quest or meet another major character.

Jack: Yep. It's lovely. He's increasingly sinister. It becomes clear very quickly as soon as you see—

Austin: Please— please be specific, because he'll be like, [deep voice] *you're going to need more batteries. Get more batteries.*

Jack and Janine: [chuckles]

Austin: Okay, I'm on it!

Janine: How do you know how many batteries I have?

Austin: [chuckling] Yeah, he's watching!

Janine: Mmm.

Jack: Oh my god, Janine, you say that, but let me tell you, the internal battery economy of the Interchange, which is the sort of bunker set up to— i's not terribly clear to me yet, I haven't finished this game. I've got some clues as to what is happening in the Interchange, but I cannot say with full confidence— what I can say with confidence is that it has an internal battery economy that would make god proud.

Austin: [chuckles] The battery thing, both—

Janine: I'm famously a fan of batteries.

Jack: Oh, famously.

Austin: The batteries both sold me on the game, and then I think because of overcoming the battery economy, have made me go, okay, I've got what I need from this, unfortunately. But [Jack: chuckles] yeah, they are important. They open doors for you. They power generators, which sometimes do things like open doors, I guess. And they're very rare.

Jack: Sometimes they turn the power on. But the thing that has had the power turned on is broken.

Austin: Yes.

Jack: This is a particularly funny poke in the eye that the game will do occasionally where you're like, "yes, I powered it up!" and you'll look over it and it's, you know, sparking or whatever. Yeah, and this kind of like, this strange clue or lead system is enjoyable. It's not world-shattering—

Austin: It's not revolutionary. This is not, oh, I can't wait to see other games learn from this, or like incorporate something like this necessarily, [**Jack:** No, it's perfectly enjoyable mechanic.] but it's a nice way to engage with a game like this.

Jack: When it works best, it produces situations like this, where you know, you hear that a convoy has blown up, and you go and the convoy might have a clue as to where the Interchange is, because in the opening 30 minutes of the game, they need to get you to the fucking Interchange.

Austin: Says you.

Jack: So they are just handing out—

Janine: [chuckles]

Austin: I took me five or six hours— I did so much stuff before the Interchange.

Jack: Oh really?

Austin: Yeah.

Jack: I did stuff before the Interchange, but they were— I was getting clues as to the location of the Interchange everywhere I went.

Austin: The problem is I was getting clues like, you know, I don't remember the actual name of this character, but it was like Kalishnikov is in the eastern part of Skethermoor, [**Jack** chuckles] in a single you know, townhouse or whatever, and I'm like, well, I got to go there. That's what I'm interested in. I'm going to find out who these other fuckers are. There's a lot of that— and I will say that I think structurally, the clue system stretches the available map.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Not in the sense that it applies to the whole map, because obviously it should do that, but in the sense that this is a game without fast travel. This is a game—

Jack: Sort of.

Austin: Right. I guess the Interchange itself is sort of—

Jack: The sewers.

Austin: Yeah... [hemming and hawing] yeah... [**Janine** chuckles] they don't save you that much time. I don't know, I—

Jack: And you have to buy the keys of them from The Lady.

Austin: Do you? I don't think I did that. I use the sewers a lot— I don't know. We've had different experiences with this game, Jack.

Janine: I can't believe you broke in and used the sewers illegally.

Jack: This is what the clue system is good—

Austin: I just broke into the sewers, yeah. Though this is not a game with traditional— you don't have a set of stats or a set of skills that you're putting points into. There are skills that you can learn, or I guess more like abilities that you can learn via books and you read the book that unlocks a new set, [**Jack:** And drugs.] and then eventually you get your plasmid point or whatever to— they're not actually plasmids, but like that style of like—

Jack: Performance enhancements.

Austin: Performance enhancing vials that you can consume to give you extra ability points. But because the clues lead you— because it's not, you open up a map and you can see that you have the same— you have six quests all on the northern side of the village map, you're not like, okay, I'll just go do all of those in a row. I'll go boop, boop, boop, boop, boop and then I've done them.

Instead, you're like, oh, and then I guess I'll check in over here. And then you check in over there and that says, oh, well, you want to go back to Slatten... Slattenmire or whatever, the slate farm place—*the slate farm place*—the slate quarry place, Slatten Dale. And you're spending a lot of time traveling in this game. This is a game about walking from place to place a lot, and encountering you know, troops on the way and maybe you're in good graces with them so they're not going to fight you this time. But if you perhaps, for instance, betray them in the big prison, suddenly they'll fight you on sight, for instance.

Janine: Why would you do that?

Jack: And the combat is bad.

Austin: I... I really like the first five hours of the combat in this game, the first seven hours of combat in this game.

Jack: Because it's like, sweaty and panicked and odd.

Austin: That's exactly right. The first fight that you have when you come out where you could have— I guess I come out of the quarry or out of the bunker towards the quarry. I listen to the Oberon must die guy on the phone. Then I go, what's going on over here? And I walk into a trap that blew me up or stab me with spikes or something. And I went, okay, [**Jack** chuckles] load up my game, go back in and see what's going on over here. And you get the kind of bandit camp, they've taken over part of the mining area. They've kind of blocked the entrance with two double-decker buses. And you begin doing the—

Jack: I haven't seen this, this is good.

Austin: You begin doing the thing that you do in many of these games, which is like slowly, you know, crouch-walking your way through an enemy base, looting everything they have, trying to get yourself ready for just in case something goes wrong. Something goes wrong and you end up killing 12 people.

And in that first fight, it was so sweaty. Sweaty is exactly the right word. You're very vulnerable at the beginning of this game. This is not a game with an explicit like, armor system or something, so you're not like, well now I have the flak jacket, you know. I believe that there are some abilities that make you a little hardier. There must be because I've gotten to the point in the game where I'm just, I feel like I'm invincible. And I apologize because it's been like two or three weeks since I put my— most of the time that I put into it into it. But that first fight is like, okay, every shot has to count. I have maybe a rifle that's a single shot rifle, or I have a revolver— I think I said to Janine the other day while playing was like, this is a game that makes the revolver feel like a historical invention.

Jack: Oh, it's so good.

Austin: It's like, oh! I can shoot six times in a row without reloading. This is the most important thing in the entire game. [**Janine:** Yeah.] And eventually, of course, you have an assault rifle and you have pistols.

Janine: Today it's the Snapdragon CPU. Back then it was a six shooter.

Austin: That's right, exactly.

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: So that first fight was like that. And I had a bunch of other fights that were like that. And I think through— as you begin to explore the Interchange and start to fight different types of creatures and people, some of that stuff remains kind of sweaty and weird? But there came a point where between the— there's a very simple crafting system in this game, and repair and upgrade system. I don't know if you got to this stuff, but you can find a book that teaches you how to upgrade your guns? And once you do that, you're just doing so much damage with so little ammo.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: And I know I did not do much of the melee stuff. Maybe melee remains kind of sweaty and fun? But by the point I got to where I am in the game, I have not had a fight that has meant anything since the one time where—and this is the battery thing for me—I went into a military base in Skethermoor— or Sketh— Skethmoor? I don't know.

Jack: Skethermoor.

Austin: Skethermoor, okay. And there's like a military base that's on the map that I was able to get into because I was on good terms with the captain of the village, the commander of the village, because I maybe sold out the vicar to him instead of selling out the person who was maybe actually doing some shit that I should have told him about. But fuck that guy, he's basically a cop. And fuck the vicar, the vicar is also basically a self-appointed cop. Anyway, so I'm walking around Skethermoor, I find this space—

Jack: Austin's discovering Britain.

Janine: God's cop, discovering God's cop also.

Austin: God's cop— yeah, uh huh. Self-appointed God's cop. And so I go into the base and there are you know, 25 of British— Britain's best boys in there, who proceeded to die as they ran into the kitchen I was hiding in. And I shot them one by one as they opened and closed the door. Like a Hitman run go bad.

Jack: They do that in Britain too.

Austin: Uh huh. And then, like, I, you know— they got their hits in and I was down to basically a third of my health, maybe a quarter of my health? And then I left the bunker, you know, with my battery in tow, I had, you know, big, big rewards from down there— I think I even got enough of their various good rifles to build the best version of the rifle. And I opened the, you know, I climbed the ladder, I went through the load screen and go back up to Skethermoor. And there was a big robot who went, "Halt, intruder!", and

instantly killed me. [**Jack** chuckles] And my save was from right at the bottom of the ladder.

And so I had to learn how to kill those robots with no health. And then I did. And it took me 20 minutes and it was a really fun little challenge. And from that point forward, I have been invincible. [**Jack** laughs] Because if the big robot can't fucking kill me or can't like frustrate me enough to make me try a different tack, I it's just not— [**Jack**: Yeah.] you know, these little zombies aren't going to do it. And the occupation soldiers and the druids aren't going to do it either. I've killed so many druids, Jack. I feel so bad, but I've killed so many druids. They just keep coming. So yes, I do agree with you. The combat is not—

Janine: They're kind of like nature's cops though. So it's—

Austin: They certainly believe they are.

Jack: They are not!

Janine: [laughs]

Austin: Uhhh, have you talked to these ones?

Jack: I have not met these druids yet.

Austin: They think that they're nature's cops.

Jack: Okay, alright alright.

Austin: But yeah, so—

Jack: I'm just taking issue with druids.

Austin: Generally, yeah. I really wish they did more with the druids, is what I will say. I had a whole quest line that was like, go to the druid camp and get a thing? And then if you get the thing, you end up getting to be in their good graces after that? Or you get like a token that's like, oh, you can carry this and they won't attack you anymore. It's like, I just killed 700 of them.

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: What do you mean they won't attack me anymore? I think that there's like a limit to the structure of the game in moments like that, which is fine. Like I'm not— it is not a big AAA game and I've had a really good time with it. So at that point, I was not like, well, fuck this game then. I was mostly like, okay, fine. Okay, this is what we're doing.

We're doing one of these. We're doing the, "I now have the special, don't kill me even though I've killed 700—even though I've basically destroyed your entire cult—we're cool, still". But yes, I think at that point, the combat fell apart for me. But I really did like the bits of the game that were difficult, where I was making hard choices about carrying capacity, about spending ammo or not, about trying to maintain good ranges.

And I think that the guns feel fine! Like I think that they feel pretty good. I think it's a game where a headshot— also, oh my god, the sound design in this game.

Jack: Oh my god. Austin, when you said they do the Fallout vault door opening, I like prickled a bit and I couldn't figure out why. The reason I prickled is that the Interchange doors opening make a sound that is more frightening than anything has ever made in Fallout.

Austin: There's a more scary sound in the Interchange that's not meant to be, I think— well, maybe it is. I think maybe it is. I jump every time I walk down one of the hallways that has the like cleansing spray? The like decontaminations sprayer?

Jack: Oh yes!

Austin: And it goes *BRRRRHH!*, and I go *wuuhhh!* Every time. Every time.

Jack: The sound design on the weapons is great.

Austin: They are the Sniper Elite people. When the bullet hits the head, you hear it.

Jack: Yes.

Austin: It's gross.

Jack: Yeah, I think I really, this is not a game without its problems and we have been enumerating them as well as we've been enumerating its successes. I can overlook the majority of them because of the delight I feel to be playing an apocalyptic game set somewhere other than America or a racist caricature of the Middle East.

Austin: [chuckles] Yes.

Janine: Yeah.

Jack: You know, walking through slate mines that have been constructed like slate mines, or like dry stone walls, or a bizarre simulacra of a Cumbrian village, this stuff is entertaining to me in a way that it doesn't often get to be? And sometimes that entertainment is feeling, you know, my teeth grating as I hear just another awful like, [in

an British accent] *“Bloody hell, what's all this then?”* from somebody. But at other times it's me going, oh my god, I didn't—I have not seen a game that does this before.

Austin: I will say the places where it misses for me narratively, are where it feels like it is doing the thing that the Fallout games will do, in terms of one little enclosed story—and not even all of them. I think there's a pretty good one about the baker and her husband—I think it's the baker and her husband in the village. But like, I came to a manor where there's you know, some member of the aristocracy who you know, was living life to the fullest before the accident and before everything was shut down. And now she is— she believes that her family is still alive, and her butler is still alive, but she is clearly, you know, she's lost it.

Jack: Doing a sort of Miss Havisham type thing.

Austin: A hundred percent doing a Miss Havisham type thing. I mean, way worse than a Miss Havisham—I would love a Miss Havisham thing compared to this, right?

Janine: Like a Great Gardens kind of thing?

Jack: Mmm.

Austin: It's literally like, she thinks—you can convince her that you are her butler, so she'll give you the key to go loot the place outside, you know?

Jack: This is Fallout.

Austin: That's what I'm saying. [**Jack:** Yeah.] And that is the moment where it's weakest, is where it is aping that style of play, instead of doing the much more interesting stuff it's doing with its clue system, and it's kind of like all the different stuff that you can get up to with the little inter-politicking of the village and stuff like that, which feels a little more distinct.

Jack: Or just like the nuts and bolts of the mystery—less the what is going on here on the macro scale, but all the scientists have names, and they are talking about what has been happening to various different scientists, much like—not quite with the intensity of the, Arkane Prey—but there is a bit of this where you can track the passage of the scientists on their flight or their course of actions. Some scientists will talk about others being kidnapped, and you can find them or find their bodies later on.

Austin: Or their weird obsessions with different projects happening and like, “hey, you know, I warned her against this, she did it anyway”. And then you go back and you find the log that is like, “I can't believe she warned me about this,” you know, “I know what

I'm doing". That style of stuff actually does work pretty well here. Because it's not— because it isn't laid out super cleanly and you're piecing it together yourself.

Jack: You're saying, was that the person from— I did the whole bit with the convoy and, you know, solved what I believed to be the initial mystery of the convoy, and then picked up a note elsewhere that clued me into the fact that somebody had survived the convoy, and that was great. That was this really good moment of like, oh, I thought I had essentially closed off the quest, I'd put it down. But now there's a survivor and I can go and talk to them. Or, you know, that stuff's really interesting to me.

Austin: There are other ways in which it is extremely not like Fallout, like the fact that there are, you know, 15 talky NPCs in the entire world, right?

Jack: Mhm.

Austin: Generally speaking, there are like non-named villagers and soldiers and druids. And then sometimes you'll meet like—

Jack: Carl.

Austin: Mother— yeah, or Mother Iago, the Witch of the Woods or whatever, right? And like that is— and Carl will have a quest for you, and the Witch of the Woods will have a quest for you, and you'll do that quest and that is kind of it. And that I think is a really solid way of scaling to what the budget for this game was.

And it doesn't not work, you know what I mean? Like, this is part of what reminds me of Stalker, where there are a handful of named important characters inside of various towns and stuff.

Jack: R.I.P. to Wolf.

Austin: Right, yes. But there are also just like the folks with the kind of proc gen names, the other many Stalkers and the bandits and stuff like that, who don't necessarily have anything for you, but you could talk to theoretically and just get some loose intel from or something. But here it's just like, there's also villagers in the village, but then there's the captain, the vicar, the various shop keeps, you know stuff like that. That works pretty well for me.

Where I think this game works the best is where its kind of exploration and survival systems can interact to put you in tricky places, like you come out of the bunker and there's a robot that wants to kill you. Or, I went deep into an Interchange place once, I won't give away too many specific details but like, it looked different than the rest of the Interchange in a big dramatic way. It had a different set of enemy types than the rest of

the Interchange, including the stuff that I've already said like zombies, right. There's a different stuff happening in this part of the Interchange. There are parts of the Interchange that very much have the sort of Bioshock-y like, oh, and then this wing is the blank wing.

Jack: Medical.

Austin: Medical, exactly. Energy or whatever— power plant, whatever it is. And the— I went into this place, and on the way in, I had to pass through a place that did a burst of negative— like a debuff, and the damage over time. Or actually, it wasn't the damage over time, it was like, while I was moving through the space, I just took damage. And I made it through, and I explored the whole place, and I got what I needed from there— there was a particular quest item I needed from in there. And I killed the enemies that I could kill that were in there, and I got ready to leave, and I went through the little space that got me into the zone, and I fucking died. And I went, shit, did I soft lock myself here?

And I did another pass at the whole place, and realized I could build— I could make— I could craft a damage-resistance potion or whatever. Was able to use that to get through with just the tiniest hair of health [**Jack:** That's good stuff.] back into the rest, and that's really great.

Now, is there a world where I couldn't have found that, and I would have literally soft locked my game? Maybe. I haven't gone to look, but I think it's probably possible. But instead, I had this great moment of being like, oh hell yeah— I mean, I could have loaded an older save is what I could have done, right? If worse came to worse. But instead, I was like holy shit, like I just got out of that place, you know, through the skin of my teeth, and now I know all this extra stuff about this place that recasts some of the other stuff I've known, and like, who am I trusting and all of that, what Oberon is. And so, you know, all of that I think, when it works, it works really well.

Jack: Can I talk about the weird little animals briefly?

Austin: Please talk about the weird little animals.

Janine: That's good.

Jack: You know, when you go into a cave in a video game, and bats fly out of the cave, and they're basically like a particle effect.

Austin: Oh yeah, fucking— yeah, uh huh.

Jack: Yeah, I saw the bats come out of the cave. I went, they're a little particle effect, then the bats kicked the shit out of me.[wheezes]

Janine: [chuckles] Yeah.

Austin: Did you go on up to the church?

Jack: No, not— oh, is there something up there that will get me?

Austin: Yeah, it's the bats. They just keep coming. I killed so many bats on the roof of the church, like the tower of the church, and they wouldn't stop coming.

Jack: After my first encounter with what I thought was a particle effect getting to me, I then had in short order an encounter with some leeches, and an encounter with some rats, and they were both awful. Those little fuckers.

Austin: I don't like them.

Jack: There's a dedicated stomp button, and it does jack shit.

Janine: [chuckles]

Jack: You might as well just—

Austin: You just gotta stomp them, like the gnomes in Repo. You gotta, you know, do them before—

Jack: Earlier— yeah. Earlier you said, you know, the Protocol are walking through the door, and you're shooting them one by one. I'm a single person bat killing army. They fly at me. I knock them out of the sky with a single punch.

Yeah, I was trying to put together why the kind of like, the absolute bright light British pastiche of so much stuff bothers me, sets my teeth on edge. And here, while— you know, while a whing of it that we have talked about continues to bother me, other stuff here doesn't. And I think it's just because they keep, in times when it is deployed badly, they just keep doing the same fucking thing over and over again. It is a particular kind of Britain that is being deployed. And that Britain is here in this game, but there is also the 50s techno thriller. There is also the government out on the moors. There is also the, like, unholy trinity of folk horror in there, as well as the mothy vicar, you know, I'm a fading heiress to— or whatever. And just that 10 degree increase in breadth makes me have so much more fun with it as like a— as like a setting than I would elsewhere.

Austin: It's so funny, I misunderstood what you were saying at first? You were saying you don't like it when— or one of the things that sets you on edge with other sorts of

pastiches is, like, they keep repeating the same type of Britishism over and over again, right? The same— and what I thought you were saying was, like, you were talking about when— you were talking about, like, someone in power in Britain making the same mistake over and over again?

Jack: Oh no, we do also do that.

Austin: And I was like, oh no, that's in here. That's big time in here. [**Janine** chuckles] That's the Protocol, you know? That's like oh yeah, what if we kept digging? What if we kept trying to use the power plant? What if we kept, you know, maybe this time, the chaos vortex will work the right way for us. [chuckles]

Jack: Yeah. I don't mean it— I don't mind it when you, as a storyteller, either as an American or as a British person, have a guy run towards you and say, “oh, bloody hell”. What I mind is when that is the whole of it.

Austin: Sure, yeah.

Jack: You know, you look at your next cue card and it says, “oh, bloody hell”. And you're like, well, shit.

Janine: Yeah, it's like that, you know, it's that thing of like, when someone tells a joke that gets a laugh, and then instead of telling more jokes, they keep telling the same joke? There is like a sort of, sometimes in media about British people, there is this like, toe twisting in the dirt, “aren't I a little stinker, mate?” kind of thing that like is—

Jack: Yup.

Austin: That is the British Bugs Bunny right there.

Janine: [laughs]

Jack: [chuckles]

Janine: But it's like this sort of—

Jack: Tim Rabbit.

Janine: It's this sort of like, initially I think it was a thing of like— I think it started back in the day as like sort of a cultural colonialism kind of like, [**Jack:** Mhm.] ha ha, we're the heroes. And then as empire fell, collapsed, etc., it feels like it became more of a like, oh, but you really like us though, don't you? [**Jack** Yeah.] Like everyone knows us, we're that guy.

Austin: Yeah, we're Tim Rabbit. [chuckles]

Jack: We're Tim Rabbit, and we say like spiffing and you know—

Austin: Yeah. So we do chap hop.

Jack: And we do— oh we do chap hop.

Janine: We're knickers.

Austin: That's right.

Jack: We're gonna get the chap hop people, and we're gonna get John Cleese, Michael Palin, Eric Idle, you know? **[Austin:** Uh huh.] All of them lot.

Austin: The British people, that's them.

Janine: Mhm.

Jack: Yeah, alas. Anyway, I had a really good time with Atomfall, I'm excited to play more of it. This is a game that is not without its limitations, but you can have a good time with it.

Austin: Yeah.

Janine: Remember when they used to make these?

Austin: You know, I— I think that— yeah, I left this being like, ooh, something of this scale is really fun. I think if I was not struck by the podcaster's curse, I would finish this game. But now we've talked about it, so it is dead to me, **[Janine laughs]** unfortunately. I know that I will need to spend that time on other stuff that we want to talk about. That is the podcaster's curse.

Janine: No, but we're— it's supposed to be different! This will be different— it will be different this time!

Austin: I know it's supposed to be different, but there is *so much* I— okay, the Blue Prince just came out, I know I have to put time into that.

Janine: Yes.

Austin: There's just a lot.

Janine: We already talked about it, we might have to stop.

Austin: I will also simply say that I got deep enough into this game where I was like, oh, okay, so there's this many endings. I'm choosing between these people.

Janine: Yup. Yeah, that's the real thing.

Austin: I know what the rest of this game looks like, and then I watched someone finish the game five times.

Janine: [chuckles] Okay— well!

Jack: [chuckles]

Austin: So, I am effectively done with this game, yeah. Interesting. I'm really— what I'm *really* excited for is whatever they make next, because this feels like a game that they learned a lot from—

Jack: It's done really well for them too.

Austin: I'm so happy to hear that because I think it will definitely lead to more games I'm excited to play from them? There's a lot— I just enjoyed my time with it until the final hour of playing, where all of the enjoyment disappeared all at once, which maybe that won't happen for you, the listener. And like it didn't all fall apart because they did a stupid thing or they did something that I thought was offensive, or bad, or like not because of a core problem with the design. I just wringed all the water out in such a way that it stopped being entertaining anymore.

Jack: Yeah. Sometimes that just happens.

Austin: Sometimes you kill 700 druids in a row to get a little icon and then you're like, all right, I'm fucking done, you know? So.

Janine: Yeah. So the metaphor I use for this a lot is like, sometimes you eat a really big, good meal, and you don't finish it.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: A hundred percent.

Janine: It doesn't mean it wasn't big and good, it's just, you know. Your stomach's only so big.

Austin: Yeah, I should have ordered the smaller— I should have ordered the smaller steak.

Janine: Yeah. You don't need the—

Austin: I got the biggest steak, and—

Janine: The 14— the 20? I don't know steak ounces.

Austin: Those are both acceptable ounces.

Janine: One's big and one's— okay. 30 ounce. Don't have a—

Austin: A 30 ounce is a huge steak. You'd never get that. That is more than— I've never ordered a 30 ounce steak by myself, certainly, you know.

Jack: 30 ounces. Also, I'm literally realizing right now that the village is called Wyndham?

Austin: Yeah, uh huh.

Jack: Yeah.

Austin: Like the writer.

Jack: Like the writer.

Austin: There it is.

Jack: Well, how about that.

Austin: How about that.

Janine: Also like the wind.

Jack: Also— no, it's with a Y. That's how they spell—

Janine: No I know, just— but the sound is there.

Jack: Mmm...

Austin: Wind.

Janine: Wind.

Jack: Wind.

Janine: And like the place, and the thing that happened? It's all there.

Austin: Mmm.

Jack: Mmm, it's all there.

Austin: Right, because the Windscale fire is W-I-N-D.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: Interesting. Much to consider.

Jack: Much to think about. But you'll have to think about it in our absence.

Austin: That's right, because I think we are done for the day. Or maybe not the day, I don't know what y'all are doing after this but, we're done.

Jack: I'm going to make salmon.

Austin: You're going to make salmon.

Jack: Mmm.

Janine: Ohh?

Austin: From first principles.

Jack: Yes. [chuckles]

Austin: You're going to invent the salmon. For— if you're interested in salmon [**Janine** chuckles] and the difference between salmon and trout, you should go to friendsatthetable.cash where you can support us. And at the \$10 level, you'll get access to our Outward LP, the second episode of which is available now. LP means let's play, by the way. I realize I'm aging myself by saying LP, a sort of— a term that has become provincial. In the provinces—

Jack: What do they call them now?

Austin: Straight VODs?

Janine: Content.

Austin: Content, streams, playathons?

Janine: Ew, no.

Jack: I don't know that they call them playathons. What do they call them?

Janine: Who's saying playathons?

Austin: No, I was just thinking of words.

Janine: Mmm.

Austin: You don't just think of words sometimes? Guess not.

Janine: Shoebox.

Austin: You can go watch us play that game. We have two episodes of that out now. I'm very excited to keep recording more of it. There is a great— there's a great— there's some great segments in that second episode. If you watched the first episode and enjoyed it, let me tell you, the hijinks have continued both in play and in the edit. If you haven't seen any of it, you can go to youtube.com/friendsatthetable to see the first episode for free, along with some recent streams that we've done.

Jack's tour of the Dreamcast, in concert with our release of Perpetua—the kind of Dreamcast JRPG-inspired season—has continued. Jack, you most recently played Jet Set Radio, [**Jack:** It's so good.] or I guess Grind Radio, which is so, so good. But even before that, you played Evolution, [**Jack:** Also good.] the JRPG, and you played—

Janine: [sing-song] Shenmue.

Jack: Oh that's it—

Austin: Shenmue.

Jack: Oh, Shenmue! I can't believe I forgot about Shenmue.

Janine: Uh huh.

Austin: Shenmue will be up soon on the— on the Friends at the Table account, along with a bunch of other stuff, so.

Janine: I mean, it's on Twitch, but it'll be on YouTube.

Austin: Yeah well, I was—

Janine: If you cannot wait for Shenmue— if you're dying.

Austin: Yes.

Janine: If you're dying right now.

Austin: That's right, if you're dying for Shenmue, if now is the time you have to watch Jack—

Janine: If a man has shown up with a sword.

Austin: If Lan Di has arrived and asked you— asked your father where he's keeping the thing, then you're like, I better watch the Shenmue video now [**Janine:** A mirror is the— a mirror—] and see what I should do— well, I didn't want to spoil— I don't remember if Lan Di says he does.

Janine: Well it's not a mirror anyway, it's—

Austin: Okay, well— not by contemporary standards, certainly. Anyway.

Janine: [chuckles]

Austin: You can go to [twitch.tv/friendsatthetable](https://www.twitch.tv/friendsatthetable), [youtube.com/friendsatthetable](https://www.youtube.com/friendsatthetable). You should go to [medioclub.plus](https://www.medioclub.plus) to listen to Mediaclub Plus, where Jack, Keith, Sylvi, and Dre are working through the Chimera Ant Arc of Hunter x Hunter. I was just guesting on an episode, Jack, for an *incredible* episode of anime, maybe one of my favorite. I was very happy to be there for it.

Jack: It was a great time. I can't tell you anything about what is happening right now in the Chimera Ant Arc.

Austin: Have you finished the season yet? Are you waiting for the next one?

Jack: No no no, I'm waiting.

Austin: Okay, okay, okay. Woo. Good luck, have fun with the rest of it. And you're almost done, which means we're nearing the next season of Hunter— not— oh first of Hunter x Hunter, and then of Media Club Plus. I think we have a good idea of what we're doing next at this point. Very excited for it. If you are not an anime person, stay tuned because we are leaving anime behind, at least for now, to do something different on Media Club Plus.

Please leave us reviews by going to whatever your podcast platform is and hitting the button that says five stars. We think it's a five-star podcast. We would really appreciate any sort of ratings because this is the moment that's really important to get those reviews in where we're looking for new listeners. Also, please tell people about us, you know. I think it's very easy to assume that you know, the people who make the podcast you like, they have a huge platform and they can tell everybody and then everybody can make a decision about it. But like, it's actually really hard to get information out,

especially now in the sort of post— **[Janine: Yeah.]** we're in a new era of social media where getting news out is really hard? Even as Blue Sky continues to do well—

Janine: Nintendo just made a whole— their own app for it. It's so hard. They just made their own thing.

Austin: They sure did. They sure did. They were like, you know what? F all this, we're just coming to Nintendo Today or whatever.

Janine: We don't need to figure this out. They'll come to us.

Austin: They'll come to us.

Janine: We don't have that luxury [laughs]

Austin: And so— we don't have that. We can't make an app and no one would join it. If— it would be a lot like the Jeremy Renner app, but worse somehow. So, you don't want that from us.

Janine: A lot of people joined that. That was part of the problem.

Austin: What, did a lot of people join that?

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: I didn't realize. Well.

Janine: Yeah.

Austin: I'm sorry, what happened to him physically. **[Janine: Yeah, that's fair.]** The nightmare thing he went through was really sad. I'm less sorry about the app not really developing anywhere. That was not a great idea. We don't have an app.

And speaking of apps also, by the way, if you want to support us on Patreon, please go to a web browser and go to patreon.com/friendsatthetable or friendsatthetable.cash because it is simply cheaper. If you do, there is a surcharge for using the iOS app because of the way Apple has decided they are going to treat the world, so.

Janine: It's so annoying.

Austin: So. So yes, sorry, friendsatthetable.cash or patreon.com/friends_table, that's the way to get us there. I think that's gonna do it for us this time.

Janine: Do you have a sign off yet?

Austin: Yeah, we all decided.

Janine: Oh, did we?

Austin: We've been using it.

Janine: What?

[“[Side Story](#)” by Jack de Quidt begins playing]

Austin: To be continued.

[music ends]