

## **EGSM 3: Games are a serious business (Tabletop RPGs)**

### **Content warnings:**

- Explicit language
- Brief reference to BDSM
- Discussions of: death and murder, physical violence, war
- Mentions of: fascism, religion, alcohol, amnesia, fictional child death, trauma, prison, food, vampires

### **JONNY**

I really enjoy that, Helen, you felt the editor desperately needed to know – as like up front information that it was a lovely bunch of people...

(Group Laughter)

...that they were going to be editing for.

### **BEN**

Yeah, you don't want the recording to be just like "ah, I'm with a bunch of bastards!"

(Group Laughter)

### **HELEN**

It's going to be dreadful! I hate everything.

(Group Laughter)

**JONNY**

You might want to get a drink editor, cos whoo!

(Group Laughter)

**[Show Theme - Intro]**

**HELEN**

Hello friends and fans, and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show in which we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host, Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers, and today, we're talking about role-playing games. I am utterly transported and effervescently delighted to be joined – don't laugh Jonny – to be joined by Becky, Ben, Jonny and Travis. Going to do a little round of introductions, going to go alphabetically as usual. So Becky, can you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do?

**BECKY**

Hello, I'm Becky Annison. My pronouns are she/her and I'm an award winning – much to my shock and horror – game designer of Lovecraftesque, When the Dark is Gone, Bite Marks and others and I'm one half of Black Armada Games and thank you so much for having me. I'm really pleased to be here!

**HELEN**

Thank you so much for coming on. Ben, you're up next.

**BEN**

Hello, I'm Ben Meredith, one of the worst Rusty Quillers!

(Group Laughter)

My pronouns are he/him and I am a multi-award-winning actor, but that's not relevant today!

(Group Laughter)

My day job is a game designer for computer games which is also tangentially relevant, but not quite. And also I've done, you know, bits and bobs with tabletop things. That's basically it.

**HELEN**

Cool. And Mr Jonathan, tell us your pronouns and what you do.

**JONNY**

Hi, I'm Jonny Sims - he/him - and you probably know my voice from The Magnus Archives, also on the Rusty Quill Network; but I'm mainly here because I am one half of MacGuffin and Company, a tabletop design and publishing company.

**HELEN**

Wonderful. And last but absolutely not least, Travis – give us your pronouns and tell us who you are.

**TRAVIS**

Hi, I'm Travis Vengroff – he/him – half of Fool and Scholar Productions doing sound design, being the dungeon master of Dark Dice, I make some tabletop stuff for 5E and my own system, Liberty After, and I'm here and having a lot of fun.

### **HELEN**

Huzzah and hurrah! Excellent! Okay. So, I'm gonna start off the conversation by asking everyone sort of how you got involved in the RPG space cos for me, it was via a convention. It was a load of people wearing pink t-shirts and I said, "what are you wearing the pink t-shirts for?" and they said, "oh we're playing games" and I said, "ooh, what kind of games?" and they said, "it's called Werewolf". And that was my initial slide into roleplaying games, and I'd be interested to hear from all of you as to how you got into them.

### **TRAVIS**

Yeah, I was sort of pulled in a couple of different ways and a few different directions. I started playing D and D because I was really bored on a school bus and my friend taught me how to play cos we had like a 40 to an hour long drive to and from school and that really helped cut the time down. And then I kind of got into Warhammer about a decade later for a bit, for about a decade, and then my wife and I bonded over a love of board games and we really got deeper into that sort of sub-genre of gaming, which is a lot of fun.

### **HELEN**

So here's a question right: I don't know anything about Warhammer except from what I've heard from Grant Howitt and it sounds absolutely bonkers! Is this is an accurate assessment?

**TRAVIS**

Bonkers would be an accurate assessment and it's constantly a different kind of bonkers every three to five years.

**HELEN**

Ah!

**JONNY**

And a lot of it comes from it starting as this like really like British 2000AD style satire of like – it's like, ah, hypermasculine space, it's very like Judge Dredd...

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**JONNY**

...style thing where it's like, ha, look at this ridiculous exaggeration that has since become completely unironic.

**HELEN**

Oh.

**BEN**

Hey, the space fascists are the heroes guys, it turns out. Who'd have thought?

**HELEN**

Mmm, I'm not sure about that you know.

**JONNY**

Yeah, it's a weird one...

**BEN**

Cos they've got big shoulders.

**TRAVIS**

Massive shoulders.

**HELEN**

Oh, if they've got big shoulders, then...

**JONNY**

But the orcs are just a bunch of brilliant football hooligans.

**BEN**

Who are mushrooms! Don't forget.

**JONNY**

Who are mushrooms.

**BEN**

Angry mushrooms.

**HELEN**

What?

**BEN**

Yeah, they're fungus, the orcs are fungus.

**JONNY**

Who believe that they can fly enough that they can fly.

**BEN**

Yeah and if they paint something red it does actually go faster just because of collective belief.

**HELEN**

That's really inspiring actually!

(Group Laughter)

**JONNY**

Yeah it's...Warhammer is...it's fascinating because it's one of these things that on the surface looks like properly like grimdark in a very serious way. But every layer you peel back is like, what is this?

(Group Laughter)

This is absurd!

**TRAVIS**

There are rats that are trying to rule the world and they're not Pinky and The Brain.

**HELEN**

Oh! Well good. I support the rats! Becky, tell me how you got into roleplaying games.

**BECKY**

Okay, so mine all started with a book in a school library, but it wasn't a roleplaying book, it was a short novel which, looking back on it, I think was probably a Satanic panic morality tale about the evils of roleplay.

**HELEN**

Ohhh I love those!

(Group Laughter)

**BEN**

Well it obviously worked!

**BECKY**

And I read it and I was like, this is amazing, I should be doing this, this looks fantastic and then I remember for my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday saving up all of my money that I got for my 11<sup>th</sup> birthday and buying the black box of D and D with the red dragon on the front.

**HELEN**

Mmm. That sounds very fancy!

**BECKY**

I've been roleplaying ever since, which is quite a long time now! But yeah, that was it – it was, it was a book designed to put me off roleplaying but in fact had completely the opposite effect.

(Group Laughter)

I can't remember the name of it as well, so!

**HELEN**

Well, wasn't the idea was like, "oh, oh, when people play dungeons and dragons they all have to get together in a room and then the dungeon master has to tell them what to do and they must obey!" and it's like, that's the opposite of what happens!

(Group Laughter)

**JONNY**

Well there's the classic Jack Chick tract, which I think is called Darkest Dungeons.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**JONNY**

Which is about like – I believe it is, it is literally Satan who is the dungeon master corrupting the evangelical youth, because it's always like literally Satan in the Jack Chick tracts. But I think, I think that has ... there've been a lot of variants on that throughout the ages.

**BECKY**

So I know, I think, I think this book was a bit more, a bit darker than that. I mean it was a children's book so it can't have been that bad. But I seem to recall that some characters in the game in the book had died and so eventually, the DM thought that he had to murder the players.

**HELEN**

Ooooooh!

**BECKY**

Yeah, yeah, it was quite spicy! It was quite spicy!

**JONNY**

Oh was it... it wouldn't have been like a Point Horror or one of these things where they always like to just like grab any sort of like adolescent, adolescent hobby and be like how could this become murder?!

(Group Laughter)

**BECKY**

It could have been. Maybe it was RL Stine and I've completely misremembered the whole thing.

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

Ben, how did you get into RPGs?

**BEN**

Well I didn't get into them until I was at university cos I was too cool! I wasn't, I wasn't at all. I spent a long time collecting Warhammer 40K and not, not using it and then I spent all my pocket money on a Necron Monolith and went "what am I doing with my money?"

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

What's a Necron Monolith Ben?

**BEN**

So Necrons are cursed undead robot Egyptians basically? Who want to wipe out all life on earth because their dark Gods were like... ha, ha, that'd be funny! And they have like big like ziggurat temple things that hover around the map and fire green laser beams and they're called "Monoliths".

**JONNY**

And they look sick as shit.

(Group Laughter)

**BEN**

They do look really good! They do look really good.

**TRAVIS**

This is true.

**BEN**

But when you spend all your pocket money on them...yeah. You get a bunch of plastic you've got to glue together and you're like, "oh man, I could have bought sweets".

(Group Laughter)

Could have bought so many Double Deckers!

(Group Laughter)

No, and basically I just – my house on campus at university was just chock full of nerds so they got me to start playing D and D 3.5. And then off the back of that, I started playing Vampire: The Requiem and then got put into LARPing as well with a system that was based off Neil Gaiman's Neverwhere.

**HELEN**

Interesting. Oh, do you want to mention what LARPing is, just for any audience who may not know.

**BEN**

Live action role play, so it's basically like RPGs but it's... well, no, there's a whole broad spectrum of it, right from sort of almost morality tale, immersive experiences which are sort of the Scandinavian LARP sort of school where there's like LARPs where you get treated like refugees for a weekend and they basically do Zimbardo's prison experiment.

**HELEN**

Oh!

**BEN**

You know? Yeah, but like more controlled than just letting some students go absolutely feral. But it's like immersive experiences that are supposed to like teach you empathy, stuff like that – they get very, very serious. You've got like parlour stuff where you know, there's absolutely no rules and it's just people sort of dressing up nice and just improv-ing and you go to big fest events where there's like loads of rules and everyone's got hit points and you're running about with armour and stuff, whacking each other with rubber swords. Yeah, so there's a whole spectrum of that. It's quite fun.

**HELEN**

Hee-hee, it does sound it. And lastly, Jonny, how did you get involved?

**JONNY**

It's weird listening to you all talk about it because I very much was the friend on Travis' school bus and the campus house mate of Ben. Cos my dad's been like doing tabletop since I don't know, the 70s or something, so it always was going on in my house growing up, every Tuesday night, and when I was about

eight, I was like “oh this is super cool, I really want to join in” and my dad’s group let me a bit, you know, I’m sure that a bunch of like you know, beer-drinking swearing 40-somethings absolutely thrilled to have an eight year old sitting in on the first hour or two of their games. But then as soon as I got the chance, I was like...no-one else outside my family seemed to have like heard of this thing, so I was throughout most of my life just dragging people in, being like, “hey, do you want to do this thing? Do you want to play this?”

(Group Laughter)

**BEN**

You were the boy that Jack Chick warned you about!

**JONNY**

Yeah! Except right at the start of uni I decided no, I’ve grown out of this, like this was, this was cool when I was a teenager but I’m a, I’m a grown-up now!

(Helen laughs)

And then in second year, someone in one of the societies I was in was like, “oh, yeah, we were thinking of like playing this game, a little” – I think it was like Savage Worlds – “but we can’t make head nor tail of the rules” and I was like...

(knuckle click)

“okay”.

(Group Laughter)

**BECKY**

I have trained for this my whole life!

**JONNY**

Yeah and that was very much like okay, I'm back in fully.

**TRAVIS**

It's beautiful!

**JONNY**

Yeah, just when I thought I was out! Yeah.

**HELEN**

Ha! I love that, just when I thought I was out, university pulled me back in? Okay, something I want to talk about then is like can everyone remember like the first character that you played? Cos I think we all have many, many years of it between us but I still remember my first one. Maybe that's cos it was like 2013 when I played it, but the first proper RPG I was in was a Monsterhearts game, and I played a Vampire and the person who was playing the Mortal was really into it and I had no idea what to do!

(Group Laughter)

And she was like, "I throw myself at you", and I was like, "okay... um...". I'm a lot more confident with that kind of thing now but I was like, is this allowed? I don't... is this what I'm meant to do? Argh!

**JONNY**

Oh God, the idea of there being like romance in any like of my early RPG experiences is like oh my god, like the biggest event I remember from my first character was when I rolled amazingly and bisected an ogre.

**HELEN**

Ooh!

**JONNY**

In a single, a single blow. That was like yes, good!

**HELEN**

It's always fun to bisect.

**JONNY**

Yeah.

**HELEN**

In, in imagination, as a game!

(Group Laughter)

**TRAVIS**

Good clarification.

**JONNY**

Or on stage as a magician.

**HELEN**

Any other takers?

**TRAVIS**

My characters always just died! They barely made it a day.

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

Oh no!

**TRAVIS**

I have terrible dice rolls. My first one was an orc character and I'd just played a bunch of Warcraft One or Two, and I was like, oh, I'm gonna raid a human settlement, I'm going to do this. And then I obviously couldn't solo it, so I was dead pretty quickly. But I tried, I tried!

**HELEN**

Oh!

**TRAVIS**

And then I had a second character who was also an orc trying to avenge the previous orc, and then I died a second time...

(Group Laughter)

And then I sort of decided I'd do something completely different and just, I died two different ways!

**JONNY**

Have you ever actually – there is an RPG system called Orc and it really sounds like you have accidentally played that system. Because the way Orc works is you start off with like a stack of like 30 character sheets that are basically identical, and then you just basically work your way through as all your orcs die throughout the course of your adventure.

**TRAVIS**

That sounds amazing! No I haven't heard of that.

**JONNY**

It's so much fun! You're just sat around a table roaring!

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

I love that, I love that concept. I wonder if you could make like a game that's based just on who can be the loudest. That would be a bad idea actually! That would be very bad.

**JONNY**

I mean in a convention setting, you wouldn't be popular.

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

I think in any setting where there are other people around, like in this flat I can hear everything that's going on next door, so...I do wonder sometimes what they think when they hear me podcasting! Because they can't hear any of you, they just hear me talking to myself really loudly and excitedly for hours on end.

(Group Laughter)

**BECKY**

Maybe they think you're a medium!

**HELEN**

Ooh I hope so! I'd love to be the spooky neighbour! Becky, do you have any notable first characters or things you remember from early on?

**BECKY**

Oh man, this is really hard. I think mostly because my first characters would have been 30 years ago, which is really scary when I say that out loud.

(Group Laughter)

I don't think I've said that out loud before, that's really ... whoa. Yeah, so I've been roleplaying for 30 years so there's no way that I can remember my very first character. I can definitely remember probably the, the first kind of important character to me was when I played Amber Diceless and I played it I

think for about five years in the end from the ages of... or maybe four years – from the age of 17 through 21 I was in a long-running Amber Diceless campaign which I loved and I had an Amber character called Niamh and she was probably my favourite.

**HELEN**

What's Amber Diceless? I've actually never heard of that.

**BECKY**

Oh! Oh!

**HELEN**

Oh I'm going to settle in!

**BECKY**

Let me tell you! So...

**JONNY**

It was big in the late 90s Helen, I wouldn't worry about it!

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

Jonny!

**BECKY**

It was big in the late 90s, I'm a child of the 90s! I cannot deny it! So, Amber Diceless is based off a series of pulp fantasy books, they're a little bit noir-y in the beginning, by Roger Zelazny called the Amber Chronicles. The first five are excellent, the second five don't exist as far as most people are concerned so I shouldn't bother, but they're all quite short and they're all quite fun and they involve a royal family who live in a sort of a fancy world with various weird fantasy powers and Erick Wujcik wrote a roleplaying system based off the back of it and it was notable for kind of two reasons, I think. Firstly that it had no dice, so everything's done off stats and sort of trusting the GM or sort of negotiation over stacking the deck, by which I mean – so you have stats and you would then compare stats to see who won in the battle, for example, but: if you had a lower stat, but you were able to kind of cheat somehow, stack the battlefield in your favour, then that fictional positioning could have sort of an impact but you know, there was no kind of way of quantifying that particularly versus your stats, so it was very much a kind of a suck it and see, you know it when you see it kind of a GMing style, which I was quite down with at the time. I think the other thing is that like tucked away right in the back of Amber Diceless is rules for shared GMing or like passing the GM role around people and I know that everyone always talks about Rocky and Bullwinkle – as that being the first game about shared GMing? All the American guys like Jason Morningstar talk about Rocky and... the Rocky and Bullwinkle game, but for me it was Amber Diceless just kind of tucked away in the back was this whole but what if, what if there was multiple GMs?

**TRAVIS**

That's pretty cool.

**BEN**

I actually remember quite well, I think, I played a D and D 3.5 dwarf, I think called Carad, which is the first two syllables of Caradhras, you know the mountain.

**HELEN**

Of course it is! Oh, I love it, I love it Ben.

**BEN**

Yeah, cos I'm a massive nerd! Sorry, I mean I'm too cool for roleplaying games! I just... please believe me! And they were a dwarven...I think a prestige class of like a hunter or something? Okay and you know, I will say I was 18, you know – I was at university, I was all hopped up and I wanted to do a character who was meaningful. So they were kicked out of their community and became a hunter for being gay cos, oh I'm gonna say something with this D and D character!

(Group Laughter)

You know it was very much just, ah, it's just I didn't do anything with it, it was for no other reason, and I was like oh, yeah, no, this will be serious cos I'm going to be serious about this roleplaying stuff and deal with issues. Idiot.

**JONNY**

I can't believe Ben's gonna be cancelled for bad representation in his 18 year old 3.5 campaign!

(Helen laughs)

**BEN**

A ham-fisted, ham-fisted goofus attempt! But yeah, I mean, and what I mainly... well like he had stone armour, hit like a brick shithouse, and eventually got roll-or-die-d and disintegrated, cos a lich cast Finger Of Death on him. And he disintegrated and his armour was so big that it just like slightly sagged and nobody realised he'd died.

**HELEN**

Oh that's really sad!

**BEN**

Cos the armour held itself up! It was really funny!

(Group Laughter)

Cos obviously we all knew it cos like my mate who was the GM, Merlin, which is his real name, rolled like a billion damage and we all sat there being like, "oh no" and then had to pretend that I was still alive for like the next four rounds of combat being like "get out of the way", cos I was standing in front of the corridor. It was great fun! It's a very D and D story isn't it?

(Group Laughter)

**TRAVIS**

Absolutely.

**HELEN**

I love it. Jonny, have you gone?

**JONNY**

Yeah, well I mean I, I legitimately don't remember cos I was quite young. There's like, there's a few it might have been, one of which was a dwarf of my own, I can't remember what class, I just remember he had an axe and bisected that ogre. I also remember that my dad tried to – cos this was after I'd bought a copy of D and D third edition of my very own, and my dad was trying to run us through some stuff in it. And he decided he wanted to adapt a module from Warhammer fantasy role play called Castle Drachenfels which is this like – I've read since and is incredibly grotesque horror. And he sort of very much like dampened it down and like, I'll be honest, we didn't really get it because most of it sailed clean over our heads! The other one it might have been – there was a Traveller game...

**HELEN**

Oh!

**JONNY**

...that my dad's group were playing in where everyone was like amnesiacs in sort of, space?

(Group Laughter)

**JONNY**

Space USSR? And I was a child who ended up getting blown up cos I was poking around a helicopter wreckage. I remember being like, “oh I’m just dead” and the GM who, looking back on it, probably quite happy to blow up the child! Was like, “yeah, sorry. Oof.”

(Group Laughter)

I guess you’ll have to go to bed now!

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

Whoops. What a shame!

**JONNY**

It was not a million miles away, not a million miles away.

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

I do remember Fiasco being...the first time I played that, I found that quite difficult because I didn’t get it at the time. I was still – cos it was very early on and I was, the same way I was in Monsterhearts, I was trying to win!

(Group Laughter)

And that is a very, very bad attitude to take into Fiasco.

**JONNY**

But a very common one when you're just starting out.

**HELEN**

Yes, it's true.

**BEN**

Arguably that's one of the potentially... I mean the problems, like you've got you know, when you're shepherded by a good DM or a good group, it's dealt with but, but stuff like D and D when you have hit points and loot and experience and it's... I wouldn't say the computer gamification cos this was doing it before computer games were, arguably, so maybe it's the D and D-ification of computer games, right. But that idea of like the, like the endless hoarding of power and influence kind of makes people want to win, right? Like it's the whole fun, like oh yeah you beat the GM, and it's like oh...

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**BEN**

All right, I get that's one way to play it, I guess if you enjoy that, it's you know, it's valid but...

**JONNY**

I mean to be fair a lot of games like D and D, it feels weird to talk about them in the same way one might talk about gambling but there is – you roll a dice

and on a high number you get an instant hit of like “oh this really nice thing has happened, oh I’ve done this amount of damage or like I have received this amount of treasure or this amount of hit points” and like it’s the stakes like, it hits the same part of the brain in a lot of ways I think.

**BEN**

I don’t think it’s weird, right, I mean you are literally just, you’re... I mean you’re, you’re gambling with a fictional person’s life.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**JONNY**

Yeah.

**BEN**

Your life right, but that’s, those are the stakes right? You’ve got stakes, you’re trying to avoid the stakes going in your favour, like you have the house, the GM?

**JONNY**

Yeah. And I think that is the joy you get from that sort of roleplaying is, is just as valid as the joy you get of like four minds meeting, crafting an epic tale of betrayal and love, you know?

**BEN**

Oh yeah, it’s all just games.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**BEN**

Ultimately.

**HELEN**

Oh yeah, yeah, like none of these I think are like inherently bad or worse than the other. I think there's pros and cons to all of the approaches. I do think that if you have a table that is really entrenched in "we are the players and we are against the GM", if you're not careful that... cos there's this thing of like bleed right? And I think that you have to be really careful in those situations not to end up being mean to your poor GM! Or for them to do it to you.

**BEN**

You could definitely argue that the more immersive games kind of run that risk as well.

**HELEN**

Oh yeah.

**BEN**

Like if you have a like a torrid relationship between two players, like that's... if you're really going for it that can, that can really bleed.

**JONNY**

Well like in a lot of, in a lot of like heavy duty LARP circles, like, you talk about aftercare the same way you do in something like the BDSM community, you know? Anything where there is huge and significant, deliberately evoked emotion, you need to deal with those emotions afterwards.

**HELEN**

Yes! But on that note, we're going to take a little break and then we're gonna come back and talk about this cos now we're getting into the stuff that I'm really interested in, so see you in a minute.

And welcome back! So, Travis – I'm interested in what you think about these different opposing gaming styles, and how they can affect players around the table as well.

**TRAVIS**

Hey, I think it's actually – I haven't played diceless in quite a while and honestly, I'm also really excited that you all play people who are very sober! I'm normally also sort of a caretaker of our...

(Group Laughter)

My typical group. So it's a lot of handholding and just making sure we have collectively a very fun time, and I am sort of the showman so I haven't got to experience the collective stuff, except with Dark Dice where it sort of goes off the rails and the players decide they want to go in the other direction that I hadn't planned and randomly sing musicals and do weird things, but I think they're all...they're both valid, they're both quite fun and intriguing and the

bleed stuff is also interesting. I haven't had to deal with that yet so much, mostly because people expect to come into my games to die, which is sort of the setting expectations part. So I think these are cool topics that I need to expand on more and play more and think on more.

**JONNY**

Also cos like actual play and like performing roleplaying is such a different experience, at least to me...

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**JONNY**

...than like, a social game that is being done for fun and like to explore stuff, because there is that inherent distance between...playing the character feels a lot more like an acting role, in a lot of ways.

**HELEN**

Yes, I think... I mean I don't know how you feel Ben, but I think it's absolutely a completely different... I'm very much more of an actor on RQG than I am when I'm just like pissing about.

**BEN**

Oh yeah, entirely, it's an entirely different skill.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**BEN**

And you know, I've said this before but like I think it does give a really, really unhelpful view of how RPGs are played to people who are maybe thinking about getting into the hobby and they listen to a bunch of actual players, like, "oh wow those people are so professional and they sound so slick and snappy", and it's like, "well yes they are professionals, and they're being edited!"

(Group Laughter)

**TRAVIS**

Heavily edited.

**BEN**

Yeah, ooh, so heavily! Oh my goodness.

**HELEN**

Yeah. I recently listened to... I did my preview listen of RQG206 which is, which will have come out by the time this episode is out. But there's some combat in it and I know...it's about 42 minutes long, and I know that it has been vastly edited down because that is one of the episodes that ran really long because we were all trying to figure out where we were and what was happening and what effects we could do. It was when I was trying to decide whether to use one spell or another and we had like a big conversation.

**BEN**

Yeah and it probably took us like two hours, right?

**JONNY**

It's also interesting that like a lot of games recently experiment with different levels of abstraction and inhabitation.

**BEN**

Yeah.

**JONNY**

So I'm like, thinking specifically of Blades in the Dark which we've been having a game of, well we were having a game of before everything shut down. And a couple of the players were struggling a bit because it does this thing where it's constantly jumping between these three levels. So you've got like the strategic level, which is basically if you think of it like map of the city, your gang stats, like oh well what are we doing, what's the abstract thing we're doing; and then you've got the like within a scene, you've got a level of abstraction so you're talking about the individual characters but you're like, oh well, the two of us are doing this like manoeuvre which operates in these abstract and mechanical ways. And it's comparatively rare that you will then zoom into actually being a character and voicing the character and interacting with the world as that character, and like a few of our players really struggled with that constant jumping between those layers, because...

**HELEN**

Yeah, I think I would too.

**JONNY**

...they were much more used to purely being in that inhabitation level, like purely being like no, I am my character; when I'm speaking, I'm probably speaking for my character, you know? And so like, not only moving to that, those abstracted levels, but jumping between them was very disorientating for them.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**JONNY**

So it's interesting that that sort of inhabitation and abstraction is something that is being played with I think a lot more with systems these days.

**HELEN**

Mmm. Becky, I saw you nodding along.

**BECKY**

Yeah I think that in our circles we've talked about something akin to that but slightly different I think which is this idea of the difference between the sort of actor stance and director stance in character. Where in actor stance you are immersed in your character, you are speaking in their voice, you are making decisions based on what they would do in accordance with their personality, and when you're in director stance you're kind of looking at a whole myriad of different things, so 'what decision would my character make based on their personality' is not the same as 'what decision would my character make which

would be fun for all the other players at the table, what decision will my character make which will push this to a really juicy direction?'

(Helen laughs)

And kind of finding the sweet spot I think, particularly if you want to get into the really good bloody game space, I think getting a really good sweet spot between totally inhabiting your character but knowing just enough on the kind of the meta level of where to push the plot or other players' character or to push your kind of interaction and plot into other characters' space in a way which is really meaty for them to grab on to, I think there's kind of a real, a real finessing that you can do around that which is quite cool and exciting.

### **JONNY**

Yeah like meta-gaming which is often, often talked of as like a bad thing, it's like oh you're meta-gaming cos you're like, oh you might have read this module five years ago and you remember a twist or this sort of thing, but...I often think that there's a lot, there's a lot of good meta-gaming that you do as well. Which is like if you see a character, like another player character and you're like, oh, I think, I think I've figured out what their secret is, but I'm deciding that my character hasn't. Which means that my character can act in ways that are like going to be really fun and funny and a little bit cruel maybe!

### **HELEN**

Yeah.

(Travis laughs)

**BECKY**

It's so much...I was just going to say that this, for me, this typifies the difference between the roleplayer I am now and the roleplayer I was when I was 11.

(Helen laughs)

So when I was 11, and if I heard out of character that another player was gonna betray us, and steal an item, then I'd have found it really hard, I'd have been like, "oh well I have this out of character knowledge, I wish I didn't know, cos now I don't know what to do". Now, older Becky knows that if I know your character is the traitor I will give you the item, I will hand it to you and I will say "you're the only person I trust with this".

(Group Laughter)

And then I will sit back and wait for you to hurt me with it and that, you know, I feel I've really grown as a role-player that I can you know, that I see that that is now the best thing to do.

(Group Laughter)

**BEN**

So I think that it is really interesting sort of dynamic that you get with like this inhabitation thing of like, I think it's almost a horseshoe cos like with the games you've got like the crunchy stuff, your Exalted, your Travellers to a

certain extent, your D and Ds and your Pathfinders, that kind of stuff. And then you go to your sort of super diceless like – I've never actually played it but from reputation, like your Ten Candles, which is very much just like you get in a room and you have an experience with one another. And like then it, in the middle, and with those two, I think obviously with the big, the very much the story ones like sort of how Becky's talking is like yeah, you'll kind of also take a bit of a directorial eye to it, but with your really crunchy stuff, you tend to only ever inhabit your own character's head and that's the only perspective you're working from? Which I think is potentially another reason why they are so accessible, that you're only having to juggle a single thing. But I think... and it's... I was trying to think of like – cos I've tried to run Blades in the Dark and I struggled with basically the same thing that I think that Jonny was talking about with this like constant you know, lensing in and lensing out, because it almost... it uses the, like the semiotics of your sort of storyteller's game, it's like your PBTAs which also has some of this aspect but it's much more about inhabiting the character and making like dramatic decisions. But then inside – like you open up the book which you expect to be like Powered by the Apocalypse and then you find that Blades in the Dark is like so heavily mechanised and so heavily structured, and it still talks about like – well effectively moves and stuff, but every single thing you do is like, there is a rule for that and you're going out between perspectives, and you're just like oh I just thought I was gonna have a nice improv time with my mates.

(Group Laughter)

**JONNY**

It's a game where you kind of, your instinct is to like try and tell an interesting crime story whereas actually, it needs the players to be proactive in a way that like I think a lot of systems like, don't.

**BEN**

Yeah, that's exactly what I tried to do and actually just a quick plug cos I will never not plug them and actually one thing I do like actual plays for is it's a very, like sometimes it's a really good example of how to run a system well, and although it is, you know, much more controlled than a real game, it's like you can get some methodology stuff, but These Flimsy Rituals are doing a really good Blades in the Dark campaign, they're the Furtive Shambles people and it's fabulous, so I'd recommend having a listen to that.

**HELEN**

Well, on that, I want to ask everyone if anyone has a favourite system or game?

**JONNY**

Argh!

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

Screaming immediately! Travis, you did not scream so I'm gonna ask you first.

**TRAVIS**

Oh no, it's an easy one for me. I just, I love 5E, cos again I'm always playing with new players a lot of the times and it's a fairly easy rule set to plug pretty easily and to get people into. Sometimes I'll do a diceless thing as well where it's just like all right, you're bank robbers, your job is to rob the bank and survive and that's another great introductory sort of thing, cos I like sky hooks and I like having everyone working toward either different plots but they know that they're trying to do it in a fun way or the same thing generally, but there's at least goals pushing everyone in a direction to some degree, more structured.

**HELEN**

I have heard a lot of really good things about D and D 5E. Like a lot of people are saying that it's a lot easier than it has been previously.

**JONNY**

It's a really good system which is not something that I could say about any other Dungeons and Dragons system.

(Group Laughter)

Like, just like it's a game that I am always happy to play at this point, which you know, hasn't been the case previously, mainly cos I'm a massive hipster, but also cos the systems weren't great.

**HELEN**

So, if that's not your favourite system, what on earth is it Jonny?

**JONNY**

Oh God, I don't know.

**BECKY**

'Choose your favourite cat!'

**JONNY**

So many! I... this is a question where I can't really give a current answer, because there are so many amazing systems that I'm really loving getting stuck into at the moment. So I feel like I kind of have to default to the one that has been most meaningful to me.

**HELEN**

Aw!

**JONNY**

Throughout my... although the trouble is it's Deadlands Classic, which is problematic as hell.

(Group Laughter)

Because it's like, it's a magical wild west which is just as... if you're like, oh I wonder all the different angles of problematic content that one could include in an alternate history Wild West setting – it's all there, all of it. But I didn't catch any of that when I was 16 through 21, and the actual system itself just, it's so thematic, like you draw a hand of cards for your initiative, your re-rolls are all with poker chips, you can play playing card-based Hucksters, magicians

who are basically mentally playing cards with demons to cast their magic and the mechanics for this is you draw a hand of cards, and depending on what poker hand you get, it goes off better or worse. And it is, it's just at every level incredibly thematic. It was a game that I played a lot at a very formative time and so it's the one that like, I'm very much like, oh yeah, I know it's... yeah, it's Deadlands, it's Deadlands.

**HELEN**

Becky, how about you?

**BECKY**

Oh man, now that is a tough one. I've played so many systems over the years and I'm just gonna go for something which is one that I reliably enjoy running.

**HELEN**

Mmm.

**BECKY**

Cos I think that's the kind of the key for me is that I can play just, I can play anything, and I'm happy to play anything and if you ever talk to anybody from my home gaming group, they're like yeah, Becky will, you know, every time someone puts a thing up on a schedule channel saying, oh is anybody interested in this, it doesn't matter what it is, the first person in there is me saying yeah, I'll play that.

(Group Laughter)

What is it again? So I'll play anything, but I find it... I'm much, much more picky about what I'll run. I wouldn't run D and D cos I just wouldn't just enjoy running it, but what I love running is Monsterhearts.

**HELEN**

Yes.

**BECKY**

I love it to my depths of my soul, I hack, I hack it about, I run it in a really, really particular way and I run hard. I play rough when we play Monsterhearts and you know, I kind of warn people we have a ton of safety tools in play when we play it because we, we go really hard.

**HELEN**

Yes. You'll always need them for Monsterhearts.

**BECKY**

You really need them for Monsterhearts, you need them for everything but you really need them for Monsterhearts, and really kind of encouraging people to peel back the layers of their feelings and dive hard into the drama and I just think that Monsterhearts has so many tools and levers for doing that, which were really fresh when it came out.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**BECKY**

And kind of it, I think it still just stands up there doing the thing it's intended to do.

**HELEN**

Yeah, Monsterhearts is my favourite as well, that's what I was gonna say. I just...

**BECKY**

Oh no, I'm sorry, I stole your thunder!

**HELEN**

No, no, it's good, it's lovely! I love the concept and I just, I like monsters! It's even in my Twitter bio. I like monsters, I like the concept of weird things that sometimes are scary and sometimes they're good and sometimes they're bad and I just, I love the monstrous.

**JONNY**

And sometimes they're sexy!

(Travis laughs)

**BEN**

I was gonna say Becky, I can, everything you were saying, I can really, really felt that come through when you ran Bite Marks for us!

(Group Laughter)

**BECKY**

Are you okay now?

**BEN**

I had a great time, it was really good!

**HELEN**

Bite Marks is really, really good Becky. Also Becky, you're not in our Discord but there's been a lot of appreciation for Bite Marks – lots of people really, really loved it.

**BECKY**

Oh I'm so pleased, I'm so pleased you enjoyed it.

**HELEN**

Yeah, we liked it! Ben, what do you reckon your favourite is?

**BEN**

So to be honest, like first it was D and D 3.5 because it was the first game and a bunch of people that I knew were really enthusiastic about it and that's always very infectious.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**BEN**

Then it was Vampire: The Requiem, because it's kind of like D and D a bit, but you get to roll fistfuls of dice and it's slightly more story first.

**HELEN**

Oh.

**BEN**

And then it was Corporation which is really like broadly generic cyberpunk RPG which I did run on Rusty Quill Gaming actually, but yeah, it's one of those games where it's really easy to build a thing where you say oh, my stats are so good I just kill the, you know, the super-agent with the mono-filament whip that's ensconced in my fingernail. Like it's really tropey bullshit, but in a really fun way.

**HELEN**

Yeah.

**BEN**

And then I think it became Exalted, because I really respect what Exalted Third Edition is trying to do, the looming presence of Orientalism aside? Cos like that's, you know, it gets into pretty dodgy territory I think. But again, being able to roll these massive fistfuls of dice, and have this like really intricate like system which interlinks with all the different things you can do and they pop out into like really interesting builds, is really good. And then I think it ended up with Pathfinder Second, that's probably a system that I like – I like the most at the moment because I think it's a better evolution of the D20 system than D and D Fifth is, mainly I think because they got to look at D and D Fifth and then

they got to make Pathfinder Second in the same way that like Pathfinder First is better than D and D 3.5 because it's a hack of it. So you know, they have the benefit of hindsight. Yeah, and that's kind of where I'm at, except for the game that I'm most excited to try upcoming, but I'll save that.

**HELEN**

Thank you very much. So yes, I want to round out this episode, cos we are coming to time, with what each of you are excited to see either coming out or something that you're about to play or that you want to play? My answer is gonna maybe sound a bit weird because it's a game that I did consultation for – it's called Brothers in Arms. And it's a really interesting exploration of, of war and the disposability of soldiers and like the consequences of like a fascist nation state and it's an excellent setting and I really enjoyed reading it and I would like to play it some time. And it has one of the best safety sections I've ever read in it, for obvious reasons, because there's a lot of trauma in the game. I think it's, I think it's a lovely game and I'm looking forward to seeing that get published.

**JONNY**

I was really gonna do an Edwin Starr 'war, huh' joke there, but as you kept talking I was like this isn't appropriate anymore.

(Group Laughter)

**HELEN**

It's a very serious game about war!

(Group Laughter)

**JONNY**

It's a very serious game and I can't...

**HELEN**

But it is, the thesis of the game is very much 'war, what it is good for?' So, you know, that is the underlying thing. Becky, what are you looking forward to?

**BECKY**

Oh man, that's a tough one! I've got my perennial stack of games that I keep meaning to read and get into and I suppose, top of those would be The Dee Sanction.

**HELEN**

Oh.

**JONNY**

Oh! Mm.

**BECKY**

Yeah I think, I think it's just won game of the year at UKGE, I think.

**HELEN**

Oh!

**BECKY**

I think I want to say that by Paul Baldowski of All Rolled Up and the Cthulhu Hack fame, and so yeah, I think that's the, that's kind of top of my pile of things to read that I'm kind of quite curious to get to the table at the moment. So what is that going to be? Tudor, Tudor magicians.

**HELEN**

Oh, excellent.

**BECKY**

That sort of thing, isn't it?

**JONNY**

Elizabethan I think, if it's John Dee.

**BECKY**

John, yeah, yeah, I think so.

**HELEN**

I love... it's never occurred to me to play a game set in like the Tudor Court but I would be really into that, but that's partly cos I'm really into the Tudors as like a time period cos it was... it was bizarre!

**BECKY**

And Tudor occultism, and all of that good stuff.

**HELEN**

So much weird shit was happening. Travis, how about you? What you are looking forward to?

**TRAVIS**

I'm really looking forward to Avatar Legends.

**BEN**

Oh yeah.

**TRAVIS**

I know things but I can't say them cos I'm not sure what's been announced and stuff. I'm not involved, but I maybe know someone or two who is, and from what I understand, it's gonna be amazing. I did not think I would be as excited as I am, but I love the world and what they're... the ways they're allowing people to interact with that world are very fun and near and dear and like when you hear something, something...and it sparked a childhood joy in me that I did not, I have not experienced in a bit with an idea, a concept. So that's what I'm really excited for but don't know enough about, and I know it's on Kickstarter I think in their last parts right now, but that's about it.

**BEN**

They made eleventy billion dollars!

**(Group Laughter)**

**HELEN**

Is it based on Avatar, the Last Airbender?

**TRAVIS**

Both the Last Airbender and Korra, Legend of Korra, so I think they're both in there, the different timelines. And there's another one that just came out that I'm excited to play which is the Kingdoms and Warfare? It's its own game, but it's within 5E where you can basically like, my players are like, I want to run a kingdom and it's like okay, here are the rules for running a kingdom and building your domain and expanding things, and it's literally like its own simplified version of Warhammer without having to buy hundreds of miniatures, so I think it's ...

**HELEN**

That sounds like a big USP! Ben, how about you? What do you have in mind? Are you looking forward to?

**BEN**

I am now looking forward to the Avatar system cos Travis has reminded me because they're, it's the same studio that made Masks and Root.

**HELEN**

Oh!

**BEN**

Yeah! And also cos I think that might be, that might be the vector by which I get my wife in to roleplaying games!

(Group Laughter)

Cos she's resisted so far but she likes Avatar so maybe I'll get her in that way!  
That'd be good!

**HELEN**

One of us!

**BEN**

Yeah! And also I forgot about Trail of Cthulu which is another game that I really, really enjoy and is like one of my favourite systems, like the Gumshoe system is super cool. The Cthulu bit maybe not so much. But yeah, no, what I'm actually really looking forward to playing is what I've got, I've got it sitting on my desk cos I'm actively reading it which is Heart.

**JONNY**

Ah!

**HELEN**

Excellent choice.

**BEN**

By Rowan Rook and Decard. Yeah, I've just been, just been reading through the system and the ways that various characters can die and getting more and more excited about running it. So I really, really want to find a way to run it.

**HELEN**

And Jonny, how about you?

**JONNY**

I feel really awkward cos I was expecting everyone else to use it as a way to plug their stuff!

(Group Laughter)

**BEN**

I don't have any stuff to plug Jonny!

**JONNY**

Now I'm the only one.

**BEN**

I don't have any stuff to plug.

**JONNY**

I'm the, I'm the only, I'm like... cos we're working on a system at the moment called Pit Crawler that I'm legitimately really loving and really excited about cos it's a two-player RPG like inspired by like Fighting Fantasy and old adventure game books. It's very much doing a sort of ironic but also not ironic high fantasy like wizards, argh, nonsense thing and I'm having a huge amount of fun refining it and playtesting it. But I feel awkward now cos everyone else has named other peoples' work!

(Helen laughs)

And I'm like, my, the thing I'm looking forward to is me by me!

(Group laughter)

Coming out when I choose!

**BEN**

Make the games you want to see in the world mate, you know?

**HELEN AND TRAVIS**

Yeah!

**JONNY**

I mean, yeah, and I say me, it is me and Sasha, we are very much working on it together. Aside from that, I picked up a copy of Tales from the Loop recently.

**BEN**

I'd love to- yes.

**HELEN**

That's very good.

**JONNY**

Which I'm very keen to, to give a whirl to. So yeah, cos that's got a lot of like the sort of teen adventure vibes that I like, I want to see more of in a lot of RPGs but like, I don't, I haven't, I haven't found the right system to run that

stuff yet. I thought Bubblegum Shoe might be it at one point, but didn't, didn't land with our group so I'm very keen to give Tales from the Loop a spin.

**BEN**

I ran a session of it at a con once and it was, it was a lot of fun to run, so I'd be excited to see what you think about it.

**HELEN**

Excellent. All right, well we have come to end of our hour or so of chatting. This has been great. You're all so smart. You're great!

**JONNY**

So are you Helen!

**HELEN**

Thank you listeners for listening to us chat about RPGs and the gaming space. I hope that you also had fun but for now, it's goodbye from me. Goodbye! And it's goodbye from all them. Would you like to say goodbye everybody?

**BECKY**

Goodbye.

**BEN**

Goodbye.

**JONNY**

Goodbye.

## TRAVIS

Goodbye.

**(Group Laughter)**

### **[Show Theme - Outro]**

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### **[Show Theme – Outro Ends]**

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