

EGSM 014: The Game (Improv)

Content Warnings

- Explicit language
- Brief comedic blasphemy
- Innuendo & sexual references
- Discussions of: social anxiety, food, dyslexia
- Mentions of: grief, death (inc. murder), bears, memory loss, drugs, guns, arson

LYDIA

Hi I'm Helen, I'm an improviser...

GABRIEL

Hi Helen.

(Helen laughing)

LYDIA

It's okay, we're friends!

TIM

I've been showing off now for six years...

(laughter)

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show where 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 the art of improv. And I am beyond delighted to be joined by Gabriel, Lydia and Tim. As always, we shall introduce ourselves alphabetically, so Gabriel, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

GABRIEL

Hi, I am Gabriel Garcia. My pronouns are he/him and I do tech support things for Rusty Quill.

HELEN

Excellent. And very good you are at it too. Helped me out many a time.

(laughter)

GABRIEL

I try my best.

HELEN

And Lydia, what are your pronouns, and what do you do?

LYDIA

Hello! My pronouns are she/they and I do various characters in Rusty Quill shows. And I am most famous, I think for falling off my chair in Gaming and Giving 2019. So that's my main claim to fame. Other than that, Rusty Quill Gaming, Magnus Archives. I screamed a bit in a cupboard for the one with the werewolves...

HELEN

Inexplicables.

LYDIA

Inexplicables, that was it. I screamed in a cupboard.

(Helen laughing)

It was a short guest spot, and I got... I've been doing improv stuff with folks... well, with James Ross and Bryn particularly for... gosh, now it's like 15 years. Because we were in a group before the show started, so it's, it's been long times.

HELEN

Very long time.

LYDIA

That and lots of other groups. I did puppet improv for a while. That was fun.

HELEN

Gonna come back to that, that sounds great. OK. Alright. And then we've got Tim. What are your pronouns and what do you do?

TIM

Hello, my name is Tim Meredith. My pronouns are he/him. I am co-creator and one of the stars of Stellar Firma. Just finished its third season. There's bonus content coming up, but I don't know when this comes out, so I don't know if I can tell you what it is, but it's very exciting. And I also am an improviser. I do musical improv with a troop called Do the Thing, and regular old long-form improv with a group called Tiny Dynamite.

HELEN

Ooh, lovely. Also, I've just realised that I know what the bonus content is as well.

TIM

Ooh, it's exciting! Depending on whether or not the logistics work out, ooh!

HELEN

(Helen laughing)

No, I think this will be coming out before that.

TIM

That's alright then.

(laughter)

HELEN

Okay. Alright, so let's do our little sort of establishing shot of a question which is: how did we all get into improv, either as a practitioner or a... an enjoyer. Would anyone like to tell us their improv story?

TIM

I'll go first. I'm not shy!

HELEN

Okay!

TIM

I'm not shy! How dare you. So, I got into university...I got into university. Step one: get into university.

LYDIA

Wahey! Well done!

(laughter and applause)

TIM

Bam - six grand a year? Yes please. Still paying it off when I'm 30 – ooh, and some more? Thank you sir. Yes so when I went to university, I was very, very shy. Deeply shy. Didn't like to talk to people. Bit of a well of shame. The shame's still there, but it's now covered. I've covered the well, and what I've covered it with is improv. And I got involved in improv at university with the University of Nottingham Improv Society and it sort of all got out of hand from there. Moved down to Brighton, sunny Brighton, which has a really nice improv scene, and got into some groups, but yeah it was, for me, it was mainly a... it's very frightening to talk to other people, so why don't we just turn up the difficulty setting to high, so that then regular day to day interactions don't feel so frightening. And now I won't shut the fuck up. So, it clearly worked.

(laughter)

HELEN

I have...I cannot imagine you being shy, Tim.

TIM

Mmm...

HELEN

At all.

TIM

What a distant dream it is now!

(group laughter)

"Oh god, I wish he was shy. He's still singing! We're not laughing. We stopped laughing, and he's still singing!" Yeah.

HELEN

Oh! Well, I like you as you are now, and I'm sure I would have liked you then. Umm, anyone else wanna...?

LYDIA

Yeah, I should just...I feel like I can jump in, because it's a very relatable story. Unlike Tim... er, well I did get into university!

TIM

Congrats!

LYDIA

But I failed the audition for the university improvisors.

HELEN

Oh.

LYDIA

So, I remember going to watch them quite a bit. I remember my audition for it vividly because I thought I had some great jokes, and the problem was that I just kept cracking up so much, I couldn't speak.

(Helen laughing)

So it wasn't necessarily that I was laughing at my own brilliant hilarity, that was just part of it. Mostly I was laughing with nervousness. So I didn't get in. I went to see quite a bit of improv, but I didn't get in. And then it was about four, five years later I saw a Facebook advert put up by James Ross, saying "does anyone want to audition for my improv group?" And it just turned out we had a friend in common, who had gone to a different university but one where we shared a pantomime society. So I had done quite a lot of pantomime as a student, which actually weirdly involves quite a lot of improv, obviously. Pantomime for our American listeners is like what Shakespeare originally was...

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

So, you know, it's silly costumes, switching up genders and gender roles, making rude comments at the audience, and audience participation. And it has about four plots, but they are shown every single year. And you go back every year because the jokes are different. But yeah, so, just because we had a friend in common the advert showed up in my feed, so I turned up and I got in. And I think that the reason I got into that and that I really wanted to do it was for a similar sort of reason to Tim. It wasn't necessarily that I was shy, but I had been, I spent a long time...I struggled really hard with a lot of social interactions. So I would talk, that was fine, I didn't really understand that I was supposed to be quiet, but I really found a lot of like, reading other people's emotions difficult, and knowing when I was going on about a topic too long, very difficult. And like, I don't know, just everything from timing to repeating yourself enthusiastically over and over until you get the response that you want. So...

TIM

Just keep trying again and again until they like it! That's the main thing.

LYDIA

Yeah! So I thought I would go somewhere where people would pay money to see that.

(laughter)

But you know, in a similar sort of way, it's like you turn up the difficulty setting, but you do it in a kind of space where you're expected to slightly mess up a few times and... I already at that point had quite a lot of like tricks up my sleeve. For people that are awkward or struggle - secret tip: mess up deliberately early on in a conversation, and then laugh it off and be in control, and then when you mess up accidentally later, like you will have an extra half second, and people will sort of accept it. I even do that now when I'm facilitating large workshops, and it's actually confused people where they're

like... I'm running a big corporate kind of workshop thing with lots and lots of people and I'll like, I'll mess up the projector slide, and then laugh about it. And then like, the next time I run the workshop, I'll do the exact same mistake, and like, people will be like "oh what, it's part of a script?" and I'm like...

TIM

They just stand up and shout "FRAUD!" as they walk out.

(group laughter)

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah, yeah...it's like, "it's deliberate!" Like, you know, you can run through scripts in your head that give you more time and flexibility and other things. And that's all what improv does. So that was cool, and so I've done that for a long time now.

HELEN

Cool.

LYDIA

Tick. See, now I know when you're supposed to stop talking! Mm? Yeah! Look at that! Look at that, I paused and everything.

TIM

And you say "tick" so people know you're finished.

LYDIA

Exactly.

TIM

I prefer "done please!"

(laughter)

LYDIA

“Thank you, next!”

(laughter)

LYDIA

Or like in the whatsit, in the Hoopla tradition, just like slam the floor and run away...

TIM

Yeah, yeah, yeah...

(laughter)

TIM

It really upsets like an optician, but it still works.

LYDIA

Boom. Scene!

(laughter)

HELEN

Right. Now Gabriel, we were talking before we started recording how you and I are more enjoyers of the art form than...

GABRIEL

Yeah...

HELEN

...really participants. I mean, people...I guess I do improv in terms of like gaming...

LYDIA

You're a professional improviser Helen!

HELEN

I, right, right, so this is the thing...

TIM

Cash money, cash money baby!

LYDIA

You're paid by the hour! Do you know how many like people for whom improv is their whole identity don't get paid by the hour to do it?

(laughter)

HELEN

Well, like I... for me, in my head, I feel like if I am an improviser, then I have to be funny. And I, despite several people telling me I'm funny, I don't think of myself as a funny person!

(laughter)

But people, other people think I am. So...

TIM

I mean, luckily they're the ones paying, so that's alright.

HELEN

Yeah, that's true! Aah, aha.

LYDIA

Firstly, you are funny, and secondly, it's valid to do stuff that doesn't pay you money. I should like, flag that, that's very very valid.

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm – EGSM014 - Improv

HELEN

Oh yeah!

TIM

Counterpoint: no. Unless-- This is a Tim Meredith counterpoint: no! If you're not paid, it doesn't matter!

LYDIA

It's not real! Grr!

TIM

Capitalism, hooray! Grr!

LYDIA

So the first two seasons of Rusty Quill just don't exist.

TIM

Yeah, they don't. They don't, no.

(laughter)

You think they do, but it's like...

LYDIA

Until we got an advert or whatever it was.

TIM

It's like the Berenstein Bears.

GABRIEL

There's a bottom line to every piece of art.

(laughter)

HELEN

So, yeah, Gabriel, tell me how you got into improv?

GABRIEL

Umm, yeah, so my improv story is a bit different from these two. I did make it into college, but I didn't actually go. So as a result, I did not end up working with an actual improv group. But it was something that always interested me. It was like, like there's comedy and then there's like the scary comedy, which I, which is what I pictured as improv. But I never, I didn't really start getting into it, until one day all of my friends decided they wanted to play Dungeons and Dragons. And I was all for it, until no one else wanted to DM. Because that's always how that works. And they handed me all the books and said "you're going to make a campaign for us." And I said "okay!" And we did a short little, a very short run, that I actually had a lot of fun with, and I decided that I wanted to do things like that more. And when I started working at a games store, later in high school slash early college, or college years, I didn't actually... when I started to work in there, there was an opportunity to actually be a dungeon master like for the store, and run groups for customers and things.

HELEN

Oh, that's cool. Professional dungeon master.

GABRIEL

So when I saw...yeah, exactly!

TIM

Oh so it was real, because you were paid. Interesting.

(laughter)

GABRIEL

So when I saw that, I immediately wanted to do that but I was terrified of running games for strangers, so I ended up actually doing a very short run of improv classes to kind of more, just to get more comfortable with doing weird voices and making, and collaborating on weird jokes with strangers. And it

ended up helping a lot with that job, or that part of that job, and it just continued from there. I still have not joined an improv group, and I don't think I will anytime soon, but it is... I do occasionally go to shows, and I've read a few books on improv and it's a very interesting subject. It's also helped me like in completely unrelated parts of my life. Like I've been a musician for a long time and practising improv has helped with being in like jam bands and things like that.

HELEN

Ahh...

GABRIEL

And just being able to read the people around you is a useful skill in a lot of life.

TIM

And taking, and taking a failure as maybe not like "Oh well let's start again", but "okay that wasn't what I meant to do, but it might be better than what I was trying to do. So let's have a go at it." And that is, that is quite handy.

GABRIEL

Absolutely.

LYDIA

Like a lot of my day-to-day job has involved me being in kind of panel discussions, or in workshop things, about quite like complicated policy stuff, with often people who are vastly more senior than me, and there's something about... there's something that I very much credit improv with, of always being able to kind of come up with a comment or an understanding, or respond to things and just having that extra confidence to re-shape the thing you were going to say, to draw quickly on the knowledge that you have, and reapply it to a kind of slightly changed circumstance. And like I don't think that every fun, silly skill that you take joy in needs to have application in your working life to be valid...

HELEN

Mmm...

GABRIEL

Sure.

LYDIA

But like, for me it super has...

HELEN

It just often does.

LYDIA

You know, yeah, yeah. It absolutely has. In day-to-day life, I'm a much more relaxed person because I can read what people around me are doing, so I'm less likely to panic and like, yeah I'm better at job stuff.

HELEN

This is so interesting for me to hear because I've never, I've always been this kind of loud person!

(laughter)

Like I was never shy! I was like, pretty young I was like "I want to be on stage, and yell at people!" So, I've never had to really get over any fears like that, and then of course, like I said, I never thought of the tabletop stuff that I did as improv. I thought of it as, I thought those were like new skills I was learning in terms of how to play a game.

GABRIEL

I mean it's a combination of the two.

HELEN

And for me it was really revolutionary to realise “oh adults also play!”

LYDIA

Yeah!

HELEN

Play is important, at all stages of life, and I can be silly and pretend to do things.

TIM

But, when googling “adult play”, you have to be very careful...

(laughter)

HELEN

Oh!

TIM

As long as you keep that in mind...

GABRIEL

Safe search on...

TIM

It’s fine. Adults play, but they also “play”, and you just need to know what the difference is and you’ll be alright.

HELEN

What do you think you need to be good at improv?

TIM

I think one thing you don't need is to be good at jokes, and it's very important that you don't think that when you go in as well. Because a lot, a lot of early improv is "gosh I need to make some jokes" and that's almost the antithesis of improv.

HELEN

Can you go into that a little bit more, Tim?

TIM

Yeah. So there is a...so the real fundamentals of improv is agreeing with, and building upon, somebody else's stuff. You know, they give you an, you call it an "offer", they give you some sort of theme, some sort of topic, or some sort of...you know, it could be a sentence, whatever. And then you build upon it and you build a world together, and it continues. A joke, by its very nature, is a closing off and an ending. Like a joke is kind of an end point. So, if you start a scene, and you think "oh that's funny" and somebody's like, "oh there's these things are happening, these things happening..." Jokes are often subversive. So, if like "these things happen, and these things are happening...ah well actually, I'm going to say these things aren't happening, because that's what you thought was going on, and they're not." And now it's over, and the scene can't really continue in that traditional joke format. Now you can have a big discussion about, well, you know, jokes come in different forms, but in the kind of the very stand-up-y traditional joke format, what you're basically doing is ending scenes. And it's also very difficult for the other person to interact with you on that joke, because you know what the joke is, but they don't. So, all of these things mean that if you come into it with an attitude of "I'm going to make jokes and punchlines", you're going to have a lot of scenes that have a good funny bit in them, and then have to stop, because you've ended them in some way.

HELEN

I see.

LYDIA

And I think, building on that, that the thing that you need, but which I think with work you can very much build and learn from improv, so you don't need to start out with it, is a capacity to trust...

TIM

Yeah.

HELEN

Mmm...

LYDIA

...and a willingness to trust, and a kind of vulnerability and taking seriously other people's trust in you. So, if you're going out on stage, without a script in mind, the only thing that you can rely on is the other people there. And, so long as you trust them absolutely, you will come up with something entertaining. Especially if you have practised for a long time, and you know that the other person has similar kinds of structures and end goals and ideas in their mind. But even if things begin to go a bit belly up, or if they begin to go really really well, and you can kind of see where the game is in the scene, we can talk about "the game" in a bit as well, it's probably key...

HELEN

Ooh.

LYDIA

...but like, if you can see where the scene is going, and you can trust that the other person is seeing a similar kind of thing, or you trust that they will pick up what you're putting down and that they know that they can put down stuff that you will also pick up, and that you will do that building together. And that's why I think that improv's really cool as a thing to do, even just as an exercise it is very good if, for whatever reason, trust in social situations is something that you struggle with or something that makes you anxious. Not necessarily if you're shy, that's one thing. If you just, like, sometimes get anxious, if you struggle to understand what's going on, if you find yourself

sometimes getting aggressive because you don't really...like in my case, I just didn't always understand what people's expressions meant, so lots of learning and practice, you just learn that trust is okay and can get you to a good place, and you practice off stage, and then good things happen, and so it's, it's kind of something that you need to have but you really I suppose only need to come to it, willing to learn it...

TIM

Yeah.

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

...because you can learn it by doing.

TIM

And you will be crap. There's no getting around it. You've got to go in with an attitude, rather than a skill.

LYDIA

Yeah.

(laughter)

TIM

Because unless you've already done it, well you know it'd be like "I'm going to take up archery...oh I'm bad at archery, so I shouldn't do it." Well, what did you expect? You're going to need to...

LYDIA

"Oh no I didn't hit the target, aargh..."

TIM

Yeah, exactly. And I suppose the thing that often I think keeps people away is practising something, and failing quietly and privately on your own is one thing. You have to do improv in public, so you have to fail in front of other people which is what makes it difficult, but which also makes it very valuable, because mostly improv is getting out of your own way and realising that they're not failures. They are opportunities, to sound like a really horrible sales seminar, "every failure is an opportunity to grow!"

(laughter)

LYDIA

"So keep investing in my scheme!"

TIM

"I've a very reasonably priced pamphlet that you can buy on this subject!"

(laughter)

Yeah, getting out your own way, and not worrying about failure and...because I think that, coming back to my point about making jokes, you don't make the jokes, you hang around in the right headspace until jokes occur around you.

LYDIA

Yeah.

TIM

They will happen. It's almost impossible for them to not, unless you are in such a serious space, that they couldn't possibly. And even then, I think improv is quite a good way of taking really quite serious topics, very carefully, and engaging in humour in them, because, you know, you just kind of state the facts, and the humour in them emerges, in a way that...

LYDIA

Because, like some of the, the biggest laughs that I've had in improv have been watching people that are really skilled and doing pretty serious stuff, and are even doing quite tragic scenes, but human experience is inherently hilarious, right? Like even, even the awful bits. And like, in the absolute darkest times of my life, there has been, like, absurdity, if not levity. And so you can have, like, I'm literally like thinking of something and cracking up now, like, people did a scene where some... clearly someone had died and it was awful, and they were grieving and someone had come over and tried to help. But like, it was just, so they were trying to hold the other person's grief as like the centre of the thing. They'd made a lasagne, and they realised there were no oven gloves, and they were just like desperately trying to listen and hear, and like, but also the lasagne was burning, and so like, in that like, panicking, trying to hold... and we've all kind of been there, of trying to hold someone else's like emotions and their mental head space, as like the centre. So while concentrating, just grabs the lasagne pan without the oven gloves and then the other person turns around and just starts opening up. Just standing there like holding the hot thing...

(laughter)

...and I still remember it, even though that was like four or five years ago I saw that scene, the like... the thing that is genuinely recognisable, and would be so hard to write about, but emerges from that complete trust of people, that are in the same space, that have built this thing, and then it going slightly more absurd. But like honestly it was funny at the stages before that, where he was trying to do quite normal things, while completely holding this person's like... grief in mind. And like just struggling with the awkwardness of it. But then it just escalated and became more and more strange. But because it was still trying to be so serious, it was still hilarious.

GABRIEL

The thing that I always struggled with in, you know, with improv in the form that I do it, at least, and I think it's something that you really need to be good at, is killing your darlings. I think that's huge in improv. Any time I've run a tabletop game, and I've come in with a bunch of plot points lined out, and a bunch of plans, and encounters and things to do, goes off the rails immediately.

TIM

So lovingly crafted! So lovingly crafted over hours!

GABRIEL

Yeah, so lovingly crafted. It goes off the rails with a single decision ten minutes in, and I have to, you know, to make up everything from then on anyway. And I think...it's taught me that that's, you know, I'll go into a situation with some idea of how things are going to go, but for the most part, I've learned to not be as attached to things like that. And I think that's a lot of the same in improv. You know, you can't really...like you were saying Tim, you can't go in there with like, you know, jokes already starting to be formed, and preconceived like things that you are going to do, or else it's going to put you in a box and I think just building off of what Lydia was saying on trust. It's trusting the other...

LYDIA

Such an improviser!

GABRIEL

(laughter)

It's...it's trust in the other people, but it's also, it's a lot of trust in yourself...

LYDIA

Yes.

GABRIEL

... to recognise that like, you know, I'm gonna have... you know, I'm gonna have situations that I don't know how to respond immediately and I'm gonna have to trust that the first thing that comes out of my mouth is gonna be the right path, and even if it's not, it's the path I'm going down anyway, and...

HELEN

Mmm.

LYDIA

Absolutely. Yeah, and that's one of the reasons why I think it gives you a kind of confidence that is necessarily not cocky.

GABRIEL

Yeah.

LYDIA

Like it's a confidence that comes from like knowing that you can cope, but not, but that isn't a confidence that makes you want to become the star. It's like...

TIM

Yeah. The kind of confidence where you can give it to someone else and be like "ah, okay, what you've got is good, so you have it because the show will be good" as opposed to "I will come out the other end, looking really bloody smart."

GABRIEL

It's a hot potato of confidence.

(laughter)

HELEN

It's been really interesting listening to you all talk, because this is a... I asked this question, what do you think you need to be good at improv, without knowing what my own answer was. And so now I have lots and lots of thoughts.

LYDIA

What is your answer?

HELEN

So, what I reckon, after, you know, reluctantly realising that I am indeed an improviser myself...

(laughter)

TIM

Such a shameful admission.

LYDIA

“Hi I’m Helen, I’m an improviser...”

GABRIEL

Hi Helen.

(laughter)

LYDIA

It’s okay, we’re friends!

TIM

I’ve been showing off now for six years...

(laughter)

HELEN

I feel like I am...I worry that I’m about to just summarise what everyone has said, but I think that one of things that you do need to be good at improv is like, an ability to... No I’m gonna say it with the phrase that’s coming into my head. The ability to sort of just cast yourself on the mercy of whoever else is on the stage...

TIM

Yeah.

GABRIEL

Okay, yeah.

LYDIA

Yeah.

HELEN

It feels to me like it's a, it's a trapeze act.

LYDIA

Yeah.

HELEN

Um, that one where you're dangling upside down and they're dangling upside down, and you have to let go and they have to catch you.

TIM

Yeah.

HELEN

And I think I'm actually very lucky that the majority of my improv experience, has been specifically improv experience where I've been aware that it is meant to be a light-hearted, sort of comedy type show, despite what the plot says...

LYDIA

Despite all the evidence and content...

(laughter)

TIM

The scene opens. I'm covered in blood, time for fun.

(laughter)

HELEN

I think I've been very lucky to have a group around me that I could trust.

TIM

Yeah.

HELEN

And that trust did have to build, I think, because I didn't know Alex and I didn't know Bryn, like at all, for that first, for that first audition episode. The one in which I play a character with no name.

LYDIA

Do you? I can't remember who that was?

HELEN

Yeah, it's a weird...it's a weird one that, you know, it was my audition episode, and yet I did not have a character.

LYDIA

That's strange how that happened.

HELEN

For listeners not in the know, this is an in-joke about the Beowulf episodes of Rusty Quill Gaming...

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah, I haven't actually forgotten Helen's performance. It was an incredible performance...

(laughter)

And genuinely that, that, can that bring us into the discussion of “the game”?
Because that was a perfect example of a game in improv.

HELEN

Do you know what? We’re going to go to a break...

(Lydia wails loudly)

...and we’ll talk about it afterwards.

(group laughter)

TIM

Oh no, Lydia has died. Lydia has unfortunately died and will not be able to appear in the rest of this episode of Enthusiasgasm. See you soon!

GABRIEL

That is unfortunate because the rest of this episode we’ll be talking about “the game”.

TIM

Yeah. They would have loved this, if only they weren’t dead now.

(Lydia screams comedically in the distance)

GABRIEL

Very sad, very sad.

[BREAK]

HELEN

And welcome back. So Lydia, please elaborate about “the game”.

LYDIA

I am dead, and therefore cannot.

TIM

Lydia is dead, and we have killed them. Much like God.

LYDIA

Yeah! Much like God is my band name.

TIM

Such a very sort of like chill way. “Um, I’m much like God. I’m not God, I’m just, you know...”

LYDIA

Yeah like, let’s not go overboard!

HELEN

Just very similar!

TIM

Reign your neck in.

LYDIA

Like, you know? The game, in improv is...it’s basically something that keeps happening, but more.

TIM

Yeah.

HELEN

Okay. So, in the break you wanted to bring up the first game I played with the RQG lot as a good example?

LYDIA

Yes.

HELEN

And I do think that is a good idea, because we should not assume that everybody who listens to this podcast even knows who we are. So...what happened was, the first time we recorded, er, I recorded with Rusty Quill Gaming to replace James Ross, my nemesis, because he had left and you needed another player. And so my audition episode was a three-parter called Thanes of Beowulf, and we were all given the same character sheet. We were all barbarians, so the only things that we could change, we all had the same stats and everything, the only things that we could change were like names and personalities and... we all had proficiency in bagpipes, as well. I remember that.

LYDIA

Yeah, I don't think that really came up. But that's fine, you kill your darlings!

HELEN

You do, you do.

TIM

Alex sitting there thinking "but I've written such a good bagpipe scene...when will they get to the bagpipe festival?!"

(laughter)

HELEN

So, I decided my character was called Ulf the Unremembered. And that he was cursed by a witch that everybody would forget who he was, because he was very concerned with building a legacy, but he pissed off a witch, and she said “well no one will ever remember you ever again.”

LYDIA

And it continued from there.

HELEN

Yes. Every time I said something in a scene, everyone was like “who are you?” What was the, you kept saying “a stowaway”!

LYDIA

It would often be genuine delight that you’d turned up because we were playing barbarians who were quite distracted and not necessarily academically inclined. So like Bryn was playing someone who was either obsessed with or kept killing bears, and kept pointing bears out when they weren’t actually bears, but he just kept turning around in delight being like “A FRIEND, A NEW FRIEND, WHERE DID YOU COME FROM?”

(laughter)

And lots of things. And even to the point where we’d swum down to the bottom of a lake in the middle of nowhere having fought a leopard or something. We were just like “oh hello, fancy seeing you here new friend, blub, blub, blub”, you know underwater and it just kept happening. But the fact that it was the thing that then people in the Discord, people on Twitter and Tumblr and whatever were still making the jokes, because it’s a nice simple game.

TIM

Yeah.

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

The point is that you're always doing fascinating things. You're part of the group, you're doing the thing, and then, you're not, like "oh hello, new friend?" And it's, yeah.

TIM

Yeah.

HELEN

And it became...it ended up being like part of what determined the ending of that one-shot, because eventually Ulf got so fed up with no one remembering who he was, killed the entire village!

(laughter)

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah, it was like, "if you don't know who I am, rargh!"

TIM

"You'll remember that, you bastards!"

(laughter)

LYDIA

And it was the fact that we, and I think it's just a really lovely example of what we'd all been saying about like confidence and trust, like, it was genuinely I think quite scary for everyone. Like you, coming for your first audition, because of course James we'd lost to the, you know the tragedy of parenthood.

TIM

Yeah. We mourn for him every day.

LYDIA

And...I shouldn't say, I am the godmother of the child, so like, I'm pro the child!

TIM

So you know first-hand.

LYDIA

I'm pro, I'm pro the child...

TIM

It's not what you said off the call, okay, no but continue yeah...

LYDIA

What, hey, what, no! Shush! Um, but like, you know we'd had the same people around the table for quite a while...

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

...and it was like "can we do this without..." and James is very loud and funny, "can we do this without James?" And you turned up, and you didn't know half the people there, and the other two of us you knew from very different contexts, right? Like, we knew each other from...

HELEN

And not that well!

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah, yeah! But the fact is that you set something up that was funny. And then there was a sort of, like, tentative "oh, who are you?" And you just ran with it. And so it could escalate and escalate and escalate, and by the end we were just like...absolutely in tears of laughter.

(laughter)

TIM

A game is something, as you say, it happens more than once. Patterns and repetition are inherently funny, ask any toddler. But a good one is a game that everyone can play. Like it's not exclusionary, by its very nature, anybody can join in. And not only does it make it funny, but it also makes it fun, which are two different things because there are many things that are very funny but not fun at all.

LYDIA

Yep.

HELEN

Mmm.

TIM

But improv tries to be both. It doesn't always succeed, but it tries.

(laughter)

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

HELEN

That's really useful. Are there any other like improv terms that we should talk about or know?

LYDIA

We've already talked about "yes and" which is about building on...

HELEN

I don't think we defined it though.

LYDIA

Mm. It's just the rule.

TIM

It's a concept very bluntly delivered by the phrase "yes and." Somebody says something, and you say "yes, that is the case, and that..." And when you start, you literally, there are exercises where you say "yes and" but it's more a habit. Because you can say "no". Like you can say the word "no", whilst still totally accepting everything somebody's given to you and building upon it.

LYDIA

Like refusing to recognise that Ulf exists.

TIM

Yeah.

(laughter)

LYDIA

Our denial of Ulf's existence and character was our yes'ing to your game.

HELEN

Yeah. Oh that makes sense. I want to talk about if we have any favourite sketches that we've seen or done. Or like, good improvisational moments that you've enjoyed, and Gabriel, I am going to come to you on this. I want you to start us off, if that's okay. Has there ever been something where, because you said that you've been DM'ing for a while and you found that, if you ever planned anything it went off the rails. So did you ever like cope with something new and you were like "oh that was quite good actually?"

GABRIEL

So, my current entire campaign that I've been running for about a year and a half has been one long improv.

Rusty Quill Enthusiasm – EGSM014 - Improv

(laughs)

HELEN

Oh really?

GABRIEL

My players don't know that. They frequently ask to see my notes, and you know, they want to see, you know, everything that I've planned out, and the sprawling campaign that I've created for them. I wrote notes for like the first chapter, and then they took over from there.

TIM

And you've just been holding blank sheets of paper this whole time?

(laughter)

LYDIA

Incredible.

GABRIEL

Well, the great thing is we do it over Discord. So I'm just like...

(bangs on table)

"Oh yes, I am looking at my notes..."

(laughter)

"I'm totally not just thinking of what to do next!"

(laughs)

In the past, I've DM'd that I've planned out a lot more, but I just...I knew this group of people, I've known them for a long time, they're my friends. And I just wanted to, to be a bit more loose with this one. And so, they have been, you know, a lot of the decisions, like every plot point, at this point, is a result of a decision that they've made at some point. And it's just...it's interesting when

tabletop games are, you know, more collaborative I feel like? And I guess the example that I was leading towards, is there was a little...there was a chapter that we played that had a huge plot twist at the end, right? I won't go into it, because that's not going to be interesting to anyone but me and this group, but, you know, there was a point like four sessions into this chapter, that one of my players... like I heard, you know, them get an idea, and they said "oh my God, like, this clue, this clue, and this clue, like, this is the plot twist of the chapter. Like that's insane!" And I'm sitting there like, that was all coincidence, but that's a brilliant idea for...

(laughter)

...for a plot twist! You know what, you guessed it!

TIM

Yeah, well done!

GABRIEL

Yes, I have been carefully placing all of these clues this entire chapter, it definitely didn't just all happen to line up. And I think the reason it lined up was because this campaign has been so collaborative that it's just...things like that naturally come out of the story.

TIM

Yeah.

GABRIEL

So, yeah, no one tell my players that there aren't actually any notes for this campaign.

(laughter)

LYDIA

That's the true plot twist!

GABRIEL

Yeah.

HELEN

It's between us, and however many listeners we get!

TIM

It's a really good magic trick that you described there, and it's what we often use in the stage version. Like, we'll do shows, and people come up to you and go "it was so cool how you had this bit, and you had that bit, and then they came together and they all did this!" And I'll be going "I didn't notice that happened..."

(laughter)

"...but I'm not going to tell you that, because (a) I want to look real good and (b) no one likes to be told oh no, no, no, that wasn't that..." It's so much more fun to be like "Yeah! Isn't that great how it all came together?"

(laughter)

GABRIEL

Planned from the start!

TIM

It's a great life skill. Take credit where you can get it. Really do.

(laughter)

HELEN

Yeah, I should do that more often, actually. I can be honest to a fault. So, I will try and...I will try and make people feel good by making them feel clever, in future, yeah.

TIM

And sort of to kind of build on that a little bit, the favourite source of games and source of fun, is often in, ooh we can use some terminology, the cross-initiation. Where you both come with a thing, and you both basically lay it on the table at the same time, and you see what that does. So, neither of you knows what's going on, but you lay it out and go "right, what's now happened?" because you'll come up with stuff that you would never have come up with if you sat down together and thought "right let's think of a fun scene." I have a good example of that in a scene that I can remember. It was ages ago, we were doing a show at The Komedia, and I came on at the back, and started filling a hot air balloon at the same time two of the other performers came in at the front, and started breaking up.

(laughter)

So they were having quite an intense breaking up scene, and I had already established myself as a man midway through filling a hot air balloon. So immediately the implication is, they've come for a hot air balloon date, and midway there, they've realised actually they're breaking up, so as the conversation goes on, I'm inflating and deflating the balloon, depending on how I reckon it's going.

(laughter)

So it looks like, "you know what, I think they're going to make it through this!"

(Tim makes inflating sound effect)

"Let's fill up the balloon!" "Ooh no, that was a mistake to say, this is over!"

(Tim makes deflating sound effect)

(laughter)

So I'm just at the back as a sort of weird relationship barometer. And neither of us came up with that, and for most of the start of the scene, they didn't know what I was doing, because they were facing out and I was behind. But yeah, we wouldn't have come up with that as an idea, but it sort of just

emerged. And everyone was like “oh God, what a good joke!” and you’re like “yes, one that we made...mm hmm, yep, made it.”

GABRIEL

Right.

HELEN

What about you Lyd, do you have a favourite thing you’ve done?

LYDIA

So, a few things stand out from like my old...in the old Fat Kitten days, where there were scenes that went like unexpectedly emotional. Like there was one where me and Bryn did a scene in like rehearsal, where it was an alphabet scene, where you have to start every line with the next letter of the alphabet, it was just one of the many exercises you do to kind of get your brain going. And it just turned into this thing where he was like old, grizzled tube maintenance worker, and I was like, young newbie, like on my work experience. And the crux of it was that there are terrible ancient monsters down in the tubes and that is what you hear scream, when the train’s coming through. And he had a massive gun, and I just had a stick, because it turned out when it was my turn to say something that it was the letter S. So he was like “and that’s why I gave you a...” and I was like “...stick? A STICK?!”

(laughter)

And so it was just like, well you know, and then we head off deep into the tunnels and there was a like, you know, will we...you know, W, will we come back? Why I don’t know, um, thing. And I had that with a couple of things. I had like an end of the world one with James Ross on stage I remember where it was just like, we were, I think we were like burning a television or something, and he was trying to tell me what was on TV before the world ended, and I was being some kind of, again, weird kid that didn’t know.

TIM

Apocalypse teen!

LYDIA

Yeah, apocalypse teen that didn't know about like, pop TV references.

TIM

Bottled water?! Alright granddad, quiet down...

LYDIA

Yeah, it was like The Simpsons, they'll be gone, you know, whatever. And like those things where something just works, and it was, it's good. I remember those. But I think one of the things recently is I've gotten into...so obviously I do a lot of like foresight research work for different kinds of innovation companies and stuff, and I got over the last few years I've been doing more teaching with that. So, I've been teaching a master's course on futures thinking and world building, and I have basically turned a few like improv games into things that the students can do as part of this design course, where they're coming up with a world and problems to solve and new technologies. And then they're using that for their kind of design course. And it's just been kind of amazing where, doing improv with no expectation of comedy, I'm sort of seeing people come up with really strange and sometimes very dark and often absurd sort of ideas for weird new tech. And then people that sort of come in quite awkwardly, being like "I'm an engineer" and then by the end they're telling quite a kind of deep and complex story, because I've set them up with like...they have to create an object, they have to create some like characters, and they don't know that they're doing really basic improv games.

HELEN

Okay, so we've actually, we're actually nearly at the end of the episode.

LYDIA

Oh no!

HELEN

We're going to have to call this episode to a close. This, I think this has been a very good episode. I'm very pleased with all of you.

GABRIEL

Yeah.

LYDIA

Yeah.

HELEN

Thank you very much.

TIM

We did podcast well!

LYDIA

We did story tell word thing! Woo!

HELEN

This has been lovely. This has been genuinely lovely. Listeners, I hope you have enjoyed it too, and I will see you in the next episode. But for now, it's goodbye from me, goodbye, and its goodbye from all of my lovely guests. Do you all want to say goodbye?

EVERYONE

Bye!

TIM

Prego!

(laughter)

HELEN

You're terrible.

[Show Theme - Outro]

HELEN

Enthusigasm is a podcast distributed by Rusty Quill and licensed under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial share alike 4.0 international license. It is directed by Helen Gould, produced by Lowri Ann Davies with executive producers Alexander J Newall and April Sumner, and edited by Marisa Ewing, Tessa Vroom, Jeffrey Nils Gardner, and Catherine Rinella. Thanks for listening.

[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

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