

[Intro plays, an upbeat, arcade game-like tune.]

JONNY

Hello, and welcome to “No One Wants to Hear Your RPG Stories,” a podcast where we tell RPG stories in order to help you with running games, and playing games, and just generally enjoying the rich, wide world of tabletop roleplaying. So, first off— who are we? We are Macguffin & Co., I am Jonathan Sims— and who are you?

SASHA

I’m Sasha Sienna.

JONNY

And we design, run, and just generally play a lot of tabletop roleplaying games. And board games. And all sorts of analogue games, but this one specifically is about roleplaying games.

SASHA

I feel like when I said “I’m Sasha Sienna,” I said as if I was asking you like, “And I’m...Sasha Sienna? Right?”

JONNY

Far as I'm aware. If not, there's stuff we need to talk about off-podcast.

SASHA

Yeah.

JONNY

Yeah.

SASHA

Yeah. Let's just assume going forward—ugh, that's office-speak—let's just
assume for now that I am—

JONNY

(Simult.) So what I'd really like to action is—

SASHA

[groans] Oh, god.

[Both laugh.]

SASHA

Maybe we should get some artwork for this podcast so we can refer to it as
“the creative.”

JONNY

Well, now we’ve reached that level of synergy, I think it’s important for us to
push forward on our holistic growth journey—

SASHA

Ugh!

[Both laugh.]

JONNY

Okay. So, today we’re going to be talking about worldbuilding. We’ve had a
couple of questions through that we thought we could kind of roll together
into the topic, so from James Gibson on Patreon: “In a campaign, what ways
are there of handling off-screen events if you want to give your players
some sense of what’s happening in other parts of the world? Cutaway
scenes? Letters written from other NPCs? Oneshots featuring other
characters? Or just accept that the spotlight of the world is focused on the
PCs and nowhere else?”

SASHA

And Iris, @inyw21 on Twitter says: "Hi! What's your advice for worldbuilding? I'm terrible at it."

JONNY

Oh, I'm sure you're not that bad, Iris.

SASHA

We thought that we could combine those.

JONNY

Yeah, because I think what James is asking is not just the practicality, because honestly, all those? Yeah. Every one of those— great suggestion. But I think there's a much more general question of, how you make a world feel alive—

SASHA

(Simult.) And rich. Yeah.

JONNY

And rich. And how it feels, not just like— a very closed sandbox for the players.

SASHA

(Simult.) I mean, it's how you make it feel like a world, right? Not just how you make it feel like a room.

JONNY

Yeah. So I think we're going to start with talking generally about worldbuilding, sort of from the ground up. How do you create a world?

SASHA

Well, I think this is a really great question for us specifically to answer, because if I do say so myself, which I do, clearly, publicly on this podcast, I think that worldbuilding is something that you and I working together are really good at, and also I know something that we just love so much.

JONNY

Well, it is the thing that we do on Patreon.

SASHA

It's the main thing that we do because I think it's our favorite part of roleplaying games, just saying.

JONNY

If anyone doesn't actually know, we create what are called "micro-settings," which are sort of miniature worlds or parts of a wider world in which a specific small campaign can be set. We have some free ones of those on our website and sell some through Itch and also have some available on Patreon.

SASHA

Oh, there's probably—by the time this comes out— a Kickstarter coming soon as well.

JONNY

Ooh! And maybe a Kickstarter coming soon. Watch this space— well, listen to this— watch the space where you have been listening to this—

SASHA

Well, that might be on like, a train or something, don't just stay there—

JONNY

(Simult.) Anyway— dialing back—

SASHA

(Simult.) Anyways, moving on— we've only got so much time— *[laughs]*

JONNY

Yeah. Worldbuilding.

SASHA

Worldbuilding! So, as we're saying, I think we do this really, really well, and I think that one of the reasons that we tend to do this consistently well is because the first thing that we think about when we're designing— not always, but a lot of the time— when we're designing, we're like, "Okay what is the game here?" And that to us, that usually means "Who are these people in relation to the world they are in?"

JONNY

Yeah. Because this is roleplaying, so, often if you approach worldbuilding from the sense of "Oh, what's a really interesting world?" you can build this wonderfully intricate world with really interesting characters, but it is kind of static, it's this thing you've created, and then when it actually comes to placing characters within it, it either comes off a bit generic, where it's like "Well, I guess the characters are questers?"

SASHA

I think the thing is, you said, "It's roleplaying," right, and so you should be starting with the role in this world that you are playing. I think— if I can talk about video games for a second—

JONNY

Uh, no.

SASHA

[dejected] Okay, never mind. No, I mean, I really enjoy—

JONNY

[laughing] Sorry. Please.

SASHA

So, I really enjoyed playing *Fallout 3*. Then I came to play *Fallout: New Vegas*, and there was so much about it that I thought was so cool, and I loved the aesthetics of it, but honestly, I found the Courier to be like, "What is my purpose?"

JONNY

Really?

SASHA

Yeah! It like— the role of that character just bounced around—

JONNY

(Simult.) I literally found it to be the exact opposite, 'cause like, the whole thing about *Fallout 3* to me is actually kind of a similar problem, like you've got this character who's kind of deliberately— I suppose it does make sense in the character you are given is one who is not part of the world outside, and I guess it's because you are expected to not be familiar with the world of *Fallout*, so you are given a character who would not be, so that is how you relate to the world at every point.

SASHA

Well, I felt like for me, that was the specific role that I could slot into, this sort of outsider—

JONNY

(Simult.) Whereas for me, the Courier is like, "Oh, no, you are very much a part of this world, and you're a part of this world that is currently..." Like, I think you're right that *Fallout: New Vegas* has less immediate direction in

terms of what— it kind of assumes that you're reading vengeance into your own motivation.

SASHA

That's true, and I have to say vengeance is not a motivation that I generally connect with. I do tend to bounce hard off of vengeance narratives because I just don't find that to be a compelling motivator for me in a game. I'd just much rather kind of, "Great, I got away alive," and live my life, but the thing is in *Fallout: New Vegas* is that the world is much richer.

JONNY

Yeah. But it's—

SASHA

(Simult.) But it didn't connect with me for that reason. Anyway, that's video games.

JONNY

(Simult.) That's a long tangent about video games—

SASHA

Which is explicitly not what we do.

JONNY

But it is interesting, I think, that it is a surprising rarity for video games to give any thought to who your character is within the world, often it is just like, "Oh, you're the 'Chosen One,'" and that means it's your job to do these things. And the story is just kind of happening to you as you move forward.

SASHA

Yeah, whereas I think both you and I, when we come to design worlds and the player characters' role within those worlds, we are always embedding our characters as in the middle of this world— they are never gonna be an outsider who's more powerful than the others— well unless we were really playing around with that trope. So, Jonny, do you wanna talk us through, 'cause I think you're really great at this specific thing— what do you think throughout our micro-settings is some of the ways that we've done that the best?

JONNY

I think largely, because with our microsettings we generally come up with— so far we've generally come up with, almost a weird job, and built a world in which that job works. Like space ghost-hunters, with overtones of whaling, was like "Oh that's a really interesting job! What world allows for that?" And

that kind of very naturally centers the players at the center of— in some ways at the center of this world, but certainly at the center of the part of the world that you are examining. I think it's all too easy to spend days imagining this huge world map with all this intricate global stuff, and your players are not going to engage with most of it. It may be what you should've done is spent a day really fleshing out the complex interpersonal politics of a village, because that is the village where the characters are going to be spending most of their adventures starting.

SASHA

I think that you really hit on a great point there when you said that often energy you spent fleshing out this huge wide expansive world is lost energy. And the thing is, it's not actually because your players won't engage with it— because I think most players, especially most new players who come to tabletop roleplaying games with an expectation that it's going to be related to the world of say, fantasy novels or fantasy films, where that sort of thing really does work because it's directed by a writer who is going to take you to all these places, you know— when its a table roleplaying game, your players can try and engage with that stuff, but the thing is, that's not actually what's going to make your world feel real. Because in our actual day-to-day lives, the richness and expansiveness of the world does not actually feel as real to

us as what we eat for breakfast every day, and that's always I think going to be where your energy's really going to pay dividends.

JONNY

Yeah, I think in *Ghost Ship*, we ended up dedicating more words to a grumpy bassoonist that you're probably going to encounter more on a spaceship than the entirety of planet Earth.

SASHA

[laughing] Yeah.

JONNY

Because like, it's important to know how planet earth relates to this world and these people, but it's not actually what's going to make it feel real. It's not actually where the heart of the world is going to be. And I think— I mean, in our microsettings, we generally go, "Background: What are the general aspects of the world, the grand level concepts of the world or the setting?"

SASHA

And "Who are you in it?"

JONNY

Yeah, and afterwards, it's characters, so like, you have an overall sense of the world, you have who you are within that world. Then, NPCs and locations, because you want something real to tie them down, and secrets, because you want secrets.

SASHA

It's not very fun without a secret.

JONNY

And what's interesting is that a secret does not have to be something that is going to be revealed. Because if you know secrets about the NPCs and you know what their actual thoughts and motivations are, even if it doesn't actually come up, it will inform your world. It will mean that your NPCs are not simply reacting to players. If you know that the innkeeper really, really wants to embarrass his brother who— he's opened up a tavern in the big city and he's doing really well— and so this innkeeper has a huge chip on his shoulder. If you know that, you don't ever need to say that. The innkeeper doesn't need to give the players a quest to go and, I don't know, burn down The Hearty Dragon in Highburg. It's just that if you know that about the innkeeper, then the innkeeper is never just going to be reacting solely to the

players. The innkeeper is always going to be bringing something of his own to any interaction, which makes it feel that much more real.

SASHA

I think that you're really great at coming up with those little details about NPCs and locations within the world that give them so much flavor and depth, and I think one of the things— one of the reasons we work so well together is because certainly, I think as we've gone on we've both grown to be both doing this ourselves, but when we first came together, you would always be coming up with these just amazing lovely little details and then I'd be the one who'd always be like, "Now, hang on."

JONNY

"That radically changes how the world works."

SASHA

"What are the implications here?" Because you said something— oh goodness, it was a minute ago, but I don't remember exactly what you said already, but you said something when you were just talking then about how we focus on the everyday details, and I think one of my favorite examples is that is in *Not Far To Bermuda*, which is actually interestingly, the one of our

microsettings where we started with a concept I liked, rather than “Here’s who you are in the world.”

JONNY

Well, yes and no, because, we very much started with—we still started with the concept of, “You are trapped on a boat.”

SASHA

Oh, for sure. Okay, so you still know— Okay, no you’re right, we still started with, “Where are you in this world?” It’s just that it’s the one where we didn’t go, “Here is your job.”

JONNY

Yeah, like often we’ll be like, “Oh, what if you had the job of a pro-wrestler a.k.a gladiator in magical Ancient Rome?” Or, “What if you had the job of a down-on-your-luck croupier in Atlantis?” And we were like, “What if you’re trapped on a boat?”

SASHA

Yeah. If you don’t know about *Not Far To Bermuda*, it is basically— the idea is—

JONNY

You're trapped on a boat!

SASHA

You're on the *Wanderlust*, *Neptune Cruises'* flagship cruiseliner, and you are on your way to Bermuda and it has been 287 days, roughly, since you last saw land, but you know, the captain assures you you will be reaching Bermuda any day now, and has been doing that for quite some time, and you are determined to have the holiday you set out for. So you are playing the staff— the hospitality crew— so you can't play the crew who are actually trying to make the boat get where it's going— you are playing the waiters and the bar staff, and the poolside entertainers that are tasked with keeping this increasingly factional group of passengers happy and having a good holiday. But I think there was some stuff, when we were building the wider world of the cruise ship, and the world is just the cruise ship, pretty much—you coming up with all these really funny ideas for things that could be served in the buffet, and I would always be like, "No, hang on, that's a fun idea, but if we take that, what does it mean? Like how is food actually working on this ship and what are the implications for the metaphysics of why and where the ship is?"

JONNY

(Simult.) Yeah.

SASHA

And I think we ended up getting it.

JONNY

We ended up in a really interesting place because honestly, the metaphysics of the buffet to be like, kind of the axes along which the mini-campaign culminated.

SASHA

Yeah! I don't want to give too many spoilers if you haven't played it, but the kitchen ends up being massively integral to the plot, like how it works.

JONNY

Yeah, 'cause it was this thing of like, "Okay, well, the buffet is really weird, here's three ideas why the buffet might be going really weird in a particular way— let's make them the three twists!"

SASHA

Yeah. If you don't know, often what we do is— our campaigns, we give like three options: the twist ending, so that you have the flexibility to either pick

the one that you like as GM and try and steer things that way or if you prefer to play more organically, to go with the one you think will be most satisfying for your players.

JONNY

Secretly, it's so I can let Sasha write a really, really dark one, without making it the only canonical twist the campaign can have.

SASHA

You say that, but then about twenty-five percent of the time, you tell me my twist is too dark and I have to come up with a new one.

JONNY

Well— I mean— okay, an example of a twist which we agreed on— but Sasha very much presented—was in *Ghost Ship*: “Hey, what if it turns out everyone in the world always goes to hell?”

SASHA

[laughing]

JONNY

"What if the afterlife is just hell that is simply the metaphysics of this world?

The end."

SASHA

Yeah, okay, fair enough. Fair enough. Yeah, alright, there's nothing I can answer to that.

JONNY

(Simult.) [laughing]

SASHA

And yeah, that is some of the ones you've gone, "Alright, then." Okay, fair.

No, you know what, I think you did allow that one.

JONNY

I think we modified it slightly.

SASHA

(Simult.) Think we did modify that one, yeah. We both get veto basically, on anything we think is completely not right, but Bermuda is not the only one where that's happened. I think that's really how we drill down into "Okay, what is this world?" And so we take details that we like, and then we talk

about the implications of those would be, and what that like, in what kind of
a world would that detail be true?

JONNY

So, it starts with “What's the game? What are your characters going to be
doing in this world?” Then you spin it off into maybe a few NPCs, or a few
details about the world, and you get some nice, interesting, small details and
then those details which like, really grab you? You spin out until you have a
world that works.

SASHA

(Simult.) And sometimes you do have to give up the little details that you
just—the implications would be—you can't make a world in which that's kind
of chill detail.

JONNY

Also, you don't need to have your world finished before you start playing.

SASHA

Do you want to talk about *Primetime Colosseum* for a bit before we move
on?

JONNY

Oh, yeah. So, basically, for *Primetime Colosseum*, you're gladiators in Ancient Rome, but you're also effectively a pro-wrestling franchise. You've got your persona and you're doing all these gory gimmick matches, and I went—in our initial talking it through, I went really detailed on a bunch of intense gimmick matches that relied on this concept of the “revival potion,” the idea you can get stabbed all the hell up in the arena, pop a potion, and you're alive again, which was to a certain degree, essential for it to work without having to make new characters. I think actually, in our very, very, first early ideas—

SASHA

We did have people playing different characters as they died.

JONNY

(Simult.) We did have the idea that your character was your persona and different people were going to play it as they were killed, which I still think is quite a nice idea, but we just couldn't make it work.

SASHA

I think that is a nice idea but I think that what we wanted to do with *Primetime Colosseum* wasn't just to make it a pro-wrestling franchise, but was also to make it a teen high-school sports movie?

JONNY

Yeah, we wanted to make it a personality-driven comedy drama, which meant that the actual characters had to remain the same.

SASHA

(Simult.) Yeah. So in the end, we did end up going with the character and the persona being two separate things, like two separate characters that you're playing, but you had to keep both. But talk about the revival potion.

JONNY

So for that to work, we had to be able to have the gladiators die but come back, so those revival potions. But when we first decided on this, I went a little bit overboard on some weird gimmick matches, that were like, "Oh, everyone gets beheaded and then you play games with the heads," or like—some weird stuff. I forget all the details. But Sasha pointed out that like, "Hang on, if revival potions are that easily available? That has some significant implications for death in this world."

SASHA

(Simult.) Everything.

JONNY

And it was like, “Oh yeah, actually, if death is meaningless in this magical version of Rome...”

SASHA

We went down a really long path because you’d come up with some really cool details— I mean, the one where you get beheaded and then everyone plays with the heads— and we really wanted these details to be in there, but fundamentally, what we wanted more was for our world to be internally consistent.

JONNY

Yeah. And so, by splitting the difference and having so that the revival potions were available but expensive, so that the idea was: Death is not something that’s super— violent death is not something that’s particularly feared by the elite of Roman society? But it’s very expensive, which means that if you're going to have a deathmatch— matches to the death tend to kind of headline gladiatorial shows, and if you die, then you better be pretty confident that you're worth it to the family that runs your ludus, because

you're kind of trusting that they see you as enough of an investment to spend that money to bring you back.

SASHA

Which I think really, in the end, added to and made real the position that we wanted our characters to have in that game, you know, we wanted them to be wrestling with how much agency they had and I think that putting them in that position really drilled down into that. So, I think it's often where that detail and that thinking about the implications and the internal consistency and what kind of world those details would be in and having to marry that to your characters and what is their role, how they relate to the world, that's where you found those little magic bits.

JONNY

And what's interesting is we've been talking a lot about worldbuilding collaboratively. And it's like, I'll come up with an idea, and you'll say, "Oh, this has some implications," and then back and forth we'll tease things out.

SASHA

I mean, sometimes it's the other way around as well.

JONNY

Yeah. But obviously that's not as helpful for the lone GM creating their world for their players. So, another piece of big advice I would probably put forward is "Involve your players."

SASHA

Oh, like in *Fate*.

JONNY

Yes, very much like in *Fate*. I know it feels like, "Oh, I'm the GM, it's my responsibility to craft this world. But you're all going to be playing in this world, and I think it's— *Fate* does that really well, I think we're going to be using that as quite a strong example of a good framework in which to do it. But actually involving your players in the worldbuilding and actually talking through "Where do you want to play? What do you want to play?" Even if it's an existing world you can talk and be like— in *Forgotten Realms*, for D&D, you might be like "Well, my instinct is you probably want an epic quest," and you might find that the players are like, "Actually, no, we'd much rather do some crimes in Neverwinter—" That's a city in D&D, isn't it?

SASHA

Oh, goodness, is it a city? I know it's somewhere.

JONNY

It's a city, let's say it's a city.

[Both laugh.]

JONNY

They might say "Oh, no, actually, we want to be working our way up the Thieves Guild in Neverwinter," and you're like, "Okay, well, if this campaign's never leaving the city, that's what we want to dive in and concentrate on building this campaign and building this world." You know, I don't think we've ever actually played in any of the worlds we've created in *Fate*, have we.

SASHA

Oh, goodness, no, but we have fun creating them.

JONNY

Oh, we love a *Fate* session zero.

SASHA

Yeah, we love a *Fate* session zero. So like, there was one *Fate* game we made with some friends of ours, and we were so intending to play this game—

JONNY

(Simult.) Someday, perhaps we will. *(whispering)* We won't.

SASHA

I don't remember what we called it but we wanted basically an alternative campaign to run alongside *Blades in the Dark* because one of our *Blades in the Dark* regular players had a pretty tricky schedule, so it was like, "Oh, when Richard's not here, we'll have a separate campaign, we can carry on with this." We made this *Fate* campaign, it was brilliant. There were some really great details— I don't remember whose character it was but I would guess it was Tim's character? I mean it's almost certainly Tim's character.

Tim, if you're listening, do say if—

JONNY

(Simult.) I want to say Tim's, yeah. This is for those who are familiar with both *Rusty Quill* and *The Mechanisms*, this is Gunpowder Tim, not "We're in a beef" Tim.

SASHA

Yeah, should've made that clear. But, basically, he created this character that was like, "Okay, I want to be a Robin-Hood style freedom fighter who had died and then had their consciousness put into a robot, and now has to wrestle with what their relationship to that cause is now, and how much of their urge to fight for freedom still exists in their robot body." And so much of our world ended up revolving around—we ended up focusing the whole world on this city that was at the center of this struggle, and it ended up being so much about, "Well, that's a great fucking character concept, how are we going to make this world that that character lives in and who are we going to be in relation to this character?"

JONNY

And again, it wasn't just Tim bringing this character whole cloth.

SASHA

(Simult.) Oh, goodness, no.

JONNY

It started with— I think Tim really wanted to play a robot, because Tim loves to play a robot.

SASHA

(Simult.) As always.

JONNY

And then we realized that there's this— I think it was a company town, and there's this sort of workers' agitation revolution-esque movement, and I think one of the other players was like, "Oh, I want to play a naive, wide-eyed cadet — really into that," and then it kind of went back and forth, and then it was like, "Oh, but what if the hero's died," and then we were like, "Oh, who is your robot, Tim?" and Tim was like, "Well, I like the idea if like, personalities can be downloaded into robots," and it kind of just built into this really intricate thing. And Fate does that quite organically, I think.

SASHA

(Simult.) Oh, it's really great at taking a detail and getting the other players to go "Yes, and," to it. It really—mechanized—mechanisized? It gives you mechanics to do exactly that.

JONNY

(Simult.) Mechanisized, yeah. And it always ties things to people and places, so you always end up with a really interesting world. There's another Fate

world, a session zero, that I did which I remember we called it “Portals and Punks—”

SASHA

(Simult.) Such a good name.

JONNY

And it was going to be set in the 1960s, lots of dimensional doorways opening— I think the manager of *The Sex Pistols* was going to be the bad guy?

SASHA

That’s so funny because I once ran a oneshot where the bad guy was the manager of *The Beatles*.

JONNY

Is it just that 60s music managers are inherently evil?

SASHA

Well, *The Sex Pistols* were the 80s.

JONNY

Am I thinking— was it the 80s then and not the 60s?

SASHA

Yeah, I think you must have been in the 80s.

JONNY

(Simult.) Yeah, I must've meant the 80s. For some reason, in my head I think it's the 60s but I don't think it is.

SASHA

(Simult.) Oh, the past is all the past.

JONNY

The past is all the past— are you sure *The Sex Pistols* weren't the 70s?

SASHA

No— so the Clash started in the 70s and went into the 80s, and I think the *The Sex Pistols* started in the 80s.

JONNY

Okay, well, it doesn't matter. The point was, Frank was playing a fire in disguise called Lyle, the idea being that in some of these dimensions,

effectively elemental planes, so it was the dimension of fire, and Lyle had escaped and was now— Frank had maxed out their Disguise skill from the start, and just wore a lot of fireproof clothing and dark glasses. The idea was that he was going to roll a lot, very highly on Disguise for people to not notice that he was a fire.

SASHA

[laughing]

JONNY

And again, never played it. But I cannot recommend enough just generating some worlds using *Fate:Core*.

SASHA

Oh, it's so much fun, it's a game in itself for sure. Should we talk a bit more specifically about— So that's kind of how we go through the process of setting up the world, but let's say you have set up the world, and you're running your campaign, and you want to talk about stuff that's happening offscreen to make it look like your players are not the only ones in this world.

JONNY

Making a world feel alive. So, I think you were saying beforehand, that you wanted me to talk a bit about “The Flood.”

SASHA

Oh, yeah! So I’ve asked Jonny specifically to start with his campaign of *Deadlands: Reloaded* : “The Flood,” because that was the first—It was the first RPG game that I played, so I know that some of you may be thinking, “Oh, well, no wonder you think this, it was the first campaign you ever played—”

JONNY

(simult.) It was a while back.

SASHA

I’d played oneshots before, but never something on this scale. The campaign lasted for over a year, we were playing once a week, and it felt so rich. I just absolutely fell in love with this world, because everything about it just felt not only like there was stuff going on and that we were a part of something bigger than just our characters, but also that it all fit together so believably.

JONNY

So, a certain degree of that is because I was very intimately familiar with the world. *Deadlands* was a setting I'd kind of grown up with, and full disclosure: *Deadlands* as a setting is...

SASHA

Somewhat of a problematic faith.

JONNY

Yeah, *Deadlands* is as a setting, kind of racist. It is Old West— it's Weird West, and the way it engages with a lot of the racial attitudes of the time—

SASHA

(simult.) And to a certain degree of now.

JONNY

And to a certain degree of now, is, mm, less than ideal. But it was a setting that I'd grown up with and I knew very well, so there was a lot that I could— I knew the world and I knew how the world worked but a lot of it was just keeping in mind that— it was a quite a good campaign for factions and some of it was actually in the book saying, "Well, at this point, this faction is here. This is an event that occurs at this point." And so, there were things like, "Oh, you come back to this town that you were at ten sessions ago, and the

situation has escalated, because now the cannibalistic reverend has declared lockdown on this city because things have advanced.” But there were other times where it’s things that the characters were really into, characters they got invested in, that were intended to be— well they were really only in two of the pre-written adventures—

SASHA

I think we already talked about Gunther last episode.

JONNY

Yeah, I think we’ve talked about Gunther— because, fundamentally, they needed a way to get around— none of them had the Boating skill.

SASHA

(simult.) (laughing) Bear in mind that the campaign is called the “The Flood.”

JONNY

Yeah and none of them could drive a boat. So, in one of the early adventures, it says, “Oh, there’s a guy called Gunther who will drive you to a specific place,” and they *loved* Gunther. And so Gunther became their permanent driver, and Gunther had his own associations with the world and

his own relationships and things progressed— just keeping mind what is going on in the world and every time that characters go back— nowhere should feel static.

SASHA

I think that's really key. I think there's two things that worked really well for me in "The Flood", which is that it's not about showing about what's going on off-screen, it's just about letting us know that there is stuff off-screen that we don't need to see, that's why it's off-screen, right? The first is that whenever we returned to a place, the place itself had shifted, something had progressed, nothing was left static when we went there, and secondly, NPCs knew each other apart from us. And I think those two things, just showing that there is an off-screen, really worked for me.

JONNY

Yeah. It's also quite— "The Flood" is quite a good example of this, as well, and it does something quite clever which is have— there's a massive battle at the start which does a lot of damage to a lot of major locations, which means that there's a natural progression. Everytime you revisit Perdiction, it's slightly— there's more of it. This town is growing.

SASHA

(simult.) There's a little bit more, yeah. Things have picked up a little more. And you can help that, and then you can go away, and then you can come back, and they've been using the things that you built for them in different ways, and yeah, it really worked.

JONNY

What I'd like you to talk about actually, is after "The Flood," "The Plague."

SASHA

(laughing) Oh, yeah.

JONNY

You remember in 50 Fathoms—?

SASHA

I do.

JONNY

There was, at one point— 50 Fathoms: magical pirates— one point we pulled into a port, and there was a big plague going on. And the plague had nothing to do with us.

SASHA

Yeah, so I think this is quite indicative of how I like to tend to make my worlds seem like there are things going on off-screen, which is to have things that are nothing to do with the players causing inconvenience for what they are actually doing. I will point out that this was a long, long time ago, where putting a backdrop of a massive illness was—

JONNY

(simult.) Yeah, it wasn't...

SASHA

Not the tasteless thing it would have been to do now. But so, my players needed to get— I can't even remember what mission you actually needed to do at the time, but you basically— the game is you're shipping around the world—

JONNY

Doing a big boat.

SASHA

Doing a big boat. And so they needed to go around this island, picking some stuff up from here, and going elsewhere and off-loading it in the market to here and y’know— boring everyday shipping merchants stuff. Honestly, what a fun ride. There was— in this game particularly, what I really like about their worldbuilding is that they’ve got this trade table that explains where you can pick up resources for what prices and where you can sell them for more. And Jonny got so into that table—

JONNY

(Simult.) I really wanted to make to a bunch of money.

SASHA

Oh, he got so into that table just— “Okay, so what are the optimum routes for making the most amount of money in the shortest amount of time?” Jonny, there’s a whole world, and you’re just doing the most profitable routes over and over and over again! Which worked, but—

JONNY

(Simult.) You tell me— I mean, yeah, but fundamentally— I’m not — Basically, I was like, “Well, character’s not a hero, he’s not actually out there for adventure, he’s out there to make a living—”

SASHA

Yes, but you did choose to be a character that's just out to make a living in a game that is very much an adventure—

JONNY

(simult.) Yeah, fair enough, fair enough. But the trade table was really—

SASHA

But the trade table was so much fun for you. And it did end up working because it meant that we really got to drill down into what things are like in these few islands, and you got to know them quite well. And so, one of the things that was happening on one of these islands was basically a little epidemic going round. And it was intended to be a basically an impediment to them getting around this island, to block it off for them and make them have to go another way. And what happened was that when they got there, Bubbles, the sexy doctor crab, was like, "Well, I am a doctor, I must heal these people." And so, it ended you being three sessions, two or three sessions of the whole crew just stopping in this one town where things were worse and just working really really hard to treat people medically.

JONNY

But the thing was, is it wasn't like, a quest. It wasn't like, "Oh, this is what you are to do within this." It wasn't like, "Okay, you need to go and get the cure." It wasn't even like, "Here is your objective within the plague," it was just like, "This is the situation" and we were like, "Well, this is an interesting situation, let's get started."

SASHA

Can I tell you a secret?

JONNY

Yeah.

SASHA

There was actually a bit of— I had written, "Okay, and if they stop at the plague, here's some stuff they can do." Because I— what I really like and I knew that you, my players, would do, is that you do tend to latch onto those things that I put there. I put in details about the world that are inconveniences to you. Which I think is one way of making things look like things are going on off-screen because it's clear that the people you're trading with in this game. But you know, it's clear that your NPCs, your background characters are having problems that have nothing to do with

you.

JONNY

Yeah.

SASHA

Because now, these big problems for someone are becoming small problems for you. But i know that you as a group really like digging into these little details—

JONNY

Yeah, we do.

SASHA

So what I do now and what I do for everybody now is always have something where if someone drills down into those details, okay there is something there. And certainly I did not expect you to drill down quite as much as you did three sessions worth and I have to say, pulling out three sessions worth of material was—a lot of it was off the top of my head but it wasn't—

JONNY

But it worked, because largely it was us saying, "Okay, well, here's what we want to do within this thing," and you saying, "Well, okay, right you want to try and organize an impromptu hospital? Okay, well, you find a location, you need to find some people to be nurses," and then immediately we had stuff to actually do.

SASHA

Yeah, and I think it worked really well because these impediments that I liked to put in for you had always come out of, "Someone else has a big problem." So when you start to engage with someone else, I know what their aim is because they have a big problem. They have to get round that big problem and it's so easy to come up with "Okay, what are they going to do next?" Well, their main motivator is still that they have this big problem,

so...

JONNY

There's also something about how one of the most important things I think you can do to make a world feel alive is to make it so there are characters who aren't important, who don't connect to anything. Otherwise, I think you get what was the Charles Dickens problem, because in the works of Charles Dickens, there are no extraneous characters at all.

SASHA

Everyone is related to everyone else!

JONNY

If you meet a street-sweeper, you can guarantee that by the end of the book the street sweeper is going to turn out to be somebody's lost child or might end up being integral to the plot. So I find that for a world to feel rich, there need to be characters who are just kind of there, or characters who are important because the players have chosen to make them important, not because they are clearly "I'm here for the plot!"

SASHA

I 100% never ever choose which NPCs are going to be important until my characters latch onto them. And that means that I've always got, "Okay, for every big one NPC I've got, I've got five background characters who are literally just there to fill out the world, which could have been the main NPCs but weren't."

JONNY

Yeah! And also don't feel that just because a character is popular with your players they need to stick around.

SASHA

No, that's true. They can be the star of an episode and then never be seen again.

JONNY

Oh, there's also one— it feels like a cheat but it actually really works, and if you want to feel like your world is alive and stuff is happening that is not related to the players, have a newspaper! Just have a newspaper, or in a fantasy world, a town crier, or whatever. Just periodically, have it, so that there is a source of news of what is going on in the world. You don't have to write up a newspaper, just describe some headlines. This is something that— What I quite like in my Blades in the Dark game— they actually have at the back: "What is the current issue, the issue of the day?" table. Like "Oh, are there some murders? Is there an election?" You know, what's going on? And every week I'd roll a couple of times, figure out how that related to what state the world was in, and then between jobs, it'd be like, "Okay, well here's what's in the newspapers this week." To begin with, Richard especially wanted to engage with everything and it felt like I was dropping hints or clues—

SASHA

(simult.) Well, I think because when we've seen that kind of thing before, as people who've been playing for a long time—

JONNY

It's foreshadowing.

SASHA

Yeah, in the past, certainly, in game design, until maybe about five years ago, I don't know, I'm not good at telling times, but yeah, it would have been considered good game design to only do that if it's foreshadowing.

JONNY

But actually, it was in many ways, a menu.

SASHA

Yeah, it was fun!

JONNY

And there were a few that you guys were really like "Oh this is an interesting news— this is an interesting event, let's get involved." Like, there was city council elections.

SASHA

Oh, we got so into that— city council elections!

JONNY

And you got so into that—wasn't in any way on the plan, but it really worked, because I was like, "Okay the headlines this week: city council elections coming in."

SASHA

Why is it that our main regular roleplaying group is so into local politics? We love it?

JONNY

I feel like that's a long psychological discussion about feeling like you're making a difference, but you know, in more realistic ways.

SASHA

(simult.) Okay, yeah. *[laughing]* That's our power fantasy. Campaigning for a local council.

JONNY

Yeah, well, I mean, fundamentally I feel like destroying the Eye of Gurgamoth is fun, but its not "Oh, what a relatable joy," whereas like, "Hey you've actually managed to change something at the local level that's positive," is like "Oh, what a fantasy."

[Both laugh.]

SASHA

And I think that kind of ties back to what we were saying about sometimes actually really focusing on the smaller things instead of the epic things can make the world feel so much richer.

JONNY

Yeah. What else is a good way to flesh out a world?

SASHA

(Simult.) Oh, so there's just one thing that'd I like to bring up before we quickly get to some little end-of-the-episode questions—

JONNY

Oh, actually, I did have one more as well, so you go and I'll go.

SASHA

(Simult.) Yeah, really quickly— okay, so one thing about off-screen stuff is don't assume that your off-screen stuff has to be off-screen for all your players. so when I was doing a playtest for a system that's currently out in beta, I just wanted to test the system— it was an alpha playtest—

JONNY

(simult.) This is Ensemble, available from Rusty Quill.

SASHA

And the system as we had created it at this time, doesn't have a world attached to it, it's designed to be system-neutral at this time

JONNY

(simult.) System-neutral.

SASHA

And I just wanted to do a quick playtest of the mechanics and not think too much about the world, so I'd made this kind of basic world but I hadn't really worried about the normal worldbuilding stuff—

JONNY

(simult.) [whispering] It was basically a bit *Firefly*.

SASHA

It was pretty much just based off *Firefly*, to be honest, because it is for TV shows—

JONNY

Without the weird civil war stuff.

SASHA

Yeah, we didn't have a weird civil war. Anyway, one of the players that I had is quite a traditional roleplayer, way into *D&D*, and the way that he really likes to do his character is have a backstory that explains how he has all his skills and stuff, so we worked together to write him this backstory within the world— and I'll be honest, in terms of worldbuilding it was the thing that I put the most thought into, even though most of it wasn't my thought, it was his thoughts. So for the vast majority of our six episode arc, that stuff was only ever relevant to him, and the rest of the players didn't engage with it, didn't know about it, but it ended up being really pivotal to the whole plot, the whole campaign.

JONNY

And what it meant was that right at the end, when everything was kind of going to hell, we could legitimately go, "Hey, what's going on?" and he went, "Okay, let me catch you up." Which was really effective because it meant that exposition wasn't being given to us by the GM, it was very organic that this character was giving us the information that we needed. Of course, that's more of a— relying on players to give exposition is sometimes a little bit dicey because sometimes players are like, "Oh, no, my character's very secretive," and I get that, but—

SASHA

(Simult.) You do need to say some stuff or other people won't be having fun. I think the reason that it worked was because I had come with a very sparse world, and so what Sam, my friend Sam, wanted to do with it, I was able to shape the world around that to fit it in like jigsaw pieces. So I think having that collaborative effort meant that it really worked. So I would say definitely don't feel like everything that's off-screen needs to come from you. So you can't see that I'm doing air quotes there— "off-screen" was in air quotes because it's not necessarily off-screen to everybody. But yeah, don't say, "It all needs to come from me," sometimes it can come from your players.

JONNY

And my final tip: Minigames!

SASHA

Minigames!

JONNY

So basically, there are loads of really really cool, interesting little indie games that are for a session. And don't feel like you need to keep every part of your game and worldbuilding in the same system. There's one that I really love called *Do Not Let Us Die In The Cold Dark Of This Winter*, which is basically: It's this entirely separate system that says, "Hey, in middle of your otherwise normal fantasy campaign, you find yourself in a village during an incredibly harsh winter, and this is a session where you have to try and keep as many of the villagers alive as you can, because the winter is just ridiculously cold." And it's just this really— I guess you could tie this into the grand campaign, but it's just saying, "No. Take a moment out of your grand campaign and just try to keep a village alive in winter." And it's so evocative. Similarly, something like *The Quiet Year*, or its companion game, *The Deep Forest*? A really good way of, "Take a session out," and if there's a community that's going to be really important and you're about to get there, let's take a session to play through, collaboratively, the last year of this community, and at the end, if it says "Oh, the Frost Shepherds arrive," ignore that, we'll say that instead of, "At the end of the year, the Frost

Shepherds arrive,” the end of the year, that’s when your characters get there. And so you've collaboratively invested a lot in this village. Or do the other one, do *The Deep Forest*, have everyone play through a year’s worth of monster politics, and then have the players arrive as the heroes who are going to kill them all.

SASHA

[laughing] Devastating.

JONNY

Yeah, devastating. Just a really emotional gut punch.

SASHA

And I think you can work that in on a smaller scale as well, like I think those are just really great ideas, but there's— it’s quite similar to what I do in a game— if I’m playing it with a communal space, I often like to get the players to build the communal space before we start so they're creating their other world already.

JONNY

Yeah. So, there are loads of really, really, really cool indie storytelling— things like *Night Watch* and *The Runes of the Future*— seriously, go out, find

some really cool little RPGs that are only intended to be a session, or are much more character-focused and drop them in! It will do wonders for how deep and rich your world feels.

SASHA

So, shall we— We have run long because this is one of our absolutely favorite topics, and I feel like we could still probably talk for another hour about it.

JONNY

(simult.) And maybe we will again! Maybe we'll revisit

SASHA

Maybe we will someday! If you've got more questions about worldbuilding, then please let us know! We'd love to talk about it. So, shall we very, very quickly—maybe let's just do one each of these small questions that people send us? Let me pick one for you to answer.. Okay! So, I will say, Jordie, @yarden_bh says, "How do you introduce beginner players into RPGs in general, and specifically to the mechanics of a certain game system?"

JONNY

So, to introduce them to games more generally, I mean I generally like to work on them for a while before any actual game, you know? Just make sure that they're really invested, maybe tell a few RPG stories if they are somebody who seems like they're actually into the idea—

SASHA

(simult.) No, don't do that.

JONNY

No, don't do that, actually. But just work on them and make sure they are fully invested and when you bring them onboard, I would say the most important thing is that you are doing it with a group that you are confident in. People who you've played with a lot, you know how they work, and you know they are going to be good for new players. Because there are some people who I love playing with that I would never realistically include in a group for a new player, because they have their own specific ways of gaming, and often they want to take sessions in specific directions or they like to push the edges of certain systems.

SASHA

Yeah, if you're playing with established roleplayers, you really want to play with people who you know are going to be collaborative and open to new ideas and cooperative, I would say.

JONNY

And in terms of how to get them onboard with a new system— don't!

SASHA

It doesn't say "new system," it says specifically to the mechanics of a certain game system.

JONNY

Yeah, but: don't sweat it. Make sure that you are familiar with their character before they start playing, ideally because you've generated and created it together. Don't feel like you need to make them choose all the numbers.

SASHA

Yeah, because they won't mean anything.

JONNY

They won't mean anything to them! Don't be like, "Do you want to put this seventeen in Strength of Constitution?" You go, "You said you wanted to be a barbarian, how do you see them fighting?" And if they're like, "Smashing everything," you go, "Okay, seventeen in Strength, then." And if they're like "Oh, takes blows but doesn't fall down," you say, "Seventeen in Constitution." And then tell them what to roll, when they need to roll, tell them what information they need to give you and as you do it, contextualize it, like "Oh what's your AC? That's how hard I need to hit you, as a monster." And gradually, they'll internalize stuff, they'll start to ask questions and before you know, they know how it works! Or maybe, you play with them for a year and a half, and they never know how the system works, but they still have a lot of fun. And I mean, there are plenty of players I've run through whole campaigns—

SASHA

Oh, yeah, we've got a friend who loves to play roleplaying games. We've played in like three campaigns with her— she still does not know how to play. Or she would tell you she doesn't know how to play, but we just tell her what to roll, but she does know how to roleplay.

JONNY

Yeah! She basically says, "I always know how to play by the end of the session, but by the next session I've completely forgotten." And that's fine!

SASHA

Fair enough! So, what?

JONNY

The players don't actually need to know the system unless you're playing in
like—

SASHA

Unless you're playing in something where the system is the point.

JONNY

Pathfinder, for instance.

SASHA

Yeah, where the challenge is the point. I'm going to say, for my answer to that, that I agree with everything you've said, except I would add a couple
of points.

JONNY

Okay.

SASHA

One, I think you can play with a group of all beginners, because obviously some people have to play with a group of all beginners, and I think that can work very well, you just need to keep it chill and light and just be open with, “We’re all new here,” or “All the players are new here, and that’s fine.” The other thing is, I would say, in terms of getting characters into a specific system, is I really agree with “Don’t make them generate the character themselves at the start,” because certainly, when I was learning how to play roleplaying games, every single early game that I had had me generating a character in a system that often was quite numbers-heavy that I did not understand yet. And that was— If I was going to have walked, that would’ve been what put me off. The exception to that is stuff like, if you’ve got a game like *Fate*, which is quite numbers-light, fill in the numbers and let them choose the aspects.

JONNY

Yeah.

SASHA

And the other thing that I would just say is: "Consider creating a cheat sheet to the rules."

JONNY

Oh, yeah, you love a cheat sheet.

SASHA

I love a cheat sheet! And I'd also say: I completely agree with what you said about players not needing to ever know the rules, but also as a GM, if that's something you're not up for, that's okay.

JONNY

Yeah, that's fair. Some GMs don't want to hold a player's hand through a whole campaign, which is fair, but again—

SASHA

But if you are okay with it, it's fine!

JONNY

Again, it's just knowing what sort of game you want to play and making sure you're on the same page as your players.

SASHA

Shall we do one more question before we sign off?

JONNY

Yeah, so Jessica Wang says, "What themes, systems, or stories do you find yourselves gravitating towards? Also, do you have any favorite AP podcasts?"

SASHA

Oh, I want so much more time to answer this question about themes and stories that I find myself gravitating towards. Oh, goodness. So, I tend to find myself these days gravitating towards stories about people who are not the most powerful in their world by any means. I like to find people who are having to wrestle with things that really some grown-ups should be coming to sort out, but then, unfortunately, they are the grown-ups in this situation, do you know what I mean by that?

JONNY

Yes, absolutely.

SASHA

I like to tell those kinds of stories at the moment. At the moment, I'm telling an awful lot of stories about corruption and exploitation among people in power. On the whole though, not just now, I love to tell stories that feel like they have an ensemble cast with teammates that work together. I always like to get my players to have relationships with one another. I'm all about that group dynamic. And I really like systems that prioritize that relationship and that group dynamic, themes of found family and finding yourself with other people is something that I gravitate towards quite a lot. I'm going to say something very controversial right now.

JONNY

Oh?

SASHA

Which is that I only listen to one AP podcast with any kind of regularity, and it is "The Oneshot Network," because frankly, I get very bored of anything that's not a oneshot. In playing, I absolutely love a campaign, but I only really want to listen to other people's oneshots.

JONNY

I find that I gravitate towards trapping players in a situation and then poking them to see what they do.

SASHA

Oh, I do like that, too.

JONNY

I really like— bottle episodes aren't quite the right concept, because bottle episodes tend to be very much focused on the interpersonal, and the interpersonal is very important, but I really like trapping players in a situation which is gradually escalating, and basically watching them run around trying to find out what's going on and how to escape it.

SASHA

Can I say that's one of mine too, I also love to do that. I just really love to give characters a situation and go, "Okay, how're you going to mess this up?"

JONNY

Yeah, it's interesting that a lot of our micro-settings have been like, "You're trapped on a boat," "You're trapped on a tower."

SASHA

"You're trapped in a nunnery."

[Both laugh.]

JONNY

Yeah, exactly! "And here's what's happening that you need to sort out. Can you leave? Can you go anywhere? No, you just kind of got to figure it out."

Which, you know...

SASHA

Yeah. I think it make them very, very fun.

JONNY

I think so as well.

SASHA

I could talk for a long time about that question, actually.

JONNY

Yeah. In terms of AP podcasts, I'll be honest, I also don't listen to a huge number. The trouble is there's— roleplaying takes ages.

SASHA

It's so long!

JONNY

Four hours— an average session is four hours— which is great to play, and good to listen to, when you have time to listen to it, but I— no. Also I'm very behind on all my podcasts, I tried to keep up with "Rusty Quill Gaming," because it's very funny and—

SASHA

(simult.) It's your mates in it!

JONNY

All my mates are in it!

SASHA

It's my mates too, but I stopped listening. I'm sorry. Cut that out, Lowri!

[Both laugh.]

JONNY

(simult.) I've periodically listened to oneshots, like I've tried to get onboard with things like "The Adventure Zone," and "Critical Role" and all that, all the

big ones, but oh, who has the time?

SASHA

Many people, apparently.

JONNY

Yeah, many people have the time.

SASHA

But I don't. I don't have the time or the attention span, I'm afraid. But I'm glad for the people who do.

JONNY

Yeah, anyway...so that's our AP ignorance confession.

SASHA

So, thank you so much for listening to the second episode of "No One Wants to Hear Your RPG Stories," we really hope you enjoyed all our RPG stories this time.

JONNY

And if you didn't...sorry.

SASHA

How can people hear from us, interact with us, have more of us in their lives
in the future?

JONNY

So, obviously we both do some stuff with Rusty Quill, we're both involved in
The Magnus Archives—

SASHA

Some of us more than others.

JONNY

Some of us more than others. And we periodically guest on "Rusty Quill
Gaming," but most importantly, we are @macguffinandcompany.com, from
whence you should be able to find our games, our Itch page, our Patreon
where we pop up micro-settings and goody-bag stuff, and games and all
sorts of delightful stuff. We also stream regularly on Twitch. I stream
@jonnywaistcoat.

SASHA

I stream @SashaSienna.

JONNY

And together, we stream @MacguffinandCo! And that'll all be in the show notes— I'll be honest—

SASHA

(simult.) If you found this, you can find the rest.

JONNY

There's links, you can find it.

SASHA

But specifically about this podcast, you can get in touch with us @MacguffinAndCo on Twitter, or hello@macguffinandcompany to ask us questions that you would like to hear us answer, and I am trying to remember to say this in my podcast now: you can rate and review us in iTunes or in your pod-listener of choice.

JONNY

Like and subscribe!

SASHA

Click the little bell!

JONNY

That's YouTube.

SASHA

I don't know, but you can get in touch with us in those ways to interact with
this podcast.

JONNY

Yes!

SASHA

And you've mentioned that we have a Patreon—

JONNY

Yep.

SASHA

And that we have a Twitter.

JONNY

Yes.

SASHA

That's everything. That's all the ways that you can find us. Except by just hunting us down.

JONNY

Don't do that, though.

SASHA

Don't do that, please. Oh, and you can find Lowri, our editor, @LowriTweets. And Lowri, obviously, if you don't want people to find you on Twitter, if you want to keep your tweets nice and private, just delete this bit and shield yourself from the listening masses.

JONNY

The hordes.

SASHA

The hordes of people who are interested in our RPG stories. So, I'd say your
dad.

JONNY

I don't think my dad listens.

SASHA

I don't think your dad listens. I think he might like it.

JONNY

He might like it. Anyway, bye!

SASHA

Bye!

[Outro music plays, a bassy thumping beat.]