

Future Imaginary Dialogues: Allen Turner

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(transcript)

Allen Turner

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&
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[pause]

0:00:14 Jason Lewis: Okay. Who are you?

0:00:16 Allen Turner: Who am I? I am Allen Turner. I am a game design instructor at DePaul University, among lots of other things; I'm an artist, I'm a dancer, I've worked for lots of game companies over the years, starting with Bungie Software, working my way up through to Disney/Marvel, and places in-between. Wideload Games, Day One Studios. Did a lot of stuff; I'm a writer... Did I mention dancer? Yeah, that's me. [chuckle]

0:00:47 JL: Okay. Well, let's go and talk about that, the question of Ehdrigohr.

0:00:53 AT: Ehdrigohr.

0:00:53 JL: Yeah, where it came from.

0:00:55 AT: Where did Ehdrigohr come from? So, Ehdrigohr, the name came to me when I was in college at Columbia College when I was younger. I wanted to make my own fantasy world. I was a big reader of science fiction and fantasy and wanted to just write my own space. I didn't wanna do fan writing of somebody else's stuff; I wanted to do my own thing. I've always had this urge to have my own thing and do my own thing and express things my own way. But it didn't really go anywhere, because it was pretty derivative of all the stuff that was already out there. It was just my amalgamation of all the things that I liked, and I got disinterested in it and put it to the side. And then in the early '90s, I was a youth worker, a prevention worker at the American Indian Health Services in the Chicago area. And I had a group of kids that I was tasked with doing stuff with. They were the youth. [chuckle] And people always say, "Hey, do something with the youth," and you say it like "Do something with the buffalo." It's like "The youth, go get the youth over there." And so I had this group of kids that I was doing stuff with, and some of them saw, they had all these role playing games sitting around, and they asked what they were and somebody heard about them and said, "Hey, can we do it?"

0:02:15 AT: So I started doing games with the kids, and that was interesting because they were a group that didn't really know what they wanted to do, and everyone was trying to get them to remember tradition and dance and sing on the drum. And they also wanted to just be kids, normal kids, urban kids. A lot of cross-cultural, multi-ethnic kids who were native... Multi-ethnic across the native range. So they're people who were multiple different tribes, and then multi-culture and multi-ethnic and multi-racial across other lines as well. So there was a day I sat down and said, "Hey, we're gonna play some Dungeons and Dragons." So we're playing, and we get to this point where they've all got their characters and they're supposed to do this thing where they were gonna go... It was like... I don't even remember fully the adventure, but the adventure had a situation where they had to discover a tomb, go into the tomb, raid the tomb to get them some magic item; it was like a sword or a wand, something they had to hold, and it was in this guy's sarcophagus. And so I set up the scene and started nudging them to go into the space and then they get into this tomb, and then they don't wanna do anything. And it's not because they're scared, it's because as far as they're concerned, they're in a sacred place.

0:03:40 AT: And I'm like, "What the heck is wrong with these kids?" It's an adventure that you come in, you take the stuff, and you leave. At that point I realized, I had a realization of how that

just wasn't what we did. That wasn't our culture. As I bought into the gamer space, I also assimilated into this raider culture that says, "He who has the most toys wins". And you're supposed to go and take stuff. If someone's dead, you go and take their stuff, and you're powerful by how much stuff you've taken. And I said, "Yeah, that's just not cool." So it made me stop and think, and so then I went back and dusted off bits of Ehdrigohr and started bringing it into our games. And I said, "How about I make a game space where they were playing characters in a more native world?" Tried to actually find some games that allowed for kids to be native in their world. That was all kinds of funky because they were all colonized, they were all like just barely surviving and they're trying to keep from being dead as a culture, and that left lots of bad taste in my mouth. And so, Ehdrigohr started to get dusted off more and more, and I would run small adventures using different game systems and like this space that sometimes was Ehdrigohr and sometimes it wasn't, but it was like this fantasy world where there was a native identity in it. So that happened on and off in the '90s. Life went on, I eventually started working, and...

0:05:16 JL: Were you doing things with the youth?

0:05:18 AT: Yeah, with these kids, with the youth, I was playing with them. And we wound up playing multiple different types of games. But all of them informed what was happening in my head with what Ehdrigohr could be as opposed to what it initially started off as. So I would go back to it and I was throwing stuff away. And then when real life kicked in and I stopped doing the community work and went to work in more of a corporate space, it got put to the side again. And then when I got deep into the bigger corporate structures of places like Disney/Marvel, I found myself in a space where I was doing a lot of work that fit a particular cultural model, but I wasn't really happy because I feel like there's a space from my voice there. And so when I quit, I went back and picked up Ehdrigohr and said, "You know what, this is my thing." I felt like I spent all this time making lots of money for other people, being really creative for a lot of people. They could just drop like a bunch of worries in front of me and say, "Hey, come up with ideas for this," and I go blam, blam, blam, blam, here it is." But I wasn't doing it for myself.

0:06:28 AT: So I sat down, picked up these multiple notebooks and half-sketched ideas that I had, and said "I'm gonna bring this back to life." And then I looked at it, and looked at the stuff ahead in there, and I guess I just grown as a creator over the time. And I had more of an idea of what my voice was and said, "You know, 90% of this is crap." It's the same old crap that everyone else is doing and it maintains the same old ideas. And so I threw all of that away and just started from scratch building again. And over those next couple years, it turned into what became Ehdrigohr.

0:07:06 JL: When did it become the thing that you're willing to say, "Okay, here's the game that I imagined, and I'm not gonna keep working on it, or keep changing it", even though you might be doing that?

0:07:19 AT: Yeah. I am still doing that, but the thing that shipped, I would say maybe about six to four months before the Kickstarter, when I did the Kickstarter. I had this thing that was starting to manifest, and there was all these little bits and pieces of it they were floating around in my head, and I couldn't quite figure out where to go with it. But I knew I wanted to have it... Wanted to approach it more from a native ideal as opposed to your standard fantasy. And it was probably the summer when I made the decision. It all went hand in hand. As I left and started working in the educational space and I was starting to run bits and pieces by some of my students, and I was watching the things people that got activated by. That's when I said, "Hey there's something here

that can work." And there's a couple of years prior to that where I had this little book, and I put it in front of some of my friends and said, "Hey, could you guys give me some feedback on this?" And all of their feedback was, it needs to be more like the Forgotten Realms. [chuckle] Or it needs to be more like Dragonlance to be a valid thing. And that made me mad. And so that made me tear out all of the stuff that was...

0:08:45 JL: That hinted at those sorts of things.

0:08:46 AT: Yeah, hinted at those sorts of things. All right, no dragons. Sorry, dragons are gone. No dragons, no elves. There's gonna be spiders, 'cause I love spiders. And it was at the point where I reached out to some people trying to find artists, and I kept describing these things that are in my head and I came across a couple of people and I said, "Hey, these things." And when I got some spider sketches that met this ideal that I had in my head, that's when it was a lock-down; that's what this is gonna be, this is where it's gonna grow from. There was something that really whet my personal appetite, both mentally, spiritually, whatever, to make that, give that thing life. And I can hear it in my head. I don't know if this sounds weird, but...

0:09:32 JL: No, not at all.

0:09:32 AT: It's like a little buzzing in my ear saying, "Do this thing."

0:09:36 JL: Yeah.

0:09:38 AT: And so it started with the spiders, which I guess is apropos, [chuckle] and then built up from there. And then the next big step was, as I was getting closer to the Kickstarter, Jordan, who is a friend of one of my ex-students, approached me and said, "Hey, I wanna do some work on this thing." 'Cause the student had shown, my student [0:10:05] has shown Jordan some of the bits and pieces I already had out there. He said, "Hey, this is kinda cool. Can I draw something?" So I had a conversation with him and I said, "You know, I need..." Jordan Cuffie is his name. "I have this image in my head. I keep seeing this place, and it's like a favela, it's like a town, but it's built on the back of a turtle." It's like a bunch of turtles...

0:10:29 JL: He said that?

0:10:30 AT: I said that to him.

0:10:31 JL: Oh, you said that to him. Okay, sorry.

0:10:33 AT: And I said this to other people, and people are like, "That's kind of silly, and that's kind of weird. It's too strange." And a couple of people had made some attempts at drawing that and they was just totally wrong. And then it couldn't have been more than four hours... It was overnight. I was going to bed, and I got this email from Jordan saying, "Something like this?" And it was a turtle image that's on this poster. And I jumped up and I was, "What? This is awesome! This is it!" It was like, when I saw that image, I remembered. And I couldn't even sleep that night. I just got up and just started writing and writing and writing and writing, and it was there.

0:11:19 JL: It's amazing when that happens, right? When somebody... It's amazing when you manage to pull something out of yourself and put it down, but it's also amazing when somebody

else is actually able to... For me, I'm not sure if it's whether capture or sort of take the thing and actually turn it into the thing that's better than what I thought I wanted.

0:11:38 AT: Right.

0:11:39 JL: Right? In some way, sort of bringing it to life in a way we're like, "Oh, that's what I wanted, but even better."

0:11:44 AT: And like I said, it was like it was a reminder of a memory. It's as if someone said, "Is this what you're looking for?" I said "Oh yeah, you found my thing. You found the doorway." And then once the door was open, it just kind of wrote itself in a lot of ways.

0:12:01 JL: Right. Can you talk more about the indigenous aspect of it? I don't know whether I heard you describe it like this or if somebody else did, but somewhere along the way, I heard a description of sort of imagine... Maybe this was at the native and games thing. Imagine something like the Lord of the Rings for North America, so with no contact, and not having to draw upon the Lord of the Rings as a source document, but creating a rich mythology kinda rooted...

0:12:34 AT: Right. Yeah, I spoke about something like that at the indigenous games gathering, and the idea was that the Lord of the Rings does this thing where it's borrowing extensively from Celtic and Finnish mythologies, and all these northern mythologies to build something that was particularly English. It was to be representational, and so it pulled all these things through a lens and it didn't have to worry about being correct, it didn't worry about fitting within some academic context that languages were a particular way, that people lived in a particular place, and you can point to it and say, "Yeah, this is this particular place in the British Isles." There wasn't any of that. It was its own thing, but it took from these other places and gained its own life, if that makes any sense. And I wanted to have that kind of a feeling, but pulling from those non-Euro spaces while allowing for some of those Euro spaces to be there. I wanted something that was inclusive. My thought was, I wanted something for anyone, even if it wasn't for everyone. Right?

0:13:54 AT: But then looking back on the things that stood out to me as particularly native lenses, or in my case, Lakota lenses, but also mixed with my own mixed heritage lenses in there. And so the things that needed to stand out were things are about on the relatively relationships and that all of these things were in the space affecting each other, that the land had a big effect on it, that there's this process of growth happening, and that there's a sense of tribal spaces where the hierarchies weren't about kings and queens. It wasn't about somebody owned the land and everyone was subservient to them, it was about we. It was about we are in the space and we're trying to figure out how to survive in the space. And sometimes you get it totally wrong. It's also accepting that the native space didn't have to be this idealized native fairies of America space where it's like how in a lot of fiction, there's the trope of the magic ethnic guy, the magic negro, the...

0:15:14 JL: The magic negro, yeah.

0:15:15 AT: The magic Indian, and the person you go to for your wisdom, if you're the white person, so that you can be a better person. And like, "Why are all these people sitting around waiting for the white guy for the wisdom to be of any worth?" It's like it gets validated by their existence. And so Ehdrigohr needs to be a place where it's validated by them. It has to be their own thing. And so embracing this idea that it's tribal peoples and also embracing this idea that the tribal

people are very different from each other. There's this pan-Indian, pan-native mentality that people have on the outside...

0:15:52 JL: Sort of imaginary Indian, yeah.

0:15:53 AT: Yeah, that it's all feather culture, that it's all Mother Earth, Father Sky, we talk to rabbits, Pocahontas, [chuckle] whatever, and saying... And trying to figure out a way to get people to get that there is as much difference between native nations as there are between nations over the waters in European worlds. The way to do that, our approach was through what I call reverse appropriation, [chuckle] where I picked each of these, the tribal nations that were gonna be there in the world, and said, "I'm gonna start with a tribal nation that I know a little bit about, because my connections and friends and whatnot in the Chicago area just... " We've got lots of Indian, native tribes coming through there and saying, "I wanna start with one of these tribes, but I'm going to affect it with affectations from things from Europe, Asia..."

0:16:57 JL: Right. And like in the play a game session today, there's this one tribe, this one group was kind of imagine the darker aspects of the Spartans and the Aztecs, what happens when you bring those together.

0:17:06 AT: Right. The idea there was that it's a point of access for people who just don't get it. So you start saying, "Hey, that kinda looks like Celts." And then they start playing it and start reading it and they're like, "They're kinda Celts, but something's wrong, [chuckle] something's not quite right." And to get into it, you have to accept that this group is different from the other group. And so they stop being native and they start being their nations. It's like people, and most... Like when you think of European, you think of French, you think of English, and you think that there are different groups. There's some overlap that we see when we start thinking of a European or an African or whatever, but there's an allowance for a distinction there, that Germans are not the same as Finns, even though there may be some relationship somewhere. And so I wanted to get that idea across in Ehdrigohr that these are distinct groups. They have different religions. They have... And actually, there's less religion. They have different spiritual ideas and cosmological ideas that they are rooted in similar beliefs, but they go in different directions.

0:18:18 JL: Great. Can you talk a little bit about the use of time, particularly dream and dream travel within the world that you've constructed?

0:18:33 AT: Dream is an important space because... So there are these areas that are the traveling lands. There's the road where spirits go when they return to source. There is shadow which exists on the fringe of everything. There's the river, which is where time exists, and the idea that in Ehdrigohr, everything is inside this flow, and you can step into the flow and move up and down through the flow. But it's also a place where traveling happens. And then there is dream, and dream is a place where creation happens. Dream is a place where possibility begins. The idea is that all of the travelling lands have points of access; different times of day, different rituals, different things will let you get into one of the travelling lands. But humans, and Ehdrigohr is a human-centric world; there are no elves or dwarves or any of that. Humans all enter Dream when we sleep, and it's a way that we refresh ourselves. And it's this constant connection to source, creation, WhatMoves, which is the name we use for creation in Ehdrigohr which... I was gonna say something important there and it slipped out of my head.

[laughter]

0:19:58 AT: But WhatMoves, which is about the idea that everything's in motion. When you dream, when you sleep and you go into Dream, you're not going into deep Dream, but you're just touching it, and while you're touching it, you're touching everyone, and you're touching all this possibility and it's like this washing that happens, and you can return refreshed into the world. And then there's this thing where there are experiences that can happen in the world that retard your ability to enter Dream, to touch it, to connect with it, to pull from it, and when that happens, if you can't touch Dream, then you just drop out of the cycle of existence altogether at some point. Dream is where we indirectly witness everyone. We see all of our hopes and fears and we become real to each other, even if we're not aware of the fact that we're becoming real to each other in that very unreal space. And when we stop being able to do that, there's no relationship, there's no connection, and we just totally slip away. So the witnessing is a big part of existence in Ehdrigohr. We witness each other through things. We help each other through things. And if we don't, the Shivers can get us.

0:21:20 AT: If I don't spot you, if I don't say, "Hey, I see you," if you don't say, "Hey, you see me," then I can't be sure that I'm being counted, that I can't assure that there's a backup anywhere when things get rough. When people are in that space where they're struggling with sorrow and the sorrow's keeping them from connecting to Dream, it's important to have tribe around you that witnesses you, to make sure that when you sleep, even if you're not connecting to Dream, because we can connect to Dream, we can keep you rooted in the world until you can figure that connection back out again. When we stop witnessing you, you begin to fade out and you start to disappear. And if you go too long without being able to connect to Dream, you just kind of stop.

0:22:02 JL: Right.

0:22:03 AT: You just stop being.

0:22:04 JL: I think it's a really powerful set of things you've interrelated there, the dreaming, and the dream as a way to connect each other, the necessity of reflexive witnessing.

0:22:17 AT: Yeah. And it's a place where you figure out who you are. In a lot of native traditions, there is that idea of the seeking of a vision or vision quests and all that, and a lot of that has an overlap with the idea of you connecting to Dream to get that thing. That somehow the creator, whatever your name for the creator is, touches you in that space. And so whenever... In Ehdrigohr, people really need to make a change in the world. They gather together and they find ways to physically enter into Dream. They send people off in an expedition deep into Dream and they'll come back with gifts from the various spirits and things that dwell deep in the dream space. That's where transformations happen.

0:23:06 JL: Right, right. There's that big cosmology of the piece and how it intersects with native beliefs, whether ones that are shared by a number of native communities or specific to being Sioux or Lakota. I'm wondering at the level of game mechanics, if you see indigeneity operating or tried to design game mechanics that worked in a way that you thought might reflect indigenous ways of engagement. This is a tough question. It's a question that I think any of us who are designing media are wrestling with, which is, how in the way you actually structure the engagement with the structure does that or does that not reflect anything particularly indigenous?

0:24:00 AT: Yeah. I don't have actual data to back it up, [chuckle] but I have this belief through just anecdotal evidence and my experiences that play is a way that we confirm culture. Again, the experience I was having with those kids when they had to go and raid the tomb, there is something in the structure of that play that says, "This is an okay way to be." That your character grows in power by the amount of havoc it's wreaked in the world.

0:24:38 JL: By plunder.

0:24:39 AT: By plunder, by stuff you've collected. You can experience [0:24:43] by just destroying things, and the more you destroy, the stronger you get. There are all these understandings that are very quietly maintained in the ways that we play. And there are a lot of folks in the tabletop role-playing game world that are playing with ways to step away from a lot of those structures. What I discovered when I was looking for a way to build Ehdrigohr was that, the stuff that I was initially drawn to as standard ways of playing didn't really support the kind of experience I wanted people to have. I found myself drawn more and more to games that focused on the narrative, because I felt like that very important piece of indigeneity is your story. That you have a relationship with everything around you, and that relationship is woven together with narrative and stories. It's not just about you. It's about you in relation to them, and you in relation to things. And this idea that it's not so much about how many things you collect, and it's not so much about putting people in a place that's better than things or putting things in a place that's better than people.

0:26:09 AT: It's about treating everything as if it's important enough that you need to be mindful about what you do with it, 'cause it will affect you in the long run. And so when I came across the Fudge games, the Fudge system, and then after that, the FATE stuff, I found that there was this process that some of these games had where you had these phases of character creation, and those phases were oriented around creating aspects which are those narrative hooks that you use to get bonus points to do things in the world. And I thought, "Well, I can go a little deeper with the way this works and really connect us to this bigger ideal and say that you need to create these powerful narratives. From those narratives, you're going to create these poetic things, and those poetic things are going to be important to you on a personal and a cultural level." So I went back and grabbed that whole... I looked at the winter counts. And we did this as we were playing with it today, we grabbed the winter counts and said, "Hey, this is a thing."

0:27:19 AT: This is a thing that we used to do where we would say we documented our history by marking these moments coming up with these phrases that identify the moment so that we can talk about during casual conversations; "That was the winter of whatever." Taking that piece of indigenous tradition and applying it as a game mechanic saying, "I want you to do this to make your character. I want you to not just make some aspects. I want you to go through your winters. I want you to identify your winters. I want you to do it with some other people. I want you to build history with people as you're doing that." And then you're gonna have some things which are mechanics, but those mechanics also bind you as players, both as narratives, and there's this emotional quality to it.

0:28:08 JL: It's a huge emotional quality. I found that that was the most, in the game play session today, for me anyways, you could see how deeply and how long you could actually just spend there, right, in thinking about the different winters of your life and the significance of those things and what they meant later. 'Cause it wasn't just the... There was that first movement of "Think about something that happened to you when you were an adolescent that changed you in some way." But

then there's that other level of, "Okay, now, how did that become an aspect? How did that become something that got distilled down into, like you said, a saying, or a touchstone, or whatever it is that's operational in your life as you go forward, and operational in the game?"

0:29:04 AT: Operational, and one that you're owning.

0:29:06 JL: Yeah. Yeah. One you're owning. That's what you kept saying, one that you own.

0:29:10 AT: It affects you. It's always there affecting you. It's always there a force, this narrative that is there colouring your experience of the world. It can compel you into doing things that you don't want to do, but it can also move you through the world and give you the power to the change what's in front of you. When I came across the whole idea of aspects, that was the first thing that jumped out to me that, "Oh wow, this is therapeutic." [chuckle] This is something that really speaks to the way I've always talked with people. When I'm hearing stories from elders, when I'm hearing stories from kids, when I'm hearing about how people are moving through the world and the things that change them, this is what's happening. Connecting that directly to a cultural ideal, and then moving that cultural ideal back all the way through play, I think colored the rest of how people experience the game overall.

0:30:05 AT: And so, there's that, and then there's this other thing which is targeting things, I think, that in the indigenous world are problems that we don't always address very well. There is what I feel like is an epidemic of just depression, and that depression is coming from all these places. It's coming from just the general effects of colonization. There's the not quite knowing where we fit, the roles that maybe we had in previous... When in our cultures in the past just don't have a place anymore, that our cultures are upended. There's all this stuff that's happening that's just dismantling who we are, and it's always there whittling away at you.

0:30:51 AT: Taking those winters which are all about how I have survived and giving them to you and then saying, "I want you to be aware that there's this thing, though, there's this thing that threatens to unravel what it is that's you. You've defined who you are. And you own this. And this thing is what keeps moving you through the world." How you engage your narratives is what's keeping you moving through the world. And this other thing says to you every now and then, "This isn't true. This isn't you. This has no power. You're not worth it. Why are you even bothering?"

0:31:25 AT: And you stop owning your winters, good and bad. There's good things and bad things in those winters, but you stop owning them, and they stop being a tool for your survival. The whole idea of survivance, right? It stops being there for you, and when you lose that, you just become static. The idea is grabbing both of those pieces and saying, "These things are both part of the indigenous experience," and I want people to play with it, have a relationship with it, look at it and see how it affects them.

0:31:57 AT: And just even in our session earlier today, when people were just making their characters, there's a point when people really started to engage the stories they were coming up with and share them with each other. They hit a point where just by having a conversation, just by thinking about the whys of them, made them start to refine them, and as they refined them, made other people refine theirs. And then you start to swirl. There was like this pot of possibility just arising in between a lot of us, and that felt good.

0:32:30 JL: Yeah. It was a really great session, maybe even profound for me in certain ways. When we were talking about the new game on the way home from the airport last night, and you were talking about how some aspects of it touched people in a really deep way, I heard you and I believed you, but I couldn't quite imagine it. But now after the play session this afternoon, I could see very well how that might be and how it might be powerful outside of a game context, too. Like you were talking about the group of families you were working with, where it wasn't about them constructing a story character, it was them talking about their family history.

0:33:12 AT: Yes.

0:33:13 JL: Right? And I was like, "Well, that's gotta be really powerful, actually, or potential, anyways."

0:33:19 AT: And it's funny to me because, well it's... It's a bunch of things to me, but remember, I primarily came out a world of games as product, and I've had these little ideas rolling around in the back of my mind, and only recently am I getting to a point where I'm finding ways to put them out into the world. And so it surprises me when some of this stuff works. I've moved from the space of games as product to the space of games as medicine. There's this powerful medicine in play in being free to imagine yourself as something, free to... Being given permission to look at your narratives as real things, as spirits that are there with you, always moving alongside you, influencing you...

0:34:06 JL: And as a narrative, right? I think also just that ability to sort of look back, and if you're my age or your age or their ages back there, there's an epic tale that's being told. We don't think of ourselves as epic characters or epic heroes or anything like that, but there is.

0:34:27 AT: But there is. We are epic. We're epic.

0:34:28 JL: Yeah.

0:34:29 AT: We all have this great story that needs to be told, and in these play spaces, we get to play around with it. And I think as an indigenous thing, what we're talking about, I don't think is necessarily inherent just to indigenous people, but I think it's an issue of prioritization, where it sits within our hierarchy of things that bring us to life. I think it sits so much higher, and it's about the ownership of those relationships, self-ownership and group ownership of those relationships as opposed to ownership of stuff. The relationships don't culminate, and those narratives don't culminate in things, they culminate in community. I think that's one of the important driving ideas that's at the core of what's...

0:35:28 JL: That's where your going.

0:35:29 AT: What's important in Ehdrigohr.

0:35:32 JL: Right. I wanna ask a question that's about appropriation, and I'm trying to figure out how to do it in the sense that, I think that if somebody coming into this from a particular angle might have an issue with the fact that you're sort of pulling from a number of different traditions. And I'm just curious about what your response would be about that.

0:36:05 AT: That's just such a minefield, and I think about it all the time. And it actually affected

how I went about pulling things. So the one thing I didn't want was to make the game that made people feel like they're being given permission to run off and play Indian. [chuckle] Right? I had to do this dance where... I thought it was more important to get ideals and lenses across than particulars. And because I think the appropriation exists in the particulars, because the particulars are what gets monetized and moved around.

0:36:52 JL: And then have no depth.

0:36:52 AT: Right. It'd be very easy to make the game that was about a bunch of plains Indians, plains natives who had all the normal...

0:37:05 JL: Accoutrements.

0:37:05 AT: Accoutrements of being a stereotypical native. And no matter which one native I would choose, somehow or another, that would still be true. But then by... It's just like the cards I was talking about in the ride to the hotel yesterday. By putting them with something that in most people's minds doesn't belong, that forces this little thing to happen in your head. It keeps you from just driving right into the trope, and trying to figure out how those two things come together. And some people may never see it. Some people may just take whichever top level shows up to them first, and then deep dive into that. Beyond that, I think the other... It's a tough thing, 'cause no matter what I do, there's gonna be someone who feels like there's appropriation there, and I'm sure there is somewhere somehow. I've even had conversations with people when I first put the game out, where folks were concerned about the fact that since it wasn't placed anywhere in the Americas, then that somehow just made it into an appropriation thing and...

[chuckle]

0:38:29 JL: Right.

0:38:30 AT: Which is weird because to my mind, that was a type of racism. The racism that says that as fantasy, a Euro-style fantasy you can take European characters and put them anywhere and let them do anything, and they're fine. But if they were native, they had to be kind of in an America. If they were Asian, they have to be off in the east. If they were Africans or dark skinned, they had to be somewhere down south. I wanted to push back against a lot of those things. The pot that's there is a mindful pot that's saying, "These are the places I'm going to push back on." And I know that some people are going to be agitated by it. It's the same way that I use language in the game where I'm using bits and pieces of Lakota to color everything, but without actually giving you a lexicon of Lakota words. 'Cause I don't want you sitting around pretending speak faux Lakota. You ever hear of the Indian clubs in Germany?

0:39:44 JL: Oh yeah. I lived in Berlin for two years, so yeah.

0:39:46 AT: Right. I didn't want that. I didn't want some people using this as their Bible for how to be Cree or Lakota or Anishinaabe in this fantasy world and saying, "It's okay because it's fantasy." I didn't want that. I wanted them to be their own things and I wanted it to be about the lens you had to play through. And so then I guess there's the last part, I wanted people to also be able to own it. Even if you weren't native, I wanted you to be able to come into the game and play it and find your place. Again, there should be a place for everyone even if it's not a game for you. Those hooks

allow you to, I think, say, "Well this is kind of like my people," or "kinda like the people that I like, and I'm going to tweak it." I really hope that people mod it. I hope that there are native groups out there who pick it up and say, "Man, I don't want all these other influences. I wanna yank all this stuff out." And so it gets purged and it becomes their game. I want that. I want people to come to me and tell me what their Ehdrigohr is like. I don't want it to just be my Ehdrigohr. This is like I'm casting it out to the world saying, "Do your thing."

0:40:57 JL: Okay, so that brings me to another question which is, what has it been like playing this game with native youth and with mixed groups or non-native groups?

0:41:07 AT: Yeah. It's been an interesting experience. Playing it with non-native groups, they're very much in a game space. We sit down, I hand out some characters, when I've given them pre-generated characters, and they very quickly maneuver to try to make it be what they're used to. Typically, it just becomes about killing monsters and whatnot. And the rush is to find the threat and deal with the threat in your traditional role-playing game style. And when I played it with native peoples, the people got really caught up in more the narrative space and the fact that they got to be native in the space. There's like one adventure where I'm running with people and I tell them all the aspects that are in play, and before they leave to go on the adventure, there are these elders in the adventure that smudge you to protect you from evil, to give you these blessings. And when I'm playing with non-native people and I mention this, it's just a checkbox like, "Okay, I've got this aspect smudged. Okay, ready to go." It's a thing. It's a...

0:42:30 JL: It's an acquisition.

0:42:32 AT: It's a disposable tangible that they know will be used once and then discarded. And when I've done it with the native people, they immediately go, "Oh wait, that's right, we have to smudge." And then you stop and you talk about who's gonna do the smudging as we move through, and then they start trying to figure out who's the closest to a person they're gonna look at as someone to maintain this connection between spirit, between them as they're moving along. And without fail, that conversation would come up because that was a... They recognized that as a meaningful piece of culture that they got to play with, even if they didn't necessarily realize that they were playing with culture, it got them to touch this ritual as a thing. And again, these are things that happen outside of native cultures, I mean tribal people all over the world find ways to do some kind of protective thing.

0:43:29 AT: But it's more the terminology, it's the process, the ritual, and that they immediately have a connection to it, and it's something that becomes a part of their adventure, that I don't have to keep reminding them to do. So with the non-native groups when they say, "Okay, you're smudged against evil," they would say "Okay," and when it gets checked off, it's checked off and that's it. With the native groups, as soon as they had a chance to, they were smudging again.

0:43:57 JL: [chuckle] They went back to it and pulled it out. Yeah.

0:43:58 AT: As soon as they were ready to start the new day, they were smudging again. They were asking, "Well, what do we do about the bodies here?" And when they come across some dead bodies, they try to figure out what happened to them and what's going on with them, and what they can do to put them into a peaceful space or whatever. With the non-native groups, the tendency was, what's on them? What can we get from them?

0:44:24 AT: There's these different points of view that colored how that play happened, colored how they interacted with each other. Actually, I should qualify that a little bit. When I say the non-native groups, so when I'm playing with a primarily white audience, it's like that. When I'm playing with a non-white audience, it tends to be a little more towards the experience that the native kids had, the native groups have had. And I've got this one experience I had, actually relatively recently in Chicago, I've gotten asked to come out and run the game for various libraries. They're trying to get people coming into libraries and playing games. And they said, "Hey, why don't you come out and run it at all these different branches?" And I said, "Sure, I'll do it." There's this branch that was way on the south side, in the deepest darkest parts of the south side, I like to think of as Chicago's Mordor.

[chuckle]

0:45:31 AT: And, I called the people up to say, "Hey, I'm coming down," 'cause I have to contact each branch individually. There's a central library that sets things up, and then I have to contact a branch and say, "I'm gonna come and do this thing." And I say, "Hey, I'm coming out to run the game," and the woman who's answering has no idea what's going on, and I said, "Well, it's supposed to be, I'm coming out to run it for kids." When I said I was gonna run it for kids, I was talking about teenagers; all the other branches knew this. This branch didn't get it, and so the woman was like, "Well, we're gonna bring some kids together, we got kids out doing homework help in the homework area." And I'm like, "Ma'am, this is like a fantasy-horror game, you realize this, right?" And she's like, "Oh these kids, they watch all kinds of crazy stuff on TV now, it doesn't matter."

[chuckle]

0:46:20 AT: All I need is somebody freaking out because their kids thought something or had a description. I've done this thing before where we've had very watered down versions of the game that were just to be palatable to younger audiences. And so I show up, I walk up into this place, and sure enough, they don't have any kids, they have no idea what's going on, these kids are doing the homework help. And they send me into this back, this area where it's like an auditorium space, there's some tables set up. And they bring all these kids, they send all the kids in, and so I've got this growing mob of kids who don't wanna be there. They're all African-American kids. And they sit down, and this one little girl looks at me and she's like, "Y'all got any snacks?" I'm like, "No. I'm just here to run this role-playing game."

0:47:11 JL: I'm the game guy.

0:47:11 AT: Yeah. And she's like, "You ain't got no snacks?" I said, "I'm sorry, baby, I don't have any snacks." And the other kids are coming in, she's like, "Y'all can go back, he ain't got no snacks." And so these kids all do a 180 and they leave, [chuckle] except for this one little girl who's just sitting there at the table, and it's like this commotion and leaves. I'm like, "Well, that's it." I turn around and there's this kid. I'm like, "Hey, I don't have any snacks."

[chuckle]

0:47:39 AT: And she says, "Oh, that's okay. What is this?" So she starts pulling, picking up the book and paging through it, and I start explaining it to her. And I can tell that it's making no sense to her

whatsoever. And I'm trying to figure out how to talk to her about what this thing is, and this other little boy comes in, and he sits down, and he's definitely the child of some mother, church minister. He's all decked out with his little vest and his little tie, and he's all very proper, but he's really excited to touch this thing that's got monsters in it. He's looking at monsters and I'm like, "Hey, you wanna play this game?" And I'm explaining it to him. And then another little girl comes, they're interested, but they have no idea, they have no connection to this. And it's frustrating because even when I'm up on the north side, when I'm talking to these kids, I'm typically talking to these gamer audiences, they're primarily white gamer audiences, and I start saying things and they'll get it. Because there are things that are just part of the culture.

0:48:43 JL: Yeah.

0:48:44 AT: They're just not getting it. And I have my pre-generated characters. And this one older boy comes out. The kids I'm talking to are maybe 10, nine, 10, 11 years old. This older boy comes and he sits down, and he's gotta be like, pushing 15, 16 years old. And he totally looks like he's street urchin, been around town a few times, he knows what's going on. He sits down, he's like, "What's this?" I'm like, "Oh," I give him my spiel. He's like, "That sounds cool. Okay, I'll play." "Well, alright." And so I start providing them with the characters, and I start trying to describe to them what these characters are. And so I'm describing this one character that is a traveling storyteller. And the little girl's looking at it and she's like "I don't understand what that is." And the little boy leans in and he goes, "You like Tupac."

0:49:38 AT: And she's goes, "Oh, okay." And we're good. And then I'm explaining this way warden to, who's like these people who travel between towns and they maintain the roads, to this other little boy and he's not getting it. And then the teenage kid goes... He's like, "You got the authority." He was like "Oh, alright." And so, I realize while I'm talking to these kids, that I've been so busy, while I'm moving the game around, the language that I'm using is still trapped up in all these gamer-isms and all of this presumed culture that they didn't have. And so I had to kind of take these little boxes off of my head and find a way to connect them to the culture, connect them to the experience. And then once they did that, they were all in it. And they were all trying to find ways to be important in the story.

0:50:37 AT: And it culminated in the moment with the little girl who's playing the storyteller, winds up, I tell her... There's a point where they've gathered all these kids, and I say, "You have to get the kids you found who are lost in the wilderness, you have to get them back to town." And she's like, "Okay, I'm gonna tell a story." I'm like, "Okay, good. Telling a story is a good idea. You tell the story to keep the kids focused and go back to town." And I'm about to say, "Roll the dice to find out how strong your story is, what kinda story you tell," and she gets up and proceeds to just start storytelling. And she starts to tell some of her own stories and some of her stuff that she knew, and she brings culturally what she knows into the edge of our moment and makes it her own.

0:51:25 AT: And I stopped even asking to roll the dice and just like, "Go ahead." It just became a play. And that urge to very quickly move into this playful ownership, and make the narrative be something that was meaningful to everybody took over versus the urge to make something that would be a game within this rule set that told you where you fit in terms of power and hierarchy in the play. That whole experience of watching people own the game as opposed to... So with the native groups, people were... They had a place finally where they could be. With the more traditional gamer groups, it was just a game. With this other group, they had to figure out how to

talk to it. And once they figured out how to talk to it, then it was theirs.

0:52:16 JL: Brilliant. Nice. [chuckle]

[background conversation]

0:52:20 JL: Okay, so I'll wind up.

0:52:22 AT: I'm sorry. I can talk a lot.

0:52:23 JL: No, no, we're happy, that's why we're doing this, happy to have you talk. But I also know you've had a long afternoon already. Also, I meant to ask you this in the van last night just to prep you a bit, but what we're doing here with Initiative For Indigenous Futures is trying to generate conversations that allow us as native people and communities to imagine what our lives might be like seven generations from now. And so I'm just wondering if you had any thoughts in particular about that or whether it's how you see things Ehdrigohr growing in those sorts of times, the role of games as medicine...

0:53:04 AT: Sure.

0:53:08 JL: I know it's a big...

0:53:09 AT: That's a big thing.

0:53:09 JL: That's why I try to prep people beforehand.

0:53:11 AT: My thought on that, and this is part of my talk, is that the role is games as medicine as a way of getting people... Role-playing games have this powerful ability to give you permission to be outside of restriction, the restrictions as you know. It says role-playing games tell you on a regular basis, you need to do an impossible thing. And as a tool, there's this thing that happens where you have a memory of doing something against the odds. You have a memory of where, no matter how bad things were, you found a way. And when it comes to growing as a culture, I think that's a really important thing where we... A lot of the narratives that we tend to embrace are the narratives that have been taken away and then given back to us.

0:54:10 AT: There's the whole deal where people come into native cultures, have come into native cultures, separated families, pulled them away, taught them how to be more modernized people, while at the same time, studying their traditions, took them back over here, and then re-fed them back through another cultural lens what this stuff meant. There's this whole thing that's going on where what it means to be native is coming through all these different lenses, but so much of it is coming through these lenses that say "What it means to really be native is what it meant to be native back there, back then." We're stuck in 1890, and where we're allowed to be in terms of how we change the world, how we affect the world, the tools we're allowed to use is back there.

0:55:00 AT: To use role-playing games as an example, it's like the old days of Dungeons and Dragons when if you're gonna be a wizard, you could not pick up a sword. You were not allowed to pick up a sword because you were a wizard. There could be this crazy monster charging at you, you couldn't pick up that 1d6 weapon that would let you do more damage than your 1d4 magic missile,

right? You couldn't do it because the rules said this is who you are. This is your identity. As the games have progressed, we dropped a lot of those restrictions, and we allowed people to imagine in these bigger and better ways.

0:55:37 AT: I think the same thing applies when we start thinking about ourselves culturally that we have to grow. We have to create new landscapes that we're gonna explore. We can't just keep circling that same land. Even culturally, you followed the game wherever it went, and if you stayed in one place, you'd eventually wind up causing damage to that space. You had to move around. Moving away from a feed lot, [chuckle] an informational feed lot, a cultural feed lot, and moving into a free range space where we're allowed to figure out... We allow ourselves to figure out what we can be, and that's not dictated from an outside source. It's influenced. We don't exist in a vacuum, so all these other lenses are still effecting what the outcome is, but we get to decide, we get to remember what we haven't done yet.

0:56:34 JL: That's great. That's about everything, yeah. I really like that. Lindsay, do you have anything before we wrap up that you'd like to throw in?

0:56:44 Lindsay: I just thought those questions they brought up at the gameplay were super cool, about your own relationship to RPG playing. Yeah. But if you felt comfortable sharing these things on camera, that'd be a really cool thing.

0:56:53 AT: Which ones?

0:56:54 Lindsay: We talked about what your favorite RPG games were and you went through a couple of your favorites and talked about your relationship...

0:57:00 AT: Oh, my relationships with them, so sure. The question being what are my favorite role-playing games? And a lot of my favorite role-playing games are a function of where I was at the time when I came across them. The set that I went through where... There was of course D&D, which was like the progenitor of a lot of things. For me as a kid, I was coming from a space of... Times were bad in my household. We were destitute, there was physical abuse, there was sexual abuse, and so imagining was my escape tool. When D&D manifested in the world and I got wind of it, that just seemed like Mecca. It was this place where I could just make and create and I could get people together and we could tell stories together and do all this stuff.

0:57:50 AT: I came across a copy of it on close-out at a Walgreens, talked my mom who wanted me to have nothing to do with it at the time. She's like, "I've heard all kind of things about this and it's devil worship, and it's all these things." She eventually relented. I'm not even sure what caused her to relent. I think it was the fact that I pointed out that it was \$5. It was some ridiculously cheap amount of money and that I wouldn't do anything crazy.

0:58:15 JL: That was Christmas for you done, that she didn't have to worry about it.

0:58:17 AT: Yeah. Didn't have to worry about a birthday present or anything. She's like, "Alright, here, let's go." I took it home and I played and I created and it got me making all these stories and making characters. I had no one to play D&D with. But I made characters and I played by myself. There's actually a very interesting thing that goes with that where once I got a group of friends to start playing role-playing games with, and this is a little bit of a side track, I found myself making

lots of characters and playing with people, and in those play spaces, I got to explore strangeness. Right? I got to explore pieces of me that I couldn't explore out in the real world, and I actually got to build a relationship with myself, that I didn't have, by playing all these characters.

0:59:09 AT: And so, those characters became like these little pieces of me that I could see when whatever narratives caused them to exist inside of me, when I could see those things start to take hold and I was starting to act out the urges of that character and... Like, the pieces of me that were really, really angry about how I got to be where I was, I got to put into another character. Later on, and so now that anger had a name, it had a face, and so when I was in situations where I was seeing that anger starting to roll up and take over and puppet me, I could say "Oh no, Thanatos, settle down," or when the trickster piece of me was really kind of getting out of control, I can say, oh Mortimer, fade, settle down." To use some of the terms we're using in Ehdrigohr and FATE games, I can invoke them and move them around.

1:00:03 AT: A lot of that came out of that space. And then there's games like Dread, which I talked about earlier. Dread is a horror role-playing game where there's no stats for characters. Characters just have... There's an interview process, and the interview process tells you what you're good at, what you're not, what's important to you. And what you do in Dread is the game actually starts moving you through the story, and to do anything in the story, you have to make a pull from a Jenga tower; that's the mechanic. And what I found beautiful about that was that tower was a ritual of anxiety. You had to physically engage this anxiety every time you wanted to do anything.

1:00:44 JL: And I think that really captured this fear space. And so I really made it a horror game. And the further into the game you went, and the more unstable the tower was, the less you wanted to do and the more afraid you were to do things, because you had to engage and feed this anxiety, and everything you did affected everyone else's anxiety. It was great in the way that games that just had stats that said you're okay until you have this amount of health. And it tells you you're scared, it tells you you've got fear, it tells you you've got insanity. This puts you in a space where you felt it.

1:01:21 JL: You're embodied in the... Yeah.

1:01:22 AT: You embodied it. That I found to be a very powerful thing, and that kinda changed a lot of my thinking about how to engage games, and that there's something powerful about physicality, and that games are ritual and theatre in a way that I wasn't quite getting in the video game space, even though I'd been working on video games for a while.

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