

Sawbones 409: The World of Warcraft Plague and COVID

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[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybodyyyyyy, and welcome to *Sawbones*: a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Nice!

Sydnee: That I'm Sydnee McElroy?

Justin: I was— I was hopin'— I was hopin' that it'd be you.

Sydnee: I'm si— I'm sitting directly across from you.

Justin: Of the co-hosts on *Sawbones*, you are my favorite.

Sydnee: I'm— ... Are you doing *Sawbones* without me?

Justin: I do—

Sydnee: There are a— Are there rogue *Sawboneses*?

Justin: I do three to four *Sawbones* per week. In a good week, I do three to four *Sawbones*. Well, it's different regions.

Sydnee: I find that very upsetting.

Justin: I forget if I'm doin' American *Sawbones*. [in an English accent] I also do British *Sawbones*, don't I? [speaking normally] And then um, um... *Sawbones*...

Sydnee: Go ahead. What other accents? Go ahead.

Justin: I— um...

Sydnee: Whatcha got?

Justin: I don't—

Sydnee: You do some Australian for me?

Justin: Sh—

Sydnee: We watch a lot of *Bluey*, come on.

Justin: Um... [in an indistinct accent] I do this— I—

Sydnee: What is that noise?!

Justin: [in a British accent] I do *Sawbones* in—

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: That's still British.

Sydnee: Yeah. That's it, that's all you got.

Justin: [imitates Dracula] I do *Sawbones* in Transylvania. [wheezes quietly]

Sydnee: Ohhh, okay. Alright.

Justin: There's different regions of *Sawbones*, is what I'm saying.

Sydnee: You got a Canadian *Sawbones* for me?

Justin: Eh?

Sydnee: Mmm.

Justin: That's a little bit on the nose, isn't it?

Sydnee: I'm surprised that you didn't try to rename it like uh *Dragons' Den* and *Shark Tank*.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah, that would be— They do have different names. Don't. Don't. I see the gli— glimmer in your eyes. Don't ask me to vamp those, please.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: It's been a long, long day. Just—

Sydnee: I know it's been a long day.

Justin: We'll take— take your submissions, okay? [chuckles]

Sydnee: I know it's been a long day. It's a uh— So, I had a... a suggestion for an episode that I thought was an interesting— an interesting one. Not a new topic, an old topic reapplied to new events.

Justin: [imitates scratching on a DJ mix table] Remix!

Sydnee: Uh Bailey wrote in and reminded me of episode... um long time ago, 276.

Justin: Wow. That's several, that's several s—

Sydnee: [quietly] Mm-hmm.

Justin: Like over 800 *Sawbones* ago.

Sydnee: ... No.

Justin: If you count all the different... regions.

Sydnee: Oh, oh.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I was gonna say.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: Yes, all the secret ones I don't know about. Uh we did an episode way back then on um *World of Warcraft*. And a plague.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: That occurred within the game.

Justin: Yes, I remember. A prescient episode. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles] It was. Uh we didn't know it at the time um, but what Bailey pointed out was that it would be interesting to apply what we talked about... Theoretically, what we learned in that episode.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: To the events of the last couple years. And I thought that might be a fun way to revisit it. Not fun. Fun isn't the word. [chuckles]

Justin: That's not the word.

Sydnee: But interesting, um... Because at the time, when we did that episode, we talked about how the events of— in this *World of Warcraft* plague were used to sort of theorize what a real-life, you know pandemic would look like. And a lot of people, as we talked about in that episode, disagreed. Were like "Well, I don't know. This seems a little farfetched".

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So who was right?

Justin: Well, that's— And now we have the data. Who knew? We would have it so quickly? How lucky—

Sydnee: Uhhh...

Justin: We are to— Well.

Sydnee: No, but we can— Okay. So first of all, just to— just to rehash. And again, this episode is, is still— You can listen to it for the full accounting of this, this event.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um but to briefly—

Justin: That's probably gonna be a little weird— a bit of a weird one to listen to uh at this point. [wheezes] As many of our pre-COVID episodes are.

Sydnee: So, to— to kind of rehash what happened, uh there was an epidemic uh that started on September 13th, 2005.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um and this is when I'm going to have to talk about *World of Warcraft* as if I understand all of these things I'm about to say.

Justin: [quietly] Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And Justin is gonna have to give context.

Justin: I will try. It's been a long time since I've played *World of Warcraft*, but.

Sydnee: So, Blizzard introduced a new raid called "Zul'Gurub" into the game.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Okay, it was an update.

Justin: It's in Stranglethorn Vale, if you're curious.

Sydnee: Okay. Uh the end boss, Hakkar, could use a debuff.

Justin: Mm! [amused] Yeah, I love this slang that you're tossing around, Syd.

Sydnee: And a debuff is a... spell?

Justin: A spell, yes.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Is that right?

Justin: Well, a “debuff” is technically like— It’s the— A “buff” is like something that makes you run faster, or makes you heal better, or makes you hit harder.

Sydnee: Ohhh, okay.

Justin: Like “debuff” is the opposite of that.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: It makes your stats worse.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: A “debuff”.

Sydnee: Alright. Makes you hit softer. [chuckles]

Justin: Makes you hit more gently.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: “Ooph! You’ve woun— You’ve wounded me!” That kinda deal.

Sydnee: Then you can— okay. So this was called “Corrupted Blood”.

Justin: That made me— That— Doing that bit made me wanna watch more um... uh *Our Flag Means Death*.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: We should do that after we’re done recording.

Sydnee: Okay. We can do that. Let’s record first.

Justin: Meh.

Sydnee: Uh so Corrupted Blood would kill killer— kill characters um like over time. Like it would slowly like...

Justin: With nature damage.

Sydnee: Give you damage.

Justin: A dam— The— There's a name for that.

Sydnee: Oh.

Justin: Do you know what— a DOT. Damage Over Time.

Sydnee: Okay, alright. Um and uh it basically, like how fast you died depended on how high your level was, right?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So like lower-level characters—

Justin: [in a high-pitched voice] Well, that's a bit reductive, but—

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: [normal] How high your hit points are, which—

Sydnee: Sure.

Justin: Different character classes have different hit points.

Sydnee: Um.

Justin: Et cetera.

Sydnee: So you lived a— a varying amount of time.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Okay. And it could be passed on to other characters.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: It's contagious. That's key here.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It usually did between 250 and 300 points of damage.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Okay?

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Uh pets could also... get it. And even if you would dismiss your pet, which I guess is a thing you can do in *World of Warcraft*?

Justin: "Get outta here!"

Sydnee: The— The pets still like had it.

Justin: Y— Okay.

Sydnee: Like if you summoned them, they would still have it.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: It didn't make it go away. Okay. Now beyond that, you could also give it to NPCs. Non-playable characters.

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: I know what that is. Okay? Um and NPCs aren't gonna die. Like they can get it, but they're not gonna be killed by it, but they can spread it. Okay?

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And so um... Basically this— this plague gets released into *World of Warcraft*, is the point, and—

Justin: This was probably a— It's worth noting, I'm guessing it's a— it's a bug, because this effect should have been something that affected you in the— in the raid itself.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Right.

Justin: And not something that you brought out of the raid, right? So something was not working as intended.

Sydnee: Sure. But it— it— As you have said, you could carry it out. Um and basically everybody started dying of this plague. And it was sort of destroying the game. You know, people were very upset because um you couldn't— I mean, if you got it, there was not much you could do about it. You were sort of doomed, and everybody was carrying it, and NPCs were carrying it, and pets were carrying it. And um at one point there were like hundreds of bodies littering the streets of towns and cities, all throughout *World of Warcraft*.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Like not actual bodies, like...

Justin: Digital bodies?

Sydnee: Digital bodies. Yeah, well— [chuckles]

Justin: That would be weird if they had actual human corpses in... the video game *World of Warcraft*. What are you tal— I mean, I know you don't understand—

Sydnee: I mean, when I said that, like that sentence is very disturbing, but then if you take it in context that it's a computer game, it's less disturbing.

Justin: It's more—

Sydnee: I mean.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: And uh— And of course, it is okay— Like any— Like any video game or computer game—

Justin: [exhales heavily]

Sydnee: — when you die, you can come back, but like it takes a toll on your... what? Hit points? Status?

Justin: [laughs loudly]

Sydnee: I don't know. Like it's bad for your play. It's bad for gameplay.

Justin: [wheezes] I'm not going to correct you anymore because I enjoy this too much.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: Go ahead, yeah, it's bad for your play, 'cause you lose your points— [wheezes]

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: Like you're playing [laughs] Like you're playing Backgammon.

Sydnee: Anyway, so... okay. So what's interesting about this is that Blizzard tried to do a bunch of stuff to like fix it, 'cause like "Uh oh, everybody's mad". So first they attempted a voluntary quarantine. So "Okay, look. If you have it, please stay in your... digital hut. I don't know. Digital home. Your thatched roof". I imagine thatched roofs are a part of this game?

Justin: I'm certain, yeah, for sure.

Sydnee: Okay. It just feels right to me.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Okay— Or— or castle.

Justin: And they always do— They always do clarify everything in the game as being digital.

Sydnee: Mm. [chuckles]

Justin: That's good— That's a really good point. They always say like "Meet me at my digital hut. I have a digital bed there." [wheezes] "I'll be wearing digital clothes, and we can eat some digital food."

Sydnee: Uh, so they—

Justin: "With our digital, non-real corpses!"

Sydnee: [chuckles] They—

Justin: "Littering the streets!"

Sydnee: They tried a voluntary quarantine, um but like people didn't take it seriously. Can you imagine?

Justin: Ohhh, I see.

Sydnee: They told people—

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: "It's a good idea to stay home and not go out into crowds". But some people didn't take it seriously.

Justin: I see what we're—

Sydnee: And did it anyway.

Justin: I see what we're doing here.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: The uh— [chuckles] The other thing that started to happen is um... major towns and cities began to become abandoned. And this, I guess, affected gameplay as well because like you couldn't— There was nobody running like your stores or whatnot? Or like there was nobody

there? Like you couldn't interact with other players, you couldn't do anything.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Um it harmed sort of the way the game was structured, because there's stuff that's s'posed to happen, I guess?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: In cities?

Justin: Yeah, stuff—

Sydnee: Business and whatnot?

Justin: Stuff that does happen, yeah.

Sydnee: And nothing was happening, 'cause nobody was there.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: 'Cause everybody ran away. 'Cause they all sort of ran to the countryside.

Justin: Mm!

Sydnee: Leaving the urban areas filled with like... you know, dead people, and nothing else.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Wait, real dead people, or... digital?

Sydnee: Ah, I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna do this anymore. The plague ended October 8th, 2005. Um when Blizzard made pets unable to be affected, uh and thereby rendering it unable to exist outside of Zul'Gurub. Um they ended up— At one point, they had to do like uh hard resets on servers.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: To fix a lot of it.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: Yeah, it was a big deal. Um some people tried to say that this was just a stunt.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Or maybe something intentional.

Justin: Oh! Digital China cooked it up in a digital lab.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: That kinda thing.

Sydnee: Somebody became sort of conspiracy theorists, that this was intentionally... [sighs] I mean, I don't know—

Justin: I'm not sure what the endgame would be there.

Sydnee: I don't know what a computer game context for that would be, but in real life, I guess to start sort of making this comparison. Obviously, the uh quarantine comparison is easy to make. In real life, a lot of people began to suspect that COVID was... either a lie, right? We had a lot of um COVID deniers. Uh and then people who—

Justin: Very generous of you using the past tense. Appreciate that.

Sydnee: We have, and then uh people who also decided that "Well, it's real, but it was... leaked from a lab and made intentionally to kill everybody". It's a biological weapon, right?

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: So a lot of that definitely happened. And um it— After this happened in the game, there were epidemiologists, there were people who decided like “I wanna use this as something we can study.”

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um because the hard part about studying diseases, in theory, communicable diseases, is that mathematical models are really good, and we’ve learned this in COVID. We’ve talked all the last two years of like the concept of the “are not”.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: How many people is a sick person gonna spread something to, right?

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Spread— Spread— Like how many other people are gonna get infected, and a lot of that is dependent on what they do. Like yes, disease characteristics come into play, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Like how, how easily is it spread? And how long are you communicable—

Justin: You’re trying to model a typical human being and the way that they respan— they respond to an atypical situation.

Sydnee: Right. So what will someone do in this situation that will affect how many other people are going to catch it from them? Um and... this was a great thing to study, or at least some people argued that at the time, because we are seeing, you know, people react in real time. And this is something that— that math is limited in its ability to predict.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Because we have to factor in the idea that sometimes humans do illogical things.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Right? So player responses varied, um but that thought was that these were real-world behaviors, okay? Some characters, uh for instance, with healing abilities would go try to heal characters that were sick.

Justin: That's so great. There's a great market for that. That's a great way to make a few extra plat. Platty.

Sydnee: Is it?

Justin: Well, I mean, yeah. People are always lookin' for healers.

Sydnee: Um—

Justin: If you wanna play 'em. Oh no, I am— I have more to talk about. You see when I played as a druid in *EverQuest*. [clears his throat]

Sydnee: [chuckles] Okay, we're not gonna— But—

Justin: We would offer to teleport people for like 30 platinum.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: We'll like teleport them to go to Cronkite River and use—

Sydnee: How much longer do I have to let you go? With this?

Justin: Uh, just that long, actually.

Sydnee: Okay, perfect. Um but as you can imagine, if you are a healer and you're running to the place where the sick people are... you're at risk.

Justin: Y— Ooo, right.

Sydnee: For getting sick. Which—

Justin: Our front-line— [chuckles] Fr— Our front-line responders of *World of Warcraft*.

Sydnee: Exactly! Which is something that um would be hard to model, but we can s— we saw play out in COVID, especially in the very first wave, where uh we were short on personal protective equipment and we— our hospitals were overwhelmed in a lot of areas, especially in large urban areas.

And we had a lot of health care workers contracting the virus because they were doing their job. They were trying to help people. And so they were some of the first people who were put at high risk, as a result. Um so we definitely saw that play out in real life.

Uh there were also people who would try to like steer people away from infected areas. Uh some characters would— Like some people would intentionally like “I’m gonna go... where it’s safer. I’m gonna go hide in my house”, right? “I’m gonna go on lockdown.” Um other people like continued to uh try to get the disease and spread it to other people.

Justin: That actually tracks. I think we’d call that “griefing” or “trolling”.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Um and I mean, you know, the theory about that at the time was nobody would ever actually engage in behavior to get a disease.

Justin: Ah.

Sydnee: The— There— This was the thought. And this was—

Justin: Au, contraire!

Sydnee: As we’re gonna talk about, this is why the idea of using this as a model for how people react was kinda controversial, is the thought was “Well, you know that you’re not really gonna die. Like this is different, this is fake. This isn’t real”.

And so while there were people who took it seriously and were like “I don’t wanna get Corrupted Blood, I’m gonna go hide somewhere”, there were other people who sort of ran to it and got it, just to sort of be part of “the thing”. Um and a lot of uh critics said “Well, no-one would do that”.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: But I think what we saw with COVID is not— And what we continue to see, is not so much the idea “I wanna get COVID so that I’m part of it”, right? I— I don’t— I mean, maybe—

Justin: That doesn’t seem to be— I mean, maybe in people’s subconscious, but I— I don’t think that’s been a—

Sydnee: No.

Justin: A large part of the narrative.

Sydnee: I’m not gonna say— Humans are weird, and so probably someone somewhere, right? Like that’s true for everything. Probably someone somewhere.

Justin: Oh, for sure.

Sydnee: But overarching, the reason that we did see people... at least act with so much abandon that it was almost as if they were trying to get COVID.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Uh was this idea of herd immunity that got put out there so early.

Justin: Oh, gosh, yeah.

Sydnee: The idea that the faster we all get it and get over it, the faster we achieve herd immunity and the faster we can get on with our... economy. [chuckles] I think was the idea.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um and you heard it in the beginning too! Do you remember that for just a moment, early in COVID, it was suggested, by our leaders, that maybe we need to sacrifice our elderly? To save the economy? Do you remember this?

Justin: Yeeeeeah.

Sydnee: That maybe elderly people need to accept that this is a time to... you know. Give back. [wheezes]

Justin: Yeah, to— to take one for the team, as it were.

Sydnee: Not— And I mean, nobody said it overtly.

Justin: Certainly implied though!

Sydnee: But it was implied.

Justin: “Sacrifice your olds!”

Sydnee: The— That, you know, “We— The stock market’s really hurtin’ guys, so... You know.” [chuckles]

Justin: Yeah. Yeah, I mean it’s not just the stock market, Sydnee.

Sydnee: “We didn’t call you the Greatest Generation for nothin’!”

Justin: They closed Disneyworld, so I mean, it was pretty serious.

Sydnee: So, I mean, the idea that nobody would ever... intentionally or act with abandon, or that we wouldn’t have that expectation— I mean, that is part of a pandemic. Sometimes, in a pandemic... people go out and get infected.

Justin: There are probably people who—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: — after they got the vaccine, did try to swerve into COVID. I bet there’s a subset of people that did that, just to be like “Yeah— Yeah, I got it”. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yeah. There were two epidemiologists, uh a— three— three, but two that we’re gonna continue to talk about; Eric Lofgren and Nina Fefferman, who wrote a lot of papers. Also um Ran Bow— or Balicer did, but I wanna talk mainly about Lofgren and Fefferman because they continue to write about this, and we’re— we’re gonna talk about some updates.

Justin: Perfect. Yeah.

Sydnee: `Cause they— they— They have also looked back on their work, in light of recent events.

Justin: Yeah, I'm sure.

Sydnee: And done a lot of the same thing we're doing right now. Um but before we do that, let's go to the Billing Department.

Justin: Let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: Um Syd, you were gonna talk about kinda like updates to this— to this case. What's been happening since— since— in the light of COVID.

Sydnee: So, what was interesting is that these three epidemiologists, that I already mentioned, wrote papers at the time, a— when this uh originally happened, comparing these uh what happened in *World of Warcraft* to historical... uh epidemics or pandemics, okay?

So like Balicer mentioned it in uh relation to uh avian flu and SARS, which was prescient. Um same kind of idea because animals were involved and it had the potential for rapid global spread and, just like this, and uh that was, you know, one sort of perspective was to like "Look at this past plague. This really connects to that".

There was another paper where Fefferman and Lofgren just sort of went in— instead of comparing it to old uh... plagues, talked about how this could really be revolutionary as a way to predict future pandemic human behavior.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Because as we talked about, it— that's hard to do um sometimes with mathematical modelling. Um... so they had started

working on some more like simulations and things like that at the time, uh like that would show how... this might play out.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: Were we ever to have.

Justin: Right, it—

Sydnee: A global pandemic, with this kind of thing. So uh some of the things that they had predicted are that we would need to look, if we do have a pandemic, uh we need to look at the idea that some people will put themselves at risk. Like healthcare workers, but that— then they will get sick and that they are at risk of infecting others.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: The other thing that they talked about was that if we have something that was contagious for a longer period of time, if we take great pains to keep people alive, which we should, but that the consequence of that is that the whole time they're alive, they're communicable, so we extend... the time that people can be exposed. And we saw this happening in hospitals.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Right? Um... and then, on the other hand, like I said, some people were just infecting other people willy-nilly.

Justin: [quietly] Just to go for it.

Sydnee: `Cause they were just going about their life.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: In some cases, they were going about their life, you know?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: They didn't want to stop going to cities and doing— I mean, what do you do in *World of Warcraft*? Sell things? Fight people?

Justin: That's it.

Sydnee: Is that it?

Justin: That's it.

Sydnee: Is there a— are there others? Do you make a weapon?
[chuckles]

Justin: No.

Sydnee: I don't know. Trying to think of other things you could do.

Justin: There's nothing else you need. You fight people and talk.

Sydnee: Um.

Justin: Just like the real— Just like real life.

Sydnee: You could uh— They gave the option at one point to flag yourself if you were infected.

Justin: Oh, really?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm, but it was optional.

Justin: Ahhhhh.

Sydnee: So— Which calls to mind like— So then you start thinking like, well in a real pandemic, if there was a way— If you knew instantly and there was a way to make sure other people knew that you had COVID, would you make sure tell everyo— Well, wouldn't you do that? Like, surely you wouldn't go out into the world and infect people if you knew you had COVID. But how many— how many articles have we read during the pandemic—

Justin: Of people doing just that.

Sydnee: — of people getting on airplanes, knowing they had COVID. And exposing everybody on the airplane to COVID. Um we've heard of these things over and over again, of people going into group settings and parties and you know public transportation with COVID, knowing they had it. Um which again was something that like you wouldn't predict if you were thinking of humans as... essentially rational creatures. [chuckles]

Justin: Yeah. Well they— they should have been disabused of that notion quite some time ago. It shouldn't have taken COVID to do that. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles] Yeah, the— the other thing they argued is that um a lot of people were just going out to like work. To, I guess, you make money that way? You can have jobs and make money?

Justin: I mean, your work is killing stuff and mining, and doing that kind of thing, so yeah.

Sydnee: So—

Justin: Or being at the auction house. There's a place where you go to sell your wares, um where you have to post up. That can get pretty crowded.

Sydnee: Some people uh continued to go to work, and again, the thought was like "If you're sick, you won't go to work". Well, what we all learned, again during COVID, is that if you're sick, maybe you don't wanna go to work, but often you're expected to.

Justin: I mean, those kobolds aren't going to slay themselves, Sydnee. Somebody's gotta get out there and get those [chuckles] Crushbone Belts, et cetera.

Sydnee: [chuckles] W— And I think that a lot of essential workers would testify to that, that they were... I mean... "Yes, we don't want you to come spread COVID, but also you're essential". Um and I know there were many times throughout the pandemic where the— the restrictions on how sick you had to be, how tested you had to be, all that stuff sort of—

Justin: Got— Got a little looser.

Sydnee: Got looser.

Justin: When— When times demanded it, yeah.

Sydnee: Well, and I think the much publicized in the— in the last big spike that we had sort of with Omicron, um healthcare workers who were positive but had been vaccinated only had to stay home for what, five days? And then could go back.

Justin: Mm. Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: [chuckles] As long as they were asymptomatic, or—

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Or had been over 24 hours without a fever, whatever, getting better. Um so all of a sudden, we had people that in the beginning of the pandemic, we would absolutely not have considered allowing to leave their homes.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: We're urging them to get back to work faster, and not only to get back to work, to get back—

Sydnee & Justin: [simultaneously] To the hospitals!

Justin: Where— Yeah, right.

Sydnee: Full of sick, you know, at risk, vulnerable people are. Um some people attempted to sell fake cures during the Corrupted Blood incident.

Justin: Ahhhhh, now we're talking. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Um, I— You know, this is not a surprising one. I feel like if you're trying to like model out what happens during a plague, you didn't need COVID to tell you that this happens.

Justin: Yeah, that one's a gimme.

Sydnee: All of history we've been doing this.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Um, of course, uh you know, COVID has brought us some, some really wild new additions to the uh collection of fake pandemic cures. We've got, you know, deworming medicines, Ivermectin is up there. Oleander! That the pillow guy told us we should all take. Remember the poison, oleander.

Justin: Oh... yeah.

Sydnee: The MyPillow guy.

Justin: [chuckles] Remember when that— [wheezes] Remember in the coronavirus time, when the MyPillow guy tried to [through laughter] poison everybody with oleander.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. That happened. There was the uh part about bleach. "Can't we just inject bleach, or drink it or something?"

Justin: Light. `Member light?

Sydnee: `Member light? Wouldn't there be a way that we could put light in us? [laughs] Sorry.

Justin: We're not quite there yet, Sydnee. We can't quite— Yeah, we're not quite there yet. Maybe after 2024, if it passes by without incident.

Sydnee: And— And all sorts of like um supplements and vitamins.

Justin: Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: I mean, I know that there are a lot of people I heard for a while, they were saying like "Well, if you just take vitamin D, you'll be fine". And that was based— And again, these are all based on such specious connections. Like "Well, we think it hits people who have low vitamin D a little harder", but that doesn't mean that taking vitamin D will prevent you from getting COVID.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um... There uh— There also is uh... [chuckles] Fefferman wrote about, at the time what he called the “stupid factor”.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I am sorry if you find that term offensive. It is— [chuckles]

Justin: What he called it.

Sydnee: It is what he called it. Uh but basically like people who would be curious about the disease and wanna kinda go check out places where it was.

Justin: Fair. I mean yeah, that seemed to be...

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: I don't know, do you think people were doin' that much? I mean, do you think that sort of intentional like “Let me go poke around”?

Sydnee: I don't know if people were goin— I— I— Mm...

Justin: I mean, we do that a lot with natural disasters, I wouldn't see why this would be any different.

Sydnee: I don't know. I mean, I really think— I think what it— what they were talking about was the idea that... you cannot predict human behavior on— using like logical, rational— Like it— You cannot assume that every human is going to put their continued survival at the top of their list at all times.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That doesn't mean that everybody doesn't wanna live, essentially, but your order of priorities will shift, and continuing to live [chuckles]

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Is not always right at the top of your thoughts. Y— Other things will take precedent at the moment. And maybe underneath it, you still have this larger goal, but other things get in the way. Sometimes without your choice and then sometimes because you just really wanted to go on Spring Break.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't know. I mean that happened too, right?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like there were people who just really wanted to go to— get on with their lives.

Justin: They just— They just really wanted to! So they... they did.

Sydnee: [chuckles] So they just did it. Um and you know, mathematical models also don't account for things like, like journalists or, like I said, doctors or public health researchers. People who like might just get closer than they should to the whole thing.

Um and like I said, this was controversial 'cause there were other uh researchers who basically said, you know, none of this is uh applicable to real life because death in *World of Warcraft* is not death in real life.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So whatever players did in response to a fake death cannot be applied to how humans act in the face of real death.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um so, like I said, the idea that everybody just agreed this would, you know, this would happen was not— was not true. Um, however!

Justin: However.

Sydnee: Here we are... And, uh the researchers, especially Lofgren and uh Fefferman, have been interviewed um throughout the pandemic. I

found multiple articles where somebody remembered this and called them and said “Hey. [chuckles] How do you feel watching this play out?” You know.

Justin: Yeah, right.

Sydnee: You know, and basically— I mean, their response is “We told you so”. [chuckles] You know, “We— We— This was our concern”. And they were actually called upon to be part of some of the— And I don’t even think it was necessarily because of this work they did, because their epidemiologists and this is what they do.

But they were taking part in some of the modelling uh that happened with COVID, and they said this like “All of this irrational behavior that we saw during *World of Warcraft*, not— maybe not every single thing, to the last letter, but you can see a lot of that mimicked in our response to COVID”.

Justin: They got close. Yeah.

Sydnee: Um that just like, you know, because— And I think that what’s interesting is that it tells us two things. One, it tells us that um... looking to these sorts of things as models of how, you know, diseases— How— How humans react to diseases. Not just how diseases are spread, but how human behavior will inform the continued spread or lack of spread of a disease.

Um but I think it’s also interesting that, at the time, there were people that argued “Yes, this is a game. And yes, death in a game is of course not equivalent to death in— in real life. Uh but the players who were really involved in *WoW*—”

Justin: [quietly] Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: “— are not making that distinction. Emotionally, there— there are many of them who may be every bit as involved.” And I’m not saying it’s the same thing. I am not saying that— But they’re making decisions.

Justin: There’s probably some, but like—

Sydnee: But some of them are making decisions on an emotional level that are equal to some of the decisions on an emotional level we would make in real life, is what I'm saying.

Justin: [sighs]

Sydnee: I'm not saying that people believe the game is real.

Justin: You're implying some delusion— I know, but it's—

Sydnee: No, I'm not saying they're delusional at all.

Justin: Games— Games are designed to bypass the part of your brain that teach— that tells you that this is not real. So like, you do buy in, in much the same way that you get scared by a scary movie, right.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: Like you're—

Sydnee: On an emotional level, you're responding to this—

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: — similarly to the way you'd respond in real life.

Justin: Yes, for sure.

Sydnee: That is what I'm saying.

Justin: For sure.

Sydnee: I don't mean— I do not mean that anyone playing *World of Warcraft* thinks it's real life. I know that they don't.

Justin: Or even cares as much as they do about like—

Sydnee: No, but it's triggering an emotional response in you.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That is not, um—

Justin: I just gotta stand up for we, the gamers, Syd. You understand that.

Sydnee: This is not offensive.

Justin: I know, but us, the gamers, have been so maligned over the years that we, the gamers, have to stand together uh against scientific types who think we can't tell reality from— from our—

Sydnee: What I am saying—

Justin: Preciou— Our beloved games.

Sydnee: You— You likened it to horror movies, and I think that the point that I would make is we have accepted for a long time that um... a really well-made piece of art or media can have a huge emotional impact on us, right?

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: We accept that with like... looking at, you know, Michelangelo's David, you know?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Or looking at a— a da Vinci, or uh listening to your favorite symphony. You know, we accept that we can have some sort of—

Justin: Just don't make me— Don't make me choose.

Sydnee: [chuckles] I— [chuckles] We all know my bias towards music with words, but my point is! [chuckles] We have all accepted that these things have like deep, emotional responses, and the video games obviously can do that too.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: That's all I'm saying. That's a defense of games! That I just put out there.

Justin: As you're always doing, defending us, the gamers. Well thank you, Sydnee. That's interesting.

Sydnee: Yeah, but I— but I thought it was really interesting. You can find— And like I said, they mainly interviewed um... They mainly interviewed these researchers sort of in the beginning of the pandemic, like a lot of these articles are from 2020, um and they're still sort of guessing like at that point.

They're like "We're starting to see some things that you predicted in your research", and you know, and they were like "Well, yeah" because, you know Fefferman said "It's not just the people roleplaying, people were being themselves in the game, and so when they... were then faced with this in real life, they continue to be themselves". But there are definitely many uh many parallels that you could draw between COVID-19 and... the— the Corrupted Blood incident.

So— So the question that Bailey asked, and we've had other people email in to— to mention this, because certainly when we did that episode, I was not thinking... how... real. [chuckles]

Justin: Yeah, how real it would get.

Sydnee: It would become, but I think it is— it is an interesting um... argument that using something like that, using some sort of... [sighs] open world... roleplaying game?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Is that accurate?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: [mutters quickly] Not sure about that.

Justin: That's all-good stuff.

Sydnee: Uh would be uh— 'Cau— Because the research they were trying to get going back then, that Blizzard wasn't really thrilled about because

the whole thing was kind of a debacle, um but that research is worthwhile!

Justin: [quietly] Yeah.

Sydnee: Um because it— If we had listened to these epidemiologists a little closer, back when all of this originally happened.

Justin: Who knows.

Sydnee: I don't know. Maybe we would've been a little less shocked at how we all sort of went... You know...

Justin: Bananas?

Sydnee: Bonkers.

Justin: Thanks for listening to *Sawbones*, we hope you enjoyed yourself. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. We got a book! It's called *The Sawbones Book*.

Sydnee: Yes, we do.

Justin: Get it wherever you get books. You know, it's an audiobook too, if that's more your speed. I assume you like listening to us talk because you're listening... to us talk. Uh [chuckles]

[theme music fades in]

Justin: But that is going to do it for us. Until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[outro music plays]

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