

Wonderful! 261: Squidgerton

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[theme music plays]

Rachel: Hello, this is Rachel McElroy.

Griffin: Hello. This is Griffin McElroy.

Rachel: And this is *Wonderful!*

Griffin: We've been getting a lot of feedback that the pace of the podcast... is too feverish.

Rachel: [laughs] Uh-huh?

Griffin: Is too... people are like, "Where's the fire?"

Rachel: People always say to me, they say "Rachel, your voice is filled with rage—"

Griffin: Yes.

Rachel: "—and an energy that is upsetting."

Griffin: We got big personalities.

Rachel: Yeah, you and me.

Griffin: We're like creatures in the wild that have evolved these bright yellow face-shaped spots...

Rachel: Okay?

Griffin: ... meant to scare predators. But that's not—like I don't subscribe to that.

Rachel: I feel like you just described *The Emoji Movie*. [laughs]

Griffin: Did I?

Rachel: These bright yellow faces.

Griffin: You're just—okay. But... okay. I was—hmm. I wasn't talking about *The Emoji Movie*?

Rachel: [laughs] Can we, though?

Griffin: But if you want to talk about—yeah. Like, what's some of your favorite stuff about *The Emoji Movie*?

Rachel: I feel like we've only watched the first 20 minutes.

Griffin: I've watched 20 minutes of it in different—different 20 minute chunks of it.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Not a great flick.

Rachel: No.

Griffin: I know people come here for, like, recommendations for, like, what's hot, what's new. That's, like, the tagline. *Wonderful!* What's hot, what's new?

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Emoji Movie? Not either of those things.

Rachel: No.

Griffin: Bad, old, I would call it.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Um...

Rachel: And we have... a pretty forgiving review system for children's programming.

Griffin: Absolutely. I cried at *Boss Baby*.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I'm broken inside.

Rachel: And what was the other one that was recent? Was it *DC Super-Pets*?

Griffin: *DC Super-Pets* didn't get a tears—a tears response from me. But I was moved deeply.

Rachel: [laughs] Yeah.

Griffin: By Kevin Hart's performance. This is *Wonderful!* What's hot, what's now? And we're gonna talk about some great stuff this week. I'm really excited. I don't know what you're actually gonna talk about. But do you wanna do a small wonder to start us off? To begin the program?

Rachel: Yeah. I actually have a prepared small wonder.

Griffin: Oh my god.

Rachel: It was maybe gonna be a topic, and then I just realized there's just not enough there, because this small wonder is a man of mystery, and that is St. Louis legend, Beatle Bob.

Griffin: Don't know who that is or what that is.

Rachel: That is a man who for 27 years attended a live concert every day in St. Louis.

Griffin: For 27 years?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: He went to a live concert every day?

Rachel: Yeah. It ends up totaling over 9439 days, which is minus the days during the pandemic when there were no... in-person live performances.

Griffin: Oh. Well, yeah. You can't hold that against Bob—Robert.

Rachel: But he was a man that would wear, like, a '60s style suit and, like, a Beatle wig? Um, although some reports say it was just his hair that was styled.

Griffin: Oh, the Beatle—oh, like—okay. When you said a Beatle wig I was assuming a sort of... chitinous...

Rachel: [through laughter] Oh baby...

Griffin: But I know now. 'Cause you laughed at me that I was wrong. And then I thought about it for more than a second.

Rachel: [laughs] I got to see Beatle Bob once, and it was very thrilling. I was at—for whatever reason I was at a live music performance at the St. Louis art museum that was outside, and he was there, and I was so starstruck.

Griffin: I bet.

Rachel: I mean, it seems like the odds are pretty good, considering he went to a live show every day. But it was exciting for me. Anyway, he sadly has been recently diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, and so the whole reason that I even saw this news bulletin was that today I believe for the first time in 27 years, he will not be attending a show.

Griffin: Oh, that sucks.

Rachel: But that even though, like, he has recently—like, his mobility has decreased, he has still been going to shows. He just sits instead of dances.

Griffin: [simultaneously] Still rockin'. That's fucking great.

Rachel: That's the thing.

Griffin: I love that.

Rachel: He dances. He becomes a very standout performer in that moment. So yeah, I just wanted to give a little shout out to [crosstalk].

Griffin: Little shout out to Beatle Bob.

Rachel: Our thoughts are with you, sir.

Griffin: Um, I'm going to say my thing, but I reserve the right to make it a big wonder later.

Rachel: Okay.

Griffin: *The Traitors* on the Peacock network.

Rachel: Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Griffin: A show called *The Traitors*. It's on Peacock now. I think this is just the first sort of American release. I think it was a show that existed in the UK. We had a few fans tell us about it. Justin talked about it I think a little bit on *The Besties*. This is a competition reality show, so already we are...

Rachel: Did you say it was on Peacock?

Griffin: ... right there. I did.

Rachel: Okay.

Griffin: Couple times. It is on the Peacock network, which... Peacock. You're fucking crushing it. I'm saying, we subscribe to a lot of shit. And when

we first subscribed to Peacock—you know, I'm saying this as someone who's developing and [crosstalk] a television show for Peacock.

Rachel: [laughs] I was gonna say.

Griffin: Uh, I didn't think it was gonna be the kind of, like, powerhouse it is, but damn.

Rachel: Yeah. No, at first it was like this is where we watch old episodes of *The Office*.

Griffin: This is where *American Ninja Warrior* lives. No, there's so much more to it than that. Anyway, uh, it's a competition reality show. A bunch of people go into a Scottish castle that is, in fiction, owned by actor Alan Cumming.

Rachel: Who is himself.

Griffin: Who is himself... kind—he's an extreme—he's like if someone took the Alan Cumming knob and turned it all the way until it snapped off.

Rachel: [laughs] Just to say, like, everybody is themselves, and is not, like, a character.

Griffin: Yes, everybody else is themselves. It's mostly reality competition stars, except for a few people mixed in who are not, which is kind of a strange choice.

Rachel: Yeah, their ratio is confusing to me, because it's a lot of people from, like...

Griffin: Bravo series. There's, uh, the woman from *Below Deck*, which we watched a couple episodes of.

Rachel: There's a real housewife.

Griffin: There's a real housewife in there. Cirie from *Survivor* is on there. Fucking—

Rachel: *Survivor*. Arie from *The Bachelor*?

Griffin: Yeah. Fa—*Rosebuddies* fans may recognize that name. It's a lot of people. Anyway, it's a hidden role game where at the beginning in the first episode three people are secretly chosen to be the titular traitors. And then it's up to the rest of the group to suss out who they are.

Rachel: Yeah. And unlike *The Mole*, we as the viewer get to know who these traitors are.

Griffin: We do. We get to know who the—there's a few things that sort of set this apart from *The Mole*, which we adore old *Mole*. We did finish new *Mole*, which is one of the most frustrating, agonizing, I would say, TV-watching—again, I don't wanna be super negative here on our super positive show, but I cannot remember being more disappointed by a television program than I was by new *Mole*. Uh, this one, though, the—god. What are the non—what are the villagers called? I always—the faithful. [wheezes]

Rachel: Ohh, faithful, yeah. [laughs]

Griffin: Have to suss out who the traitors are, 'cause if it reaches the end of the game and there's any traitors left in the mix, they will get the money, not the faithful, right? Every night, the traitors choose someone to kill, or eliminate from the game, just based on what the three of them decide. And then in the daytime there's a popular vote among the rest of the—I mean amongst everybody where they will banish one player from the game.

And they're trying to get—they're trying to suss out the, uh, the imposters, in that case. What's fucking great is that the traitors, unlike *The Mole*, are trying to get money in the pot. They're not sabotaging the game, right? That one change alone fixes what was really annoying about this last season of *The Mole*, which is like, everybody was fucking up on purpose all the time so everybody would think they were *The Mole* and mess up the quiz. That element's not there, right?

One of the things that the traitors keep in mind is like, let's get rid of somebody who's dead weight who's not gonna win us any money. But then

there's, like, a million other strategic things to think about. Like, who can we pin the next popular vote on? And so, like, let's make our murder based on that decision to protect ourselves and get even further. It has unfolded even in the two episodes we've watched to reveal all of these layers of strategy that are right... right up my wheelhouse. And then every 90 seconds Alan Cumming appears onscreen.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: And is like... "Nothing bad ever ha—" I can't do a—I cannot do his accent, 'cause nobody can. But he just says—he's just quoting *Othello* constantly, and he's just—he's just—it's so good!

Rachel: The costuming. I mean, it's—

Griffin: The costumery is on point!

Rachel: It's potential that these are his actual personal outfits, but... [laughs]

Griffin: I hope so.

Rachel: But it's just, there's so much majesty to it.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: And I thought—I thought it was interesting that we get to know who the traitors are. 'Cause at first I was like, "Oh, I wonder—I wonder if that's gonna ruin anything." But actually it, like, adds this new level where you watch these people, who were chosen seemingly randomly, who don't know each other, and have differing levels of skill, kind of come together and try and do this and not get caught.

Griffin: I do feel bad for the not-celebrities who are in the house. One of whom was just, like, playing way too loud in the first episode, and then essentially had kind of a breakdown.

Rachel: Yeah...

Griffin: In the first jury vote, because he was like—he was being bullied by the real housewife. And—

Rachel: The problem was—and this is what's interesting, is that the person that was, like, quote, unquote "murdered" in the game, everybody tried to trace back "Okay. Well, who is the contestant that had the biggest beef with that person?" And that's how they picked this guy, who was just a random guy.

Griffin: Just a random dude.

Rachel: Who, like, said a couple things about him, and everybody was like, "This guy!" [laughs]

Griffin: Anyway, that was practically a big wonder on *Traitors*. We're only two episodes in and I'm already head over heels, so catch the wave.

Rachel: Catch the wave. [laughs quietly]

Griffin: What, uh—what are you talking about this week, my love?

Rachel: Uh, okay. So this is, uh... this I feel like requires some couching.

Griffin: Okay?

Rachel: You know when you have children and it's not about you?

Griffin: No.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Tell me more.

Rachel: Part of your job as a parent is to identify things that your children like, and...

Griffin: And then ignore those things to go play sports, because you never did. Right?

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I've read all the books.

Rachel: Um... and—and one of those things that our youngest child likes that I have a fondness for, just because he does, is *Cocomelon*.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: And so I wanted to talk about *Cocomelon*.

Griffin: Are you about to talk about *Cocomelon*, honey?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: You're about to bring *Cocomelon* into the room?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: This is a...

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: If you'll look around, I work very hard to make this space...

Rachel: I know.

Griffin: ... an adult, grown-up space. If you look around, you'll notice... there are no toys. There are no fun blocks.

Rachel: I mean, one might say there are toys.

Griffin: Okay, that's a fine little dig.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: And a fair one.

Rachel: I mean, not as many as have come to have been shown in the other McElroy offices, but...

Griffin: I think I'm—yes.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I appreciate that. Uh, I am surprised of all of the things that we watch with our—our youngest, that *Cocomelon*...

Rachel: I mean, it's not gonna be *Blippi*.

Griffin: [laughs loudly]

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Oh, drag him to hell!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Alright.

Rachel: I... here's the thing.

Griffin: Big Meekah stan, though. Like, we stan—we stan for Meekah.

Rachel: We love Meekah. Yeah, no, she's the best. Um, the thing that's interesting for me... so—and this is common with all very young children—uh, Gus likes music.

Griffin: Yes.

Rachel: Uh, he likes, you know, bright colors.

Griffin: Yes.

Rachel: Um, and so I am consistently looking for something to put on the television that has music and bright colors.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: Uh, and... I don't know. 90 times out of 100, *Cocomelon* does the trick.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: Um, he is—we aren't huge on the merch. He has received some merch.

Griffin: He doesn't give a shit.

Rachel: No. He likes the merch that plays music, but it really could be anything, you know? He has no attachment to JJ, who is the star baby.

Griffin: Yes. And in fact I theorize that the reason babies love *Cocomelon* is because of how prominently featured the baby JJ is. And then can you name the other two kids?

Rachel: I didn't know their names until I did the research.

Griffin: Exactly! It's because they don't get any fucking screen time! Every song is about JJ.

Rachel: Well, he has a friend named Cody now.

Griffin: Okay. Is the friend named Cody also a baby?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: So there you go. This is a very... this is a show that teaches babies "You're the only thing that matters in the whole wide world."

Rachel: Um, so yeah. So all that to say, like... as soon as small son goes to bed, it's not like we're watching *Cocomelon*. This isn't like—

Griffin: God, no.

Rachel: This isn't like *Bluey* where, like—it's not at all for us.

Griffin: God, *Bluey's* so good.

Rachel: I know.

Griffin: I know we—I know that's, like... the thing. Where, like, it's all parents talk about is how good *Bluey* is.

Rachel: And we've talked about it on the show.

Griffin: The stump—the episode where they're having—the dads are having a stump chopping party, but then Bluey and Bingo and their friends want to use one of the stumps for a nail salon and don't let them chop down that stump, and it makes all the dads get sad and frustrated, and the mom has to explain that their chopping up the stumps is how the dads play.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: And then she looks and sees the dads playing and having fun chopping down the stump? Oh my god! Anyway.

Rachel: [laughs] Anyway. Um... gosh, I can't think of anything else right now.

Griffin: It's so good.

Rachel: Uh, *Cocomelon*, I wanted to talk a little bit about it because there's a—it's a surprising pick. I understand that.

Griffin: I'm very—I'm deeply curious about it.

Rachel: But yeah, there's a lot that goes into it.

Griffin: Sure.

Rachel: Uh, okay. So for those of you that don't know, which has gotta be a very small percentage, but I imagine if you have never come within five feet of children's programming you wouldn't know *Cocomelon*. It started as a YouTube channel, and now it is also on Netflix. And in YouTube, uh, realm, it is incredibly popular. It far exceeds any other YouTube channel. It has earned 507.5 million weekly views in January. Uh, and will surpass 150 billion lifetime views sometime in February, it's anticipated.

Griffin: That's... such a big number.

Rachel: That's a big number.

Griffin: That number has so many digits in it.

Rachel: [laughs] Uh-huh?

Griffin: I think 12. That's... so much.

Rachel: Um... now that it is on Netflix, uh, it was—I was reading this article that came out in March 2022. They said it was watched for 33 billion minutes last year, more than *Squid Game* and *Bridgerton* combined.

Griffin: I love that.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I would love... love it if we finally combined *Squid Game* and *Bridgerton* into just a bunch of sort of fancy debutantes competing in a series of deadly games. This is good. Are you writing this down? Is someone writing this down?

Rachel: This is good. This is really good. Yeah, I hope so. Also the music for *Cocomelon* is streamed 1.3 million times a day on Spotify.

Griffin: That doesn't surprise me.

Rachel: [laughs] Uh... I didn't realize. So, its parent company is Moonbug Entertainment.

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: Who also does *Blippi*.

Griffin: Is that an American company? I thought *Cocomelon* started in, like, France, but that might just be because of—

Rachel: No, that's just the name. [laughs]

Griffin: —the name Coco.

Rachel: No. *Cocomelon* was actually started by a couple in California.

Griffin: Okay!

Rachel: Uh, they have—

Griffin: This is the mom and dad from *Cocomelon*?

Rachel: It was created in 2005 by a father of two in southern California. He was trying to teach his kids the ABCs, and his wife was a children's book author, and the two of them kind of came together and made a YouTube channel. And then once they started getting enough revenue they shifted from 2D to 3D animation, and then Moonbug offered them... just a whole lot of money.

Griffin: I imagine, yeah.

Rachel: Moonbug's whole thing is scouring YouTube to, like, buy out incredibly popular children's channels.

Griffin: Did they do the *Ryan's World* stuff, I wonder?

Rachel: Not that I saw. Um, but they did do, like, *Little Baby Bum* and *Blippi*, as I mentioned. Basically because YouTube is such a kind of a challenging place for people to actually earn money, like you have to know all these things—

Griffin: [laughs] [sarcastically] Hasn't been *my* experience!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: All the Monster Factories that we've made have made me about 13... American dollars.

Rachel: [laughs] Uh, Moonbug has kind of come in and offered people, like, "We'll give you this incredibly lucrative deal to take over your property, and you don't have to worry about, like, chasing YouTube money all the time."

Griffin: Right, sure.

Rachel: Uh, and I'm presenting as if they're these heroes. That's probably not the case.

Griffin: No, yeah.

Rachel: But—[laughs] but—

Griffin: It's—it's—business is business, and business must grow.

Rachel: Um... but yeah. So now *Cocomelon* is, um... is incredible. Like, it's everywhere. It's every, like, Walmart, Target, every store you go to, it's... and there are apparently tons—and you've mentioned this to me—of, like, TikTok videos of people hearing the *Cocomelon* song and, like, their children come running into the room.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: And it's built around this whole kind of like fascinating focus on what is going to be appealing to kids ages 1 to 3. There's this whole, like, platform at Moonbug where they bring in children and kind of test different...

Griffin: Oh, god.

Rachel: [laughs] Different things with them. I read this—

Griffin: That is the most dystopian shit I can imagine.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Of just, like, putting a bunch of babies in a big white room and then projecting images of, like, a mom on one wall and a ball on the other and see which way they crawl towards.

Rachel: So there was this article in the *New York Times* that came out in May 2022. Uh, for anyone older than two, the team at Moonbug deploys something they call the Distractitron.

Griffin: Holy shit.

Rachel: It's a small TV screen placed a few feet from the larger one that plays a continuous loop of real world scenes, like a guy pouring coffee, someone getting a haircut. Whenever the youngster looks away from the Moonbug show to glimpse the Distractitron, a note is jotted down.

Griffin: Holy shit!

Rachel: [laughs] And so they see, like, what became less interesting to them, and what were they more interested in.

Griffin: It sounds wild. I guess it is probably the only way to focus group a baby.

Rachel: [laughs] Exactly.

Griffin: Which is inherently not the most noble endeavor, but I suppose there are way gnarlier ways to go about it.

Rachel: In this *New York Times* article, the Chief Content Officer said, quote, "Kids love yellow buses around the world. In some countries, yellow buses are actually used to transport prisoners, but still, kids around the world love to see yellow buses and kids on yellow buses."

And then it goes on to say "Infants are also enamored with objects covered in a little dirt, like they've been rolling around on the ground, and they're fascinated by minor injuries." [laughs]

Griffin: That's true, too!

Rachel: "Not broken legs or gruesome wounds. More like small cuts that require Band-Aids."

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: [laughs quietly] And then the guy says "The trifecta for a kid would be a dirty yellow bus that has a boo-boo." [laughs]

Griffin: [breathless laughter]

Rachel: Oh, all of this is disturbing!

Griffin: Yeah, sure.

Rachel: I mean, granted, all of this is disturbing. Um... and there's obviously a lot of research still being done as to what the effect of screen time has on young kids. Intuitively, it doesn't seem great, but then there's also research to say, like, as long as your child is still active, as long as they're still engaging in play, as long it's not being used primarily as a babysitting tool, there's an opportunity for them to, like, benefit from this in some way.

Griffin: Of course.

Rachel: I'm saying all of that to make myself feel a little less guilty. Um... [laughs] But—

Griffin: Well, there's a difference between plonking your kid down in front of *Cocomelon* for eight hours...

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Which, like, we are very, very, very far from the parents who would, I think, fault somebody for screen time.

Rachel: No, and also—

Griffin: And, like, putting it on to engage them in—in play. Like, we'll put *Cocomelon* on the music device that if you say the name of it it listens to your activities.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: And Gus will just, like, frickin' party to it for quite a while.

Rachel: Yeah. He is still and may always be at that age where he can't really stay in one place for very long. So it is not a big concern of ours that he will zone out for hours at a time. Uh, but he really enjoys it!

Griffin: Yeah, sure.

Rachel: And I don't know, man. Like, the songs...

Griffin: There's some pretty good ones.

Rachel: They get stuck in my head.

Griffin: The one I think about a lot is the beach song. That's like "[singing] Let's take it slow. Today is hot, so... " like, that they kind of... "[singing] [mumbles indistinctly] And have some fun... [mumbles indistinctly] in the sun."

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: You know that one? You know what I am talking about.

Rachel: I do think I am, yeah.

Griffin: There's a song they do about pasta that is, uh...

Rachel: Yes!

Griffin: ... really, really something else, too.

Rachel: They kept saying *familia* over and over again.

Griffin: Yeah. They rhyme I think *familia* with the word pizza. Which is like... so dope.

Rachel: [laughs] Maybe we're thinking about two different songs.

Griffin: We might be thinking about two different songs.

Rachel: Anyway, *Cocomelon*. I'm not really encouraging our listeners to go check it out. I just recognize that as a parent of young children, and many of our listeners who may also be parents of young children, there is something interesting about the kind of love-hate relationship you have with the programs your children watch.

Griffin: Absolutely. And we can say all the shit we want about *Cocomelon* or *Mr. Blippi*, but when we have to go on a very long road trip and our baby who won't sit still for ten seconds has to be in a car seat for six and a half hours... I'm just saying. It's good to have those arrows in the old quiver.

Rachel: That is true.

Griffin: Can I steal you away?

Rachel: Yes.

[ad break]

Griffin: I regret to inform you my thing is a video game thing. And so I want to talk to you about it, even though it's not something that you have any *familiarity* with.

Rachel: Honey, you've done this so many times on the show.

Griffin: And I feel guilty every time I do it.

Rachel: And every time you—

Griffin: 'Cause I can't tell if you are interested in learning about these video game topics that you have not sought out on your own free time.

Rachel: [laughs] I mean, what do you think I feel when I bring poetry to the table, you know? This is not something you've ever personally pursued.

Griffin: That's fair. I'm gonna talk about a genre of video games very near and dear to my heart. The JRPG, otherwise known as the Japanese roleplaying game. This is a—

Rachel: So you have kind of tangentially talked about this before in the form of other games, right? Or no.

Griffin: Somewhat, maybe? I mean—

Rachel: Have you, like, brought any games to *Wonderful!* that fit in this category?

Griffin: Oh, god. Uhh... maybe? I may have brought *Final Fantasy* as, like, sort of one of the big—probably one of the two biggest JRPG franchises. If I brought one it would probably be that one, but I don't...

Rachel: Is that *Academy—Hero Academy*? What is the game? The...

Griffin: *Hero Academy*?

Rachel: It's not *Hero Academy*.

Griffin: There's an anime called *My Hero Academia*.

Rachel: Oh, maybe that's what I'm thinking of. Is that a game?

Griffin: It's a—

Rachel: Too?

Griffin: It's an anime. They may have made a video game out of it. What made you think of that?

Rachel: What is the game that you play where the kids are in school and they've got little blazers and they run around?

Griffin: *Persona*.

Rachel: Ohh, okay. That's what I'm thinking of. [laughs]

Griffin: That is a JRPG, though. That is a very, I would say, classical style JRPG. I'm honestly—like, I'm gonna get in the weeds a little bit, because it's a—a genre that is a little bit nebulous, which doesn't happen a lot in video games. Like, it's usually pretty easy to look at a game and be like, "[makes popping noise] That's a... that's a, you know, strategy game. That's a... 4X turn-based strategy game."

JRPGs get a little bit weird because, like, inherently in the name it's gotta be both Japanese, from a Japanese developer, and a roleplaying game. Right? Which is kind of defined by adhering to the sort of traditions that D&D established when it was first published back in, you know, the early '70s.

But then also there's some stuff that maybe it's a game that was developed in Japan that doesn't necessarily match what other RPGs tend to do, or it's a game that is exactly like *Final Fantasy* and other franchises that are kind of the identicate for this, but not made in Japan. So, like, it's kind of a weird... sort of, uh, nebulous genre that is hard to nail down. But I want to try to talk about it, 'cause I love this genre, and some of my favorite games ever are from it.

So, um, what you need to know. Uh, the two big sort of names in roleplaying games are *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*. Those are both, like, early Nintendo, late '80s games that came out in Japan and made such a huge splash, and then came over to the states in various shapes and sizes throughout the years.

Rachel: I have heard of *Final Fantasy*.

Griffin: Not *Dragon Quest*, though.

Rachel: I'm not *familiar*.

Griffin: That one's a little bit more I think, uh, esoteric in the states. It's not quite as big as *Final Fantasy* is here. JRPGs traditionally have pretty linear plotlines. Pretty linear, pretty gigantic grandiose plotlines. Typically whenever you're talking about a JRPG you're talking about a game that you're gonna be playing for... I would say 40 to 100 hours to, like, really get through the whole thing. Um, they don't have a bunch of branching narrative. There's not much opportunity for, like, player authorship, as there is—is one of the big sort of things that sets it apart from Western RPGs like *Skyrim* and other sort of stuff like that, which are a little bit more open-ended.

Uh, there's turn-based battles, which are just like fights where each character has—takes a turn, choosing what their action is going to be for that round. And then there's, like, less mechanical qualifiers. Like, anime-inspired character designs, which has its roots in *Dragon Quest*, one of the first, arguably the first JRPG. All the character designs for that were commissioned by Akira Toriyama who made *Dragon Ball*, the whole *Dragon Ball* series. He made the character designs for *Dragon Quest* which, like, persist today, and are these huge, iconic things in Japan.

Rachel: Wait. I noticed you said just *Dragon Ball*.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: And not *Dragon Ball Z*.

Griffin: So, *Dragon Ball Z* is a... sub-series.

Rachel: Were there 20—[laughs quietly] were there 25 other *Dragon Balls*?

Griffin: This was the 26th *Dragon Ball* series.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: No, *Dragon Ball Z* is, like, the one that made such a huge splash in American in the, you know, '90s or whatever when it first came here. But there are other *Dragon Ball* things that have—but all of this were designed by this dude, Akira Toriyama, who did the designs for *Dragon Quest*. Uh, and so that sort of inspired a lot of manga and anime creators to collaborate on early games in the genre. Um, the plotlines also, like, have certain tropes that the games lean on. Like, pretty much every other JRPG you play, like, the main character has amnesia and you're trying to figure out you're the forgotten prince of this ancient king—

Rachel: [laughs] Uh-huh.

Griffin: Like, it's something that people sort of give the genre a hard time for in, like, there are these—or also, like, sometimes you have to kill god. Like, you start out like "Hey, can you go and stop—avenge your village!"

And then by the end of it, like, you're in heaven killing god because of X, Y, or Z. The plotlines are just, like, outrageous most of the time.

So, like... that—those two sort of qualifiers describe the genre, but aging, like, you get outside of what that specifically means and then you get into the weeds of things like *Pokemon*, which I would say is a JRPG. There's turn-based battles, there's character advancement and all this stuff, but nobody has ever really given a shit about any story beat that has ever happened in a *Pokemon* game before.

What I really like about the genre is how sort of humble its beginnings were. Now it's this huge, multi-billion dollar sort of thing with annual releases in all these gigantic franchises. But really it just started with, like, a handful of game developers who were RPG enthusiasts who wanted to bring that sort of interest to Japan. Um, so you've heard me talk about Richard Garriott before.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: He made *Ultima* in I think 1981, and it was a very early computer roleplaying game. There was another one called *Wizardry* that came out around that same time. Those were Western computer-based roleplaying games.

There was this guy named Yuji Horii, who was a magazine writer. He was an editor for a magazine that's still in publication now, a manga magazine called *Shonen Jump*. He won a contest designing a game for a publisher called Enix. Uh, and that's how he got into the industry. His first game was a tennis game called I think *Love Match Tennis*. which is a very good name. But it was a computer game, right?

So when he wanted to make something else, he was really into these old Western RPGs, he was really into *Dungeons & Dragons*, and he wanted to make a Nintendo game. And so trying to figure out a way to make those—make the RPG genre more sort of accessible to Japanese players who, like, don't play *Dungeons & Dragons*, and also make a game for NES which has all these crazy hardware constraints that weren't present on the home computer, led him to kind of condense down what he liked about roleplaying games all the way down into this one little nugget.

And that one little nugget was *Dragon Quest*, which was... fucking huge when it first released. Like, you talk about somebody threading the needle of, like, what their ambitious project design was. I don't think you can do it much better than he did it, because he created this gigantic franchise. Just as a point of describing how big *Dragon Quest* was, there's this urban legend that *Dragon Quest* games have to be released on Saturdays because truancy was so bad on the days that *Dragon Quest* games came out that the government passed a law that *Dragon Quest* games had to be—it's urban legend because the government didn't actually make a law.

But Square Enix, which is now sort of the super publisher of almost all the big releases in the JRPG landscape, has an internal law that they have to release *Dragon Quest* games on Saturdays. The most recent one was *Dragon Quest 11* which came out, I don't know, a few years ago. Uh, it came out on

a Saturday because they don't want people shirking their work duties, because people go fucking bananas for these games.

Rachel: Do you have any stories about games that you stayed home from school specifically to play?

Griffin: Yes! When *Halo 2* came out, me and all my friends were, like, really into *Halo*. We played, like, LAN parties and stuff like that. And I remember when *Halo 2* came out, I had planned on playing it online all day with my buddy Tanner. And I asked my mom. I was like, "Can I... " this is the only time this ever happened. I was like, "This is a huge game. Me and Tanner want to play it. Can I stay home from school today to play it?" And she said yes.

Rachel: Wow!

Griffin: Which was very cool of her.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: That was one of the most exciting sort of days in my...

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: ... in my teen years to be given clemency like that.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: But I have infinite stories about playing roleplaying games, JRPGs, with my family. Right? Like, um...

Rachel: Are most of them—a lot of times I'll, like, kind of look over your shoulder while you're playing these games.

Griffin: yeah.

Rachel: Most of them seem like you are interacting with other characters and choosing from a set list of things to say to the other character, which I'm not sure whether or not those things are really consequential.

Griffin: Sometimes it is. Sometimes—like I said, like, traditionally in JRPGs, the stories gonna go where it's gonna go, and it's up to you to kind of, like, make your character strong enough to advance that, right?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Rarely where there be a JRPG where it's like, "Do you kill this guy or not kill this guy?" And then the ending's gonna be completely different. But in a Bethesda game, like *Skyrim* or *Fallout* or one of those, like, that is more the order of the day. I'd say that's one of the bigger sort of differentiators between Eastern and Western RPGs. Um, but, like, you go back to *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* and that's not really so much of a concern.

But I love—I love this genre so much I think because it was kind of born around the same time as me, right? *Dragon Quest* came out in '86. *Final Fantasy* I think came out in '87. They didn't come stateside until a little bit later. But, like, we always had them in the house from, you know, the point where we had an NES onward. I credit *Final Fantasy IV* on the Super Nintendo with, like, teaching me how to read. I so badly wanted to play that game that I... learned to read!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: So that I could do that.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: And then moving on, like, every other *Final Fantasy* game that came out, like, we got it day one, had to be there for it. We bought a Playsta—we got a PlayStation for Christmas because we just had to play *Final Fantasy VII* on it. Uh, we would have sort of impromptu races when—because it would be rare that only one of us would be playing a video game that was in our house. Like, we didn't get video games all the time, and so if

we got a new video game, all of us would want to play it, but JRPGs aren't multiplayer and so it would be like, "Where did you get to on *Wild Arms* today?"

And I'd be like, "Oh, I'm on disc two."

"Ah, damn!"

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: "Further ahead than me!" I have, like, all these really fond memories of JRPGs, specifically I think from that era in my childhood, which is I think natural when you're talking about nostalgia. Uh, of, like, that Super Nintendo PlayStation 1 era. And if I do ever have a hankering to go back and play some classic game, usually that is the order of the day. But then like you brought up *Persona*, which is arguably my favorite game franchise of all time. Those are much newer games, and keep me hankering for new stuff from this...

Rachel: It's—it's interesting for somebody like me who has very limited contact. Because, like, I only recently very—like, *very* recently understand what RPG means? And in my head, the whole concept of RPG is that you have control over, like, the character you design, and the choices that are made as that character.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: But then in these video games, it kind of... I mean, it seems like a lot of times, maybe you get to design your character, but game is set. You know? You're just walking from place to place trying to figure out where the game wants you to go, right?

Griffin: I mean, kind of. What you are describing is sort of a classical JRPG. That is—that is, uh... there is a story—there is what's called the scenario in sort of traditional Japanese game design—that may not actually just be exclusively a Japanese thing, now that I say that—that is, like, the script, right? And we've moved away from that—I say "we." Game developers have moved away from that since, you know, technology has evolved, and now

games can be much, much bigger and you can have open world games where you don't have to necessarily do every single thing.

And in fact, there's gonna be a lot of stuff that you don't do, based on the choices that you make. I love games like that, right? Like, I've played *Skyrim* more times than I can count. But there is something I think appealing about having a story that is being told to you, which is more of what a JRPG is going for. Um, and when it's not successful, when the story being told sucks, like, that's going to be... uh, a painful experience, I would say.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: But when I look back on sort of the games that define my childhood, a lot of them are those more sort of straightforward JRPGs. Which not only I think, uh, were like a big... activity, a big shared love in our household, like, I think it probably went on to define my, like, storytelling, uh...

Rachel: Hmm, yeah.

Griffin: ... like, ideas. Like, I think if you go back and listen to *TAZ Balance*, there is a lot of sort of JRPG-y stuff in there. It's a little bit more straightforward than I would say later seasons of *Adventure Zone* were. And that was I think inspired sort of by that. Um, I don't think this is anything you would—I can't think of a JRPG I would ever recommend to you.

Rachel: Yeah. You know, it's interesting, 'cause you talk about the number of hours, and for me I'm always like, "Oh, that seems like a lot of hours." But then you point out, like, I've been playing *Words with Friends*, uh, for decades now. [laughs]

Griffin: I think that if you could reveal your play time of *Words with Friends*, it may be bigger than any video game I've ever played.

Rachel: That's possible. But here's the thing.

Griffin: Even, like, when I was deep into *World of Warcraft*, I still think you've played more *Words with Friends*.

Rachel: Here's the thing, though. When I play *Words with Friends*, I play it for, like, 19 seconds at a time, you know? So it's...

Griffin: Yeah. Well, brag—brag much? About how good you are at *Words with Friends*.

Rachel: [laughs] It's just it's difficult, I think, to feel like it's the same thing?

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: Because it's very easy for me to, like, you know, eat a sandwich and be done playing *Words with Friends*. You know?

Griffin: I mean, to that point, I don't play a lot of modern JRPGs that come out now, right? Like, I play—any time a *Final Fantasy* or a *Dragon Quest* comes out, like, I'm down. I've played all of those, and I think completed all of them, and I'm a huge, huge fan of that stuff. But, like, there's a lot of other ones by more independent developers and other sort of, um... you know, franchise that are huge in Japan; not quite as big in America. And I don't go seek that stuff out anymore because, like, frankly I don't have the time, uh, to play a lot of video games these days.

Rachel: Yeah. It makes me wonder what our golden years are gonna be like.

Griffin: Probably catching up on my backlog a lot.

Rachel: [laughs] I'm just picturing, like, entering my house and it's totally silent, and all three of these boys are in different rooms playing different games silently.

Griffin: Am I one of the three boys?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: Oh, okay. I got really confused.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I thought this was, like, your totally busted way of announcing...

Rachel: [laughs] No.

Griffin: [distantly] No!

Rachel: No more boys.

Griffin: No more boys!

Rachel: Oops! All done.

Griffin: Oops! Done forever.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Anyway, that's JRPGs. Thank you for... thank you for joining me.

Rachel: [laughs] Yeah!

Griffin: For my lecture.

Rachel: You always say that like, "I'm gonna talk about video games. Rachel, don't fall asleep." And I promise you—

Griffin: I don't think you're gonna fall asleep. You're not *rude*. But also, like, I know I would rather be talking to you about something that you, uh, care about and are enthusiastic about already.

Rachel: Uh-huh. Like—

Griffin: But you can [crosstalk]—

Rachel: —*American Ninja Warrior*. [laughs]

Griffin: Like *American Ninja Warrior*. Which, where are you at, *American Ninja Warrior*?

Rachel: I know! How long—

Griffin: I feel like it's been off the air for like a year and a half! The papal ninja's only getting older!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: His body's not getting more fle—like, that dude injures himself every time he hits the fuckin' spider climb.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: He's not getting any younger! Give him his last chance!

Rachel: Oh my gosh... I have to think that's—

Griffin: Joe Moravsky the weatherman is a hundred years old! He's not gonna last much longer!

Rachel: I have to think this would be interesting to people.

Griffin: I don't—I don't know. At a recent live show I mentioned *American Ninja Warrior* and the crowd fuckin' went wild! So, like... I don't know! I don't know what's hot anymore, what's new. That's the whole point of this podcast, but I'm slippin'!

Rachel: I just—if I were an outsider and I heard somebody talking about the papal ninja, by interest would be so piqued.

Griffin: I know!

Rachel: I have to imagine...

Griffin: Anyway.

Rachel: Anyway. [sighs]

Griffin: Thank you for listening. Thank you to Bo En and Augustus for the use of our theme song, "Money Won't Pay." You can find a link to that in the episode description. And thank you to Ma—I'm playing with my socks. I'm sorry. I'm a cat.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Thank you to Maximum Fun for having us on the network. It's a great network. We're proud to be part of the family. And, um... thank you to you, for listening! We have a bunch of merch over at mcelroymerch.com that you should go and check out. We have the album with music for the whole first season of *Ethersea*, which here for, what, the next six days while we're recording this, until the end of the month, all proceeds for all album sales on my bandcamp will be donated to Earth Justice, a great climate nonprofit, so go check that out.

And anything else? What am I forgetting? Got a graphic novel coming out in, like, two weeks. You can go to theadventurezonecomic.com to preorder, which would mean the world to me. That's *TAZ Eleventh Hour*, it's really good. It's our best book yet and I hope you like it. Anything else?

Rachel: No, I don't think so.

Griffin: I just talked a whole lot. I feel like it's a—I feel like it's all in your hands now.

Rachel: You want me to say some stuff?

Griffin: You always end the show so good.

Rachel: Oh, wow!

Griffin: Any time I end the show I'm like, "[goofy voice] Bazinga!" And—but you come out and say, like, some really cool shit.

Rachel: Is this like when you tell somebody that they're better at washing the dishes than you are so that they'll—[laughs]

Griffin: It's like when I mow the lawn bad on purpose so that dad doesn't make me do it anymore. You know dad still makes me mow his lawn, right? It's why I fly to Ironton every month or so.

Rachel: [laughs] Um... uh, okay. Well, uhh... here we go. [laughs quietly] Um... I mean, I really enjoyed the week where I just read some lyrics from MC Skat Kat.

Griffin: Maybe you can make your own sort of MC Skat Kat lyrics right now.

Rachel: Oh, god. That's the worst thing you could've said to me.

Griffin: Here we go. Sure, just do a little cat rap for me now? Do that for me now?

Rachel: Just a little cat rap?

Griffin: A little cat rap? Just a couplet. It doesn't have to be a rap. Just a sort of cat-based rhyming couplet would be fine. You've... trained for this.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Your whole—*Slumdog Millionaire* style, your whole life has been building to this moment, Rachel.

Rachel: Hold on. I'm trying to think of a... a rhyming word, here.

Griffin: Catnip. Fish. Fancy Feast. Whiskers. Litter box. [pause] Meow.

Rachel: [laughs] Um... okay, okay, okay, I got one. I got one.

Griffin: Alright.

Rachel: I got one. I got one. Uh... I knew I could fit through the door because of my whisker... I also knew that I stole your girlfriend when I kissed her.

[pause]

I'm a cat. Meow, meow, meow, a cat.

Griffin: That was worth the wait right there!

Rachel: [laughs]

[theme music plays]

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