

Wonderful! 357: Tea and Adult Legos

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[theme music, "Money Won't Pay (feat. Augustus)" by Bo En plays]

Rachel: Hi, this is Rachel McElroy.

Griffin: Hi, this is Griffin McElroy!

Rachel: And this is Wonderful.

Griffin: Happy new year, everybody. We hope it's starting off right and fresh for you. Actually, I'm just now realizing our last episode went up on Jan one, huh?

Rachel: I would just ignore the new year at this point.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: Right? [chuckles]

Griffin: Sort of an extension, then, would you say, of 24. I'm not sure I want 24 to be extended. It's 20... 10. What was the last good one?

Rachel: Oh, man, that's an interesting question, huh?

Griffin: Yeah...

Rachel: I don't know that there's really a good year for like—universally, for everyone.

Griffin: Yeah, I guess some people are always having a bad time.

Rachel: Maybe—oh, man, when we got Bin Laden? That was pretty—that was pretty good.

Griffin: Wow! You just took my breath away by saying that.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Didn't think you would, and then you did say it, so... But it's—you're here, and that's all that really matters.

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: So, we are glad you're here and you're joining us for a podcast where we talk about things we like, that's good, that we're into. Like for Rachel, Zero Dark Thirty. Her favorite movie.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: She won't stop talking about this flick! Do you have any small wonders, my love?

Rachel: Oh, gosh... I will say, this holiday season, we got very into Legos.

Griffin: Oh, yeah.

Rachel: Specifically holiday-related Legos. And I really enjoyed it. It was something that you and I would kind of work together on. You know, we'd like pop in like a holiday-themed movie.

Griffin: Yup!

Rachel: We'd put together like a little Santa workshop, post office thing.

Griffin: Cute little set. We were at the Lego store buying stuff for the boys. And I just saw that after we checked out and I was like, you know what?

Rachel: [chuckles]

Griffin: We'll make some precious memories with that. And grabbed it.

Rachel: It's not even about—it's not about our kids anymore. And I had to kind of come to terms with that.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: I think for a long time Henry would be like, "I want that." And we kind of know that meant he didn't plan to put it together, that we would put it together.

Griffin: Here's my sales pitch for Legos. Everything has a correct place it goes.

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: Which is *very* good for me. And it looks—

Rachel: It's like—

Griffin: You look impressive when it's done, because it looks so big and different and wild.

Rachel: Yeah. Like Griffin has always liked putting furniture together, like following instructions. But that obviously takes up a lot of space, and it's heavy and challenging. Lego, like you—anytime, anywhere.

Griffin: Anytime, anywhere, anyway.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Yeah. Big into... big into adult Legos. Last year was sort of... tea and adult Legos were sort my—

Rachel: [chuckles]

Griffin: Two vices.

Rachel: Saying adult Legos always makes me think—

Griffin: I mean, let's be honest.

Rachel: [chuckles] It's like an erotic version.

Griffin: I'm gonna say... what am I gonna say? You know, I got a new synthesizer from the Teenage Engineering company, who makes very high-quality and expensive stuff. And this one is no exception. It was quite pricey, but it's my—I think my favorite thing they've made. It's called the OPXY.

Rachel: Oh, okay, I was looking around your office trying to figure out which one it was.

Griffin: It's the sequel to the OPZ.

Rachel: Ooh?

Griffin: Which is my old favorite. But this one is like way fancier, it's got—

Rachel: It is fancier.

Griffin: It's got like crazy, like—you can do like punch in effects and shit. It's like... but you can also sort of like adjust the key and like modulate, and sequence. You can do anything with this fuckin' thing! And I just have been turning it on for like 30 minutes at a time and goofing around and making a little song and... having a good time with it.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: That's the OPXY. I'm not going to say how much money it costs, but it's a lot. It's kind of silly.

Rachel: I don't want to know. I don't want to know.

Griffin: So, I go first this week.

Rachel: Okay.

Griffin: I want to talk about pixel art.

Rachel: Oh!

Griffin: Obviously, I'm a gamer.

Rachel: [titters]

Griffin: And I'm pretty well-versed.

Rachel: Somebody should make a super cut of you saying that sentence on your variety of media properties.

Griffin: I used to run away from it, but why? I'm a gamer.

Rachel: I remember—I still remember early in our relationship where you were just becoming comfortable with playing a game on an airplane in front of other people.

Griffin: Yes! Now I'll do that shit, but that's because I don't care anymore. But also because I do care about I'm a gamer.

Rachel: Well, you're not trying to lock down hot babes. You know?

Griffin: That's also true, yeah. I mean, hot babes hate pixel art, in general. I've been playing games my whole life, like I've been—I've seen so much pixel art at this point. But even beyond games, I think there's something kind of like philosophically interesting about pixel art that I feel like could be sort of universal. We got Henry this little computer thing, I think called Divoom, is the name of it. And you have this app that you draw pixel art on, and then you can display it on like this other screen.

Or you can display an animation, or download other people's stuff and put it on there. Which was kind of like his first step into that world. And now, like pixel art stuff is sort of what he jumps to like first thought when he wants to do something kind of creative or artistic. Either in that, or like we've got him a couple of little like video games. Simple video game making like games that he can use. And he will just get in there and go off, and make not just pixel art, but like wild, 40 frame long animations of like characters.

Rachel: The animation is what's really fascinating to me. Like this ability to kind of think about how you need to alter the image to make it, you know, move.

Griffin: That is the—that's one of the like coolest things about pixel art I'll circle back to later. But he got really into it. And so, I got a new iPad with like the iPad pencil, and I wanted to kind of mess around with it. So I downloaded that app, and then I got one called Resprite, which is a little more sort of feature rich. And I had just started to, in free time when I feel like it, downloading like sprite sheets from old games and just sort of copying—sort of copying the stuff that is in there.

Rachel: Oh?

Griffin: It's almost like a coloring book, sort of tracing, sort of meditative process for me. But at the same time, like also sort of learning about the form itself, which I think has some kind of cool stuff about it. So, pixel art is sort of like a debated term, because if you look at any picture on a screen, it's inherently made out of pixels. Any digital image, technically speaking, is pixel art. But it is usually used to describe like art where each pixel has been sort of placed with intent, sort of placed by design.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: You can make it in all kinds of different like software, and it's defined by the fact that you're just solely drawing with individual pixels as the smallest sort of building block of the picture. What I think is so appealing about it is that there is a sort of intrinsic orderliness to it. It's honestly probably partially how I feel about Legos also. Is like, every time you put down a pixel, you are making a decision about where it is going to go and what color it's going to be.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: And that, to me, takes it way out of the abstract that I feel like typically paralyzes me when it comes to any kind of artistic endeavor. If you were to tell me to draw something with a pencil and a piece of paper, like I would get in my head immediately about it.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Whereas with pixel art, like there is a... there's a unit of measurement there that you're using. There's, you know, it's easy to kind of like figure out the ratio of things, because you only have such a small amount of space to work with most of the time. And I find that kind of like being based in decision, rather than just like free-styling, to be very approachable and accessible. And I think that is sort of Henry's bag also.

Rachel: It's a constraint, you know? Like this is something like when I was doing creative writing and you were kind of stuck on like a creative project. Like particularly with poetry. They would tell you to use like a specific form, like a sonnet. Because like that constraint like gets you to refocus your brain.

Griffin: Absolutely. And then you—the way that you have to kind of like think around that restraint is what is so fascinating to me about it. It is sort of—there is a—it is a restrictive form, not too dissimilar from like mosaic or—

Rachel: Pointillism.

Griffin: What?

Rachel: Pointillism?

Griffin: What's that?

Rachel: That's the painting that was done with the dots?

Griffin: Oh, cool. I haven't heard that word before in my life. It sounds cool! I was thinking like cross-stitch. Like my mom cross-stitched all the time, and that was basically a grid of, you know, squares that you could decide where to put thread, where to put a little bit of color. Are you double checking that pointillism is the name of the...

Rachel: No, I wanted to pull up the painting that I was thinking of. You know this one?

Griffin: Oh, yeah, sure.

Rachel: Seurat. It's the A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte.

Griffin: The first pixel art, by Seurat.

Rachel: Anyway, that's what I always think of like when Henry is doing pixel art, is this idea of just using each little dot to like make a larger picture.

Griffin: It is a self-imposed limitation, right? But what is interesting to me about pixel art, as opposed to like pointillism or cross-stitch or whatever, is that it kind of grew as a form, hand-in-hand with these technological limitations.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Of the like hardware of the day, right? So, the example I have here is the Game Boy Color. This is like the third generation Game Boy that now could finally display color. It could display 56 colors, ostensibly, at once. The way it would work is it would have a background that could be made out of, I think, eight palettes of four colors each.

So each little thing in the background would be—would have four colors to it. And the sprites would be like characters or items or anything that would go on top of the—in front of the background could only be made of three colors and one transparent sprite. So if you look at any character from any Game Boy Color game, they are only made of three colors. Usually within, like a 16 by 16-pixel grid.

That's like nothing, that is not very much space to work with, especially if you want to add things like detail to characters. Or if you want to add shading to characters to make them look a little bit more detailed and realistic, like you have to get kind of clever about how you use three colors in order to do that.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Where this is really demonstrated is there's an art style called one bit pixel art, which is just two colors, usually just black and white. These are like old adventure games for the Mac, like black and white adventure games. Or there was one that came out a few years ago called Return of the Obra Dinn that has a one bit art style. And the techniques that you use for that in order to add detail, there's one called dithering. Which is where you use a sort of checkerboard pattern of black and white to simulate gray. Like if you look at it from afar, it looks like—

Rachel: Oh! Yeah.

Griffin: Gray instead of being a solid black and white. And so you use that at different sort of like ratios of black and white checkers to like create different shades of gray in the art. Which I think is really fascinating, like how do you—how do you make a detail-rich thing with almost no tools at your disposal whatsoever? I just, I think pixel art is very neat because I grew up looking at it. And still today, like if I see someone—because I'm still fairly plugged into like game development people. Like someone share like a piece of—like a character animation that they made. I think it's very fascinating. I think animation kind of goes hand in hand with it, because it becomes a lot easier to imagine how something moves when you're just thinking like, I have this dot of color here.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: If the leg moves this way, this fast, then you know that dot just has to move over here a couple of spots.

Rachel: The app that Henry was using, do you remember what it was called?

Griffin: Divoom.

Rachel: Yeah, yeah, yeah, you could search, like you could type in. Because he would spend a lot of time like looking for particular like internet games or

whatever. And so he would type it in, and then you would see everybody's animation for that is really cool.

Griffin: It's really impressive. And animation also has like its own sort of like secret techniques. Almost like how like old Disney animation had all kinds of techniques, like squash and stretch.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: There's like similar ideas in how you make a low detail thing look like it's moving a lot more than it actually is. So much so that you will see an animation of like a character running, and you'll be like, oh, that's like 30 different images of a guy running. When really, it's like six that they just have drawn in a very specific way to make it look like there's a lot more kinetic energy to it. I don't know, I think that stuff is extremely fascinating. And I think that it's cool that it has clicked for Henry because of the sort of like decision-making process that goes behind it.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: It is a very... it is an intentional work of—like an intentional art form that I feel like, I don't know, it's not too hard to make something that you can look at and be like, "I made an apple."

Rachel: Yeah. It's also like, Henry is at an age now where he's more discerning. Like it's more easy for him to get frustrated when trying to draw something, because he recognizes it doesn't look how he's imagining it.

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: Whereas, again, like we talked about with pixel art, like there's only so many things you can do.

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: You know? So any limitation—like fine motor that you have, it doesn't matter.

Griffin: Yeah. So I brought pixel art. That's my thing. A little nerdy, I guess. Anyway, can I steal you away?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: Cool.

[theme music plays]

[ad reads]

Rachel: Okay, my topic this week is a toy—or a—hm... movies and... books and television—like media properties where toys come to life.

Griffin: Okay!

Rachel: [titters]

Griffin: You were freewheeling there for a second.

Rachel: It was one of those things that was hard to figure out. Because at first I was just thinking about movies, you know? But then, of course, like when I was researching, a lot of the—or it just started in like books and—

Griffin: Was it Alien in the Cupboard? Was that—

Rachel: For sure, that's on the list.

Griffin: Yeah. For sure.

Rachel: I just started to realize when I was looking at lists of like books and movies where this happened, that I liked pretty much every single one.
[titters]

Griffin: Okay, cool.

Rachel: And this may be an only child thing. Like you may—

Griffin: Oh, yeah! Baby!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: For sure, for sure! You mean the toys can be my friends?

Rachel: [chortles]

Griffin: Hell yeah.

Rachel: You spend a lot of time playing by yourself if... well, if you're me. And so, your toys have great significance. And this idea that they could reciprocate some of your affection—this is really sad, now that I'm talking about it. [chuckles]

Griffin: Ah, yeah! For sure. But I think it is also relatable.

Rachel: And I will also say, like it's kind of undeniable how popular this has become, that this continues to be something that appeals to people.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: So, of course like when I say that, immediately people probably think of Toy Story. That was kind of the huge, like big explosion. Like there's so much stuff attached to it now. Like merchandise and like all sorts of like, there's whole sections of Disney World and all that stuff.

Griffin: I understand that is a revolutionary film, important in the history of cinema and how computers are used to make cinema. I don't know if you've re-watched Toy Story recently. It looks fucking wild.

Rachel: Oh, just the—

Griffin: It looks fucking wild.

Rachel: The animation quality?

Griffin: And this is probably... a little hypocritical, after doing the whole thing on pixel art. But it's like, that's what you think a dog looks like? That's...

Rachel: [chuckles]

Griffin: I get that you—there were limitations, but my goodness. Anyway.

Rachel: Well, I think it's like an uncanny valley thing, right? Like they have to create this whole universe that has its own kind of style, so that you're not like—

Griffin: Well, and it was also 30 years ago, so... that flick was very ahead of its time.

Rachel: Because I will also say, and this is another thing that comes with it, there is a lot that can be creepy about a toy coming to life.

Griffin: Yeah, dude.

Rachel: You really have to be thoughtful about how you present it.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: The reason I started thinking about this is I posted on Instagram some of my Christmas photos. In one of them I was wearing this pajama outfit that had Hugga Bunch on it. And I didn't remember that's what it was, and somebody in the comments was like, "Oh, that's Hugga Bunch." And I was like—

Griffin: When you were a kid. Like, Christmas photos from when you were a child.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Griffin: You're not—you didn't mean like from this past Christmas, you're rocking some Hugga Bunch fit.

Rachel: No, no, no. Hugga Bunch is a 1985 TV show about toys that come to life. The whole focus and currency is like hugs. But it's... really creepy. I would encourage you to look it up.

Griffin: Was Big Comfy Couch also in this category.

Rachel: Oh, yeah!

Griffin: That one had a toy person. Or what was it Sunday Special? Sunday Special? Shoot.

Rachel: All right. Here. [chuckles]

Griffin: Hugga Bunch, no!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Hugga Bunch is not great to see. Hugga Bunch is not great to look at.

Rachel: Apparently, this was like the most, to that date, ever spent on a television show.

Griffin: Was Hugga Bunch? I guess it's a TV movie. The bar was probably pretty low for that.

Rachel: Yeah, a TV movie, I should say. Yeah, so it was 1.4 million. It was the most expensive TV special ever produced at that time. But yeah, kind of creepy. Toys climb through the mirror, they're really kind of exaggerated in their appearance. But the toys were great, loved the toys. Had a Hugga Bunch myself. Would really... really look back on that fondly.

Griffin: I was thinking of Today's Special.

Rachel: Oh!

Griffin: That's a mannequin.

Rachel: Yeah, that's not—

Griffin: Not really a toy.

Rachel: Another one that I was thinking of, I think specifically because your brother Travis brought it up, is The Christmas Toy.

Griffin: Oh, yeah.

Rachel: Which is a 1986 Jim Henson movie, very similar to Toy Story. That like toys have this whole active life, but they can't be seen.

Griffin: Or they die.

Rachel: The thing that is, yeah, creepy in a Christmas Toy is that if a toy is seen like on the move, like it immediately, it no longer exists.

Griffin: Loses its sentience, yeah.

Rachel: It cannot come to life anymore. [titters]

Griffin: So cool and not fucked up at all.

Rachel: The—or—

Griffin: We also watched a trailer for Melissa Joan Hart's A Very Nutty Christmas, a Hallmark Christmas movie where her Christmas nutcracker comes to life—

Rachel: Oh, yeah! So that is kind of one of the early ones. Nutcracker is kind of one of the earliest—

Griffin: Oh, yeah! I guess so, huh?

Rachel: Given that it's 1816. Pinocchio is another early one where people talk about... talk about—the creepier versions are, of course, like Child's Play. Which I did not particularly care for. But again, like the—and Puppet Master is another one. Like the horror genre has never really worked for—M3GAN, I never saw that.

Griffin: M3GAN?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: It looked good.

Rachel: [chuckles] But yeah, I... I don't know, it works for me almost every time.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: I really enjoy it.

Griffin: Why do you think that is?

Rachel: I think, I mean, I also still feel this way when our kids will play with their toys in a rough fashion. Like there is part of me that feels like a lot of affection for toys, particularly stuffed animals. And I feel like, you know, they should be taken care of, like little... like little pets.

Griffin: It's funny, Henry is that way. Henry is very protective of his stuffed—his stuffed animals. I mean, he has one that he rocks with every night that is, I think if Gus ever tried to put hands on—

Rachel: We have a bonus one, by the way, in a closet, just ready to go. Should a moment arise.

Griffin: I don't know if that makes us like the world's best parents or like the world's most sort of conniving parents.

Rachel: I thought about it, because he's at an age now where I thought like maybe he would want like a nicer replacement.

Griffin: I don't think so.

Rachel: But, no, you're probably right.

Griffin: But Gus is not this way! Gus will no fully pile drive—

Rachel: Maybe he will.

Griffin: A stuffed dog.

Rachel: At some point. My mom tells this story about when I was a kid, I would make them turn all of my stuffed animals so they faced the wall when I was going to bed. [chuckles]

Griffin: Why?

Rachel: Because I didn't like the idea of them all staring at me when I was trying to sleep.

Griffin: That's interesting. So the toys could come to life and not signal it at all by moving or doing any kind of like anthropomorphic stuff? They're just alive in a completely still vessel. Just watching.

Rachel: Yeah, just watching.

Griffin: Just watching the whole time. And you can't disprove that they are.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, that's the whole haunted doll phenomenon, right?

Griffin: I guess so. Do you know what I realized? I've been thinking about doing a little bit of décor refresh in the office. And I've got this haunted doll up on the wall that I was only supposed to have up there for a year.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: It's been—she's been up there for so much longer—

Rachel: What if you put it away and your whole quality of life improves?

Griffin: That wouldn't surprise me.

Rachel: Although I wonder if you're supposed to get it out of the house to really benefit from the absence.

Griffin: I don't know.

Rachel: Anyway, the—when toys come to life—

Griffin: It's usually good.

Rachel: I almost always love—

Griffin: Well—

Rachel: Velveteen Rabbit!

Griffin: Yeah!

Rachel: Velveteen Rabbit's another one, right?

Griffin: Yeah!

Rachel: There's just something like I get very invested in this toy. And I don't know, I enjoy it as a trope.

Griffin: The one with little soldiers, little monsters?

Rachel: Little monsters? That wasn't a—

Griffin: Monster in My Pocket. That's one—

Rachel: [chuckles] Yeah.

Griffin: We're gonna continue—we're gonna wrap up the show. We will probably three or four times throughout this conclusion just shout out things

like Monster in My Pocket as we do think of other toys come to life franchises. Until then, I do want to say thank you to Bo En and Augustus for the use of our theme song, Money Won't Pay. Find a link to that in the episode description.

Rachel: Winnie the Pooh, of course. But that was almost kind of its own universe.

Griffin: And thank you to Maximum Fun for having us on the network. Go to maximumfun.org, check out all the great stuff that they have there. Shows that you're going to find and become your new favorites, and start your year off right with them. We have some merch over at mcelroymerch.com. There's an Energies Dragon pin. There's a lot of really great stuff over there. We got new stuff for the new year. We got some shows coming up in Florida, in February. We're going to be doing MBMBaM and TAZ down there. You can go to bit.ly/mcelroytours for info and to grab tickets and stuff.

Rachel: Oh, you didn't do a listener submission.

Griffin: You're right, so I'm going to do those right now.

Rachel: Okay.

Griffin: Before we close. Adrian says, "My wonderful thing is the lines a vacuum leaves on the carpet. I recently got a new vacuum, and seeing the long and wide lines it leaves on my carpet is so satisfying while cleaning."

Rachel: That is always super impressive.

Griffin: Uh-huh.

Rachel: Like when you see somebody who like really knows how to vacuum, and it's just like perfect symmetry.

Griffin: Perfect perpendicular sweeps. M says, "My small wonder is when you're walking out of a grocery store with paper bags and you have some classic grocery sticking out of the top of the bag, like a loaf of bread or a

head of lettuce. It makes me feel like a character in a slice of life movie, it charms me every time." It's great.

Rachel: [titters] That's really great.

Griffin: Walking out of the grocery store with a paper bag with a baguette sticking out of the top.

Rachel: Yeah!

Griffin: It frickin' rules, man. It's not gonna get any better than that, so let's just stop here. Thanks for listening, everybody. Goodbye!

Rachel: Bye.

[theme music, "Money Won't Pay (feat. Augustus)" by Bo En plays]

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