

Bonus Episode: Hogwarts Legacy with Michelle Thompson

SPEAKERS

Michelle Thompson, Marcelle Kosman

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra)

Marcelle Kosman 00:10

Hello, and welcome to another Witch, Please bonus Patreon exclusive interview. I am Marcelle Kosman. Hannah is not here. She's in Bali. So she's not going to join us because she's taking an honest to god real life vacation. But I *am* joined...**[Marcelle laughs]** I forgot how to finish that sentence. I couldn't remember if it was by or with. I am joined-

Michelle Thompson 00:39

My name?

Marcelle Kosman 00:40

Yeah, I forgot your name. I am joined by a very dear friend of mine who we already established. Our friendship is dang close to two decades.

Michelle Thompson 00:55

Oh boy.

Marcelle Kosman 00:56

My dear friend, Michelle Thompson. Hello, Michelle.

Michelle Thompson 01:01

Hi, Marcelle.

Marcelle Kosman 01:02

How are you?

Michelle Thompson 01:03

I'm so good. I'm really really glad that we're gonna sit down and talk about some Harry Potter stuff, which you and I don't normally talk about very much.

Marcelle Kosman 01:12

No, we really don't. So this is very exciting. So I asked Michelle to come on and chat with me about the new Harry Potter. No, sorry. It's not a Harry Potter video game.

[Michelle laughs] It is Hogwarts Legacy. Yes. Yes. And the reason that I asked Michelle to come on and talk about it is, one, because Michelle is the only gamer who I actually love and respect. And-

Michelle Thompson 01:44

Yikes. Wow. Bigotry. Interfandom, you know, competition. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 01:50

Like, some nerd culture is okay and other nerd culture is not. Turns out, I'm a real snob. No, I'm not. I'm just joking. **[Michelle laughs]** No, I just don't know any gamers. And, also, Michelle and I had this incredible real phone conversation, like a week ago, where she was filling me in on everything that was happening in the universe of gaming to do with this new game, because I haven't been following it because I only know how to play the LEGO games. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Michelle Thompson 02:23

I feel like you and I are to like dignitaries from neighboring kingdoms trying to work out a weird crossover event **[Marcelle laughs]** that is like, blowing up both of our domains. And we don't quite inhabit each other's cultural worlds, but we're trying to hash out what is happening here.

Marcelle Kosman 02:44

Definitely. So okay, so for clarity. Michelle, you have not played the game, right?

Michelle Thompson 02:51

No, no, no, I haven't played the game. And so in this conversation, I'm going to be pretty careful about trying to draw conclusions about plot beats that are in the game or in game representations of certain things, because I haven't played it and I haven't watched it streamed or anything. And also, to be honest, I don't have the lore knowledge of Harry Potter to be able to make really nuanced informed reads of those things anyway. So I'm coming to this more as someone who plays a lot of games, really cares about this medium, reads a lot of news and is highly online, which is where a lot of things have been happening. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 03:35

That's what I hear. Okay. Okay. So even though I know we had a whole conversation about this, we're just going to imagine that I know nothing. Because frankly, that is how

much I'm able to retain any in depth conversation. So start with me from the beginning. Okay, what is it?

Michelle Thompson 03:56

Sure.

Marcelle Kosman 03:57

And what's going on?

Michelle Thompson 03:58

Okay. So, Hogwarts Legacy is an open world RPG that was released on February 10. It was produced by Avalanche software. And it's sort of important because I think it's safe to say it's sort of the first attempt that has ever been made to make a game that stands in the expanded Harry Potter universe, or the wizarding world, or whatever we're calling it. That is like for adults, kind of that's not like, the LEGO games are designed to be really accessible and really beginner friendly. They're very much embracing people who don't play a lot of games or like, play with your kids or your younger cousins, you know, like-

Marcelle Kosman 04:41

Yeah.

Michelle Thompson 04:42

-And there were some games that were made as movie tie-ins that were kind of like throw away products. So there's a huge number of gamers who love Harry Potter, huge crossover, even though that's not their best and have been dying for a big high budget like let me run around in Hogwarts, let me be a character, let me be in the world, let me build relationships, let me use a wand and be creative and do magic. And that was the pitch for this game. It was supposed to be all of those things.

Marcelle Kosman 05:12

Okay, it sounds like there's a lot of opportunity there for a very successful game. Is that what's happening? *[Marcelle and Michelle laugh]*

Michelle Thompson 05:21

So, that is hotly under contention. So this game has had some of the most polarizing reviews I've ever seen on a title. I'm talking like, among major games media outlets, it got a nine out of 10 on the first day reviews were available from IGN, a couple of days later, it gets a one out of 10, which I have never seen before, in all of my days. I think it was Wired. And, you know, we can get into the reasons why some of that happened.

But basically over the last couple of months, and really culminating in the couple of days leading up to its release, and then the week or week and a half after that, this was like the biggest topic in the gaming space. And I think, what's part of what's interesting to me about this is I think it's like, an opportunity to read some of the issues that are going on in the Harry Potter world, but through the lens of games and like the cultural issues that we have, you know?

Marcelle Kosman 06:21

Okay, so, okay, so I know that there are lots of people who are calling for a boycott of the game, because JK Rowling is a transphobe, and because she profits financially from the game. Okay, so I know that I also know that she is not involved in the game, and that Warner Brothers really went out of its way to try to distance this game from her. So how's that kind of going?

Michelle Thompson 07:05

How's that going? *[Marcelle laughs]* So this is the stuff that gets so interesting to me. So Rowling has not been directly involved herself, however, her production company is. So we still have a material pipeline that goes there. And that's been one of the big driving forces in the calls for a boycott. I mean, also, some people are just making the argument that like, at this point, anything we do and engage with and platform that extends the legacy of this series is in some way an endorsement of Rowling. And there's something to that argument, I think. But also, there's a lot else going on here. So...

Marcelle Kosman 07:51

Are you saying there are other issues?

Michelle Thompson 07:53

Literally, my brain is reeling, trying to pick which one to start on in response to this comment. I mean, okay. I think one of the things that has emerged as a really interesting element of this for me is that I think for especially for kind of lay people who aren't like incredibly deep in the Potter fandom, I think there's a perception that like, the the world itself, the wizarding world, the franchise itself is still sort of a valuable and good asset, that it basically has sort of liberal humanist values, and that the direction that Joanne has gone is kind of like a scar on the face of something very worthy underneath.

Marcelle Kosman 08:38

Right. Yes, that otherwise it would be- yes, no, no, yeah.

Michelle Thompson 08:43

I'm sure that very informed people and I'm reading between the lines would have their own interpretations of whether that's valid, but I think that's the narrative. And one of the things that's come out in this, in the development of this game is that like, what if actually now because of her legacy, the people who want to work on wizarding world products going forward, are people who are responding to and extending the worst parts of her belief system? So for example, this game goes into development in 2017. It gets announced only a couple years after that, but, you know the Rowling timeline better than I do, but for what I know, 2018 to 2020 is sort of when we start really being aware of the bad trans stuff, right?

Marcelle Kosman 09:33

Yeah, so her shitty politics start to become text instead of subtext around that time and by text, I mean, she literally starts publishing things that are real shitty, and I think that like, I think she goes, I want to say she goes full TERF in January of 2020. Because, and the reason I remember this is because Hannah and I had agreed to reboot this podcast, and all of a sudden, Joanne has gone like full blown "This is the hill I choose to die on". And we had to have a serious conversation about whether we wanted to make a Harry Potter podcast, in light of she-who-must-not-be-named. So, so yeah.

Michelle Thompson 10:26

Teah. So in the early stage of this development cycle, and I mean, games this big, it's very normal for it to take like five years for a game this large to come out that's not in and of itself, anything concerning. But you know, over that 2018 to 2020 arc, this studio starts losing people and people weren't really sure why at the time, it really looks in retrospect, like a lot of people who were in early development on this game, ended up having issues with whether they wanted to continue to work on this franchise. There's some loose anecdotal evidence that that was going on.

I don't want to hit that point too hard, because it is a bit speculative. But one thing we do know is that the lead designer on this game, who was a man named Troy Leavitt, got outed in late 2021, for a bunch of GamerGate videos that he made when that was all going on, speaking in defense of the harassment campaigns that were brought against a bunch of really prominent female, gender nonconforming and generally progressive game developers and journalists. I'm gonna assume everybody kind of knows what GamerGate was. You can probably, a very cursory Google search will tell you a lot about that if you're not sure. Basically, this is like, this is the seed of so many battles that are still going on today in the games community. It's also one of the major cultural events that sort of launched the contemporary alt right as we know it. And so-

Marcelle Kosman 11:57

What?! Okay, whoa! *[Marcelle laughs]*

Michelle Thompson 12:00

Listen, there's a real substantial- that comment was not made glibly, there's a well documented historical legacy of how GamerGate was one of the major launching pads of the contemporary alt right. And gaming spaces continue to be one of the most fruitful recruiting and hunting grounds for people who are looking to recruit particularly disillusioned young men into white supremacist spaces and alt right, radical fascist spaces. There's a lot being done about this. That's, listen, have me back after this. I'll tell you all about it. I have so much to say about this.

Marcelle Kosman 12:36

Okay. Incredible.

Michelle Thompson 12:37

Anyway, we find out that the guy who's making the wizarding world game is a GamerGater. So he quickly gets shown the door. Warner Brothers swoops in and makes this big public statement to fans saying like, well, we're as shocked as you are, don't worry. We're making sure that like, yeah-

Marcelle Kosman 12:57

[Marcelle laughs] Shocked.

Michelle Thompson 12:58

No trace of this guy. They literally say something to, I don't have a direct quote in front of me. But something to the effect of like, no imprint of Troy's politics will be in this game at the time that it ships. We will return to this point later in this conversation. So that happens, people are still pretty concerned about that. Because honestly, late 2021, in a game that's supposed to ship at the end of 2022 is like... that is when a lot of the big creative decisions in a game have already been made. You're out of pre production and well into production at that point. So there's some other stuff too. It comes out that one of the voice actors is cozying up to Rowling on Twitter, Greg Ellis, he's a very infamous men's rights activist who was at the forefront of the harassment and smear campaign around Amber Heard.

So already, we're starting and he's in the game that ships so like, you know, to what extent are we concerned about who is still working on this game? We're still a little bit concerned. And so, you know, there's a series of content decisions that we can talk about if you want to, but it's really left me with the question like what if... JK may have

been the biggest problem in the past, but what if she's not their biggest problem for this franchise going forward? What if the people who are drawn to this now are actually people who want to nurture that element of what's going on?

Marcelle Kosman 14:37

That doesn't seem impossible, right? Because I feel like for the, sorry, by "doesn't seem impossible," what I really mean is, that makes logical sense to me because the folks who seem to be the most hurt and disillusioned and trying to find a way forward, like post TERF-Gate. Those tend to be folks who were into this world because it seemed like it had all of these options and all of this imaginative potential. And, you know, once the dominoes start falling and you start to realize like, like, oh, well, what other kinds of politics, what other kinds of hateful politics are actually built into this world, it makes sense then that the folks who are still committed to expanding and nurturing the world, despite transphobia, would also be into other types of hateful shit. So yeah, anyway.

Michelle Thompson 15:49

Or at the least maybe indifferent enough that they don't see it, and are very comfortable replicating and playing creatively in the spaces where like, for example, anti semitism is a major influencing factor in the narrative. And like, maybe some of the people who worked on this and designed it are like, real vocal anti semites. But a lot of them are probably, like, libs who think of themselves as nice people, and just like, aren't that aware of it. And would be like, it's not that deep, you know what I mean?

So I think it raises some really, you know, this is the first major, original canonical cultural object in the wizarding world since the last Fantastic Beasts movie. And I guess, since I don't know what the canonical status is of the Wizarding World theme park things, but this is sort of the biggest step off the beaten path, I think, that they've taken in canon so far. And I think it'll be really interesting to see what the legacy of this game is, not to try to be cute about that. Yeah, Don't make that face at me, Marcelle.

[Marcelle and Michelle laugh]

Marcelle Kosman 17:03

Okay, Michelle, I have a very serious question. It's, I mean, it's as serious as all of my questions, which is pretty, pretty muddled and hard to actually put into words. One of the things that we talked about when you and I had our phone conversation, that I thought was really, really interesting, and I would love for you to touch on again, is the review system. Because I don't know anything about this universe, I learned from you that when a new game is coming out, major gaming news outlets get advanced copies in order to have reviews ready for the release day.

Michelle Thompson 17:51

That's right, because you know, games are long. I think this one is between 40 and 60 hours to play. So you can't, it's not like an episode of TV, right? That you can watch in an hour and write a review. So it's really common for, I mean, I would say for any game that has this size of budget behind it, any game that has any kind of marketing budget, which like I'm sure everyone's seen the ads for this game, like this game has marketing money. They are sending out review copies to every major gaming publication and tons of people in the influencer space like Twitch streamers and stuff like that.

So typically, a game outlet would get this free review copy between a couple of days or a week, if it's a short game, to like a couple of weeks sometimes, if it's a longer game in advance of the release. And so the way they control information flow about the game from there is they have what's called an embargo date. Typically, this is between one and three days before the release date of this game. And basically, when they've sent out review copies, it's the day before which no one who has the game is allowed to talk about what's in the game. So embargo date becomes the date that everyone is trying to hit with their review. So in this case, the embargo date was February 6, release date was February 10. So embargoes are a really big deal in games journalism. First of all, basically all of the games media journalism space happens online. And a lot of it happens just among the sort of top 10 most popular websites, like we are not a space that is well served by conventional media, like any of the places that typically review like movies and books and music and theater, they do not cover us and when they do, we are like Jesus, please hire somebody who knows what they're talking about! ***[Marcelle laughs]***

Don't believe anything printed about us in the New York Times. That's rule number one. So, we're overwhelmingly an online news space. And so I can't even express to you how important it is for the survival of the main news websites to have their reviews go up on the embargo date. Reviews do exponentially higher traffic and higher ad revenue than other kinds of articles. And the vast, vast, vast majority of that traffic is going to hit within about 36 hours after an embargo window drops or on the day of the release. So super important to hit the embargo date to the point where a lot of outlets, if they think they're not going to be able to hit the embargo day, just don't bother putting in the staff labor to review certain games.

Marcelle Kosman 20:41

Woah. Okay.

Michelle Thompson 20:42

Because it's just not worth the time sink to have one of your guys playing some game for 100 hours when they could be writing 50 other articles in that time. So that means the politics around getting review copies can get intense. Again, every big game goes to every big outlet period. So when embargo day drops on Hogwarts Legacy. There's, we have sort of the equivalent of like Rotten Tomatoes, like an aggregator that takes all the scores and collates them into one. Ours was called OpenCritic or Metacritic, they're two sites with slightly different algorithms. So people look on Metacritic on embargo day and like, oh my god, this game's got an 89. That's crazy. Like, for context, anything with a 90 is going to be like in the conversation for Game of the Year, like, that is high. Especially because people were suspecting that there was some reason to be worried about this game in the lead up.

Marcelle Kosman 21:40

You did name a couple of things that seemed concerning.

Michelle Thompson 21:45

Yeah, there was some gameplay footage that didn't look totally right. And there was just some stuff, you know? So people start looking around, and pretty quickly, they notice that like, of the big game sites like IGN, Kotaku, Polygon, Rock, Paper, Shotgun, a couple of others. The only big one that has its review up is IGN, which happens to have given the game a nine out of 10. People quickly start digging in. And it turns out, there is a very, very linear pattern between who was covering the discussion about boycotting the game that was going on in the community, and who got a review copy in time to hit the embargo date. So these other games, including Polygon, Kotaku, like big, big ones, did not get review copies in time to hit that date. That is a lot, like for that to be that clear and that brazen is a violation of protocol in our space.

Marcelle Kosman 22:45

Like that can't be accidental. Is that right? Like it can't be accidental. Like the Venn diagram of outlets that were covering potential boycotts, and also didn't get advance copies in time for the embargo date, like, that's a perfect circle. And that can't be... maybe not a perfect circle.

Michelle Thompson 23:09

It's close. Like, the data is persuasive, when you see it, is what I would say. And it also extends to a lot of influencers as well. A lot of queer influencers were not getting this game, unless they were ones that were really vocally on side with continuing to cover Harry Potter stuff. So it sparked this really intense sort of blowback, which partially was about the ethics of whether these outlets should be publishing reviews and promoting

and platforming this game, you know, so not just moving that conversation from like, the consumer behavior to the media coverage level.

And, you know, Wired only gets theirs up a couple of days later, they give it a one out of 10, which I have never seen before. To be fair, the review, the text of the review is written like about seven, but at the end, they say, one out of 10. Don't give your money. Don't support Rowling, and instead of a link to where to buy it, they put a link to trans lifeline. So there's a lot of that kind of behavior going on. There's a lot of outlets like choosing to cover it, but put in a pretty annoying paragraph about like, I hope my trans friends aren't mad at me for doing this, which is like, not I don't think trans people's favorite way that that could be dealt with.

Marcelle Kosman 24:35

Yeah, so it seems like they could make, the writer could have made a different choice.

Michelle Thompson 24:40

So here's the thing. I think there's a range of defensible positions on the question of whether to review this game. One of the most persuasive positions I've seen is from Gita Jackson, who wrote the review for Polygon which came out just February 17, so fully 11 days after the embargo, which I think is excellent. Gita is a non-binary brown person who has loved Harry Potter since the day it came out. And I think they write a really balanced contextualized review, but their perspective is like, have you seen the marketing budget on this thing? Like, it's literally impossible for, like a freelance games writer to platform, a game of this size, like, let's be for real for a minute.

So there's been just like, a lot of hurt feelings. And then by the time this hits the influencer space, people streaming it on Twitch, people starting to talk about it, it spawns a whole other wild set of anecdotes. Like this thing, just it was for a while, it was like multiple times every day, there was a new thing on Twitter that had happened in relation to this game, new facts coming out about content, new things that happened in the community, like it just would not stop happening. It was like two straight weeks of like, this game just kept happening. It was unbelievable.

Marcelle Kosman 26:08

Oh wow. So even though you haven't played it, do you feel like you've played it?

Michelle Thompson 26:11

I mean, kind of, but I don't think for the reasons that you're guessing. So, there's been a fair bit of conversation covering content that's in the game. So I feel like I have a pretty good handle on what the story is. But honestly, I've played so many games like this, at

this time in my life, that it has to have more than just an OK story for me to bother. And everything I've heard about the actual gameplay in this is that it's like a painted over game from the early 2010s, which is not what I'm looking for. So I feel like I can just, one of the funny points that Gita makes also in their review, is that the first spell that you learn, basically just turns your wand into a gun, which is so funny to me. **[Marcelle laughs]** Like, Gita was like, There's barely a point to learning any other spells, because your mind just goes like bang, bang, and I'm like, I don't need to play this. I'm not the audience for this, you know?

Marcelle Kosman 27:16

Yeah. So okay. I mean, so this seems really interesting to me, because I, this is based exclusively on feelings are nothing else. But I feel like the majority of us who are mourning the loss of this universe, and who would have loved to have some kind of role playing game where we get to be in the world, I suspect that we would not be satisfied with a first person shooter, but where you have a wand instead of a gun, like this is it's I'm making some assumptions here, but I'm just I'm just guessing, like, like, for me, it is almost a relief to hear that this is largely what the game is because I am not feeling FOMO for this game. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Michelle Thompson 28:11

No, you're fine. So I mean, it's set in the 1890s. So it's not, it's not going forward in time. Yeah, I mean, one of the early things that I was seeing in conversation on Twitter, everyone was mad about this game for a different reason for a very long period. But one of them that I saw was actually from people who still, even if they had complex feelings about the franchise, had love in their hearts for it, who were asking really interesting questions of the developers. Like, for example, given that open world RPGs tend to be really choice driven narratives where you really get to make a lot of decisions about who your character is and how you want to play them and how you want to behave and relate to people. Can you use the unforgivable curses in this game? Is that the right term?

Marcelle Kosman 29:01

That is the right term. Yes.

Michelle Thompson 29:03

Okay, great. So this question was put to one of the lead developers, the lead designer, Kelly Rowland, by GamesRadar, and she gave a really interesting quote, I'm going to just read part of it for you. "Characters will react visually and audibly to seeing the player cast an unforgivable, but we don't have a morality system that punishes them for doing so. This is because it is the ultimate embodiment of role playing, allowing the player to

be evil. Additionally, this was important to us because it comes from a place of non judgment by the game creators. If you want to be evil, be evil.”

So I saw some people who are invested in the lore and you know, this being sort of like a prequel in some ways. Like I feel like lore is one of the major reasons you would go to this, which is like okay, what was Hogwarts before? **[Marcelle laughs]** And people were very frustrated by the idea that like, everyone, so people like tisk tisk you for doing like the killing curse and then you basically move on with your day. People are like, Oh, I wish you hadn't done that. Well, we still have to work together to put down this goblin rebellion. Off we go. Like, that's weird. That's weird.

Marcelle Kosman 30:24

That is extremely weird. And also, can we talk about the fact that the point of the game is to put down a goblin rebellion?

Michelle Thompson 30:32

We can. So I knew I started by saying I'm not going to talk about the content of the game. But we do have to talk a little bit about the content of this game.

Marcelle Kosman 30:40

Just a little bit. Cuz, okay, So a friend of mine sent me a message before the game had been released, basically saying like, Have you heard about what's going on with this game? Because it seems hella anti semitic. And I was like, I don't know what's going on with this game. And I didn't think about it at all afterwards. And then I read a twitter link that you sent me where the writer was, like, one of the goblin artifacts is a shofar stuffed with traif. It's like a show. It's a ritual object that's been desecrated.

Michelle Thompson 31:18

Yeah, and the description of it is like, a horn that goblins used to annoy the wizards. I don't know, man. **[Marcelle laughs]** I don't know about that. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. Also, there's like, the major plot is maybe kind of a reference to blood libel, which is a little bit rough. Okay, so let me, I'm gonna read you just like the shortest summary of the game's plot again, from that Gita Jackson review in Polygon. “You're also up against the evil goblin, Ranrock and his wizard ally Rookwood.” These names, Marcelle, I don't know how you do this. “Ranrock's motives are pretty clear. After a wizard committed a vicious hate crime against him, he became prejudiced against all wizard kind, and is trying to lead a rebellion of goblins to start a war. Though the goblins you meet pointedly say that they think Ranrock has gone too far with his methods. Why Rookwood is there is never all that clear. By the end of the game, I still had no idea what Rookwood wanted or why he was working with Ranrock. Or what he would plan to do with the huge cache

of magical power they were unearthing together.” **[Marcelle laughs]** So this is where some of the like maybe blood libel stuff happens, which is that okay. And like, you're gonna have to be patient with me if I'm butchering the lore a little bit. But basically, this game invents a new type of magic for sentient creatures to have. So as I understand it, human magic is innate. And it's like hereditary. So there's this other kind of magic called ancient magic that manifests in the body and it has like a physical essence that causes it. And so I guess one of the plots is that Ranrock, your Goblin, is working with a professor to kidnap students from Hogwarts and just extract that substance from them and store it in vats and use it for stuff.

Anyway, basically, the plot of this is putting down a slave uprising. And like, I don't know, I think I can go on record and say, this is an unpopular opinion. I'm for the slave uprising. And not for putting them down. That doesn't sound heroic, although it does sound historically accurate to 1890's Britain. But I don't think that's what this game is doing. Because this game also goes so far out of its way from what I understand, again, go read Gita. They played it and I didn't. But like, there's characters from India casually in this game, India, is still very much like under British colonial rule at this period. It's so weird. It's like it's trying to do this liberal compensating for some of the politics of Rowling thing. But in a way that just never seems to quite land for people. So I don't know, like what we're left with is just this weird culture war object where, you know, there's some people committed to talking about what's actually in the game or like, the material circumstances of how it got made.

And then other than that, there's just people yelling at everyone else to just like, Shut up and get politics out of games, which I've heard more “get politics out of games” in the last two weeks than I have in a long time. **[Marcelle laughs]** And like I'm sure your listeners are smart, I'm sure they can think through some of the reasons why “get politics out of this art medium” is not a very good argument. It's not a good take, like you can quickly Google “first person shooter Military Recruitment” if you would like to learn more about one of them. Anyways. Some of the most popular and important games of the last few years were Disco Elysium, which is about being in a failed post communist, like Eastern Bloc state where nothing politically feels possible. Like, this is just a profoundly ignorant and foolish and absolutely wild thing to say about this medium even if all you play is Call of Duty. **[Michelle sighs deeply]** **[Marcelle laughs]** You're in such danger of me talking about this for another hour and a half straight. We're right on the cusp.

Marcelle Kosman 35:33

Okay, okay. Okay. Okay. I love it. And I wish we could, but we can't because we respect Coach, and yeah, we want her to stay with us forever. I feel though, that we would be

remiss if we didn't even briefly mention our token trans character who was parachuted into the game, more or less at the last minute to quell the angry queers. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Michelle Thompson 35:59

So this is the first time I've ever heard someone being misgendered by their chosen name. The trans character's name, which is very much added at the 11th hour, once word of a boycott had already gained momentum is named Sirona Ryan, which doesn't sound that bad when you hear it, but it is spelled S I R O N A Ryan, it just, it looks, it's just awful. It's just...

Marcelle Kosman 36:31

Icky, is the only term that I can think of for choosing this as your queer or trans character's name.

Michelle Thompson 36:43

It's just awful. I mean, it did spawn an entire genre of parody tweets, which was very fun for a couple of days with people being like, what's your Harry Potter name? And based on your ethnicity and sexual orientation. The best one I saw is like, a Jewish bisexual named Dreidel Bothways, which I think is actually how we started this conversation.

Marcelle Kosman 37:05

I think so. Yeah. Yeah, that seems good and right.

Michelle Thompson 37:09

And we end on that as well. **[Marcelle and Michelle laugh]** There's so much interesting to read about this. If you want to hear more about all this and what people are talking about, Jason Schreier, who's an excellent games reporter has a piece in bloomberg.ca, which was published on February 9, that talks about some of people's reservations and where the conversation was leading up to the release. Like I said, Gita Jackson's review on Polygon is really excellent at putting this game in context from the position of someone who has affection for this franchise. So that will probably resonate with your listeners. And if you just want to see like, where some trans people's head is at, Stephanie Sterling, who is someone who still uses their pre transition name in their in their online handles, which is @JimSterling, has a YouTube video that's just like, a State of the Union on like, where trans people are at in this whole thing, which is beautiful. Great. It's really great.

Marcelle Kosman 38:10

Awesome. Michelle, I am tremendously grateful that you took time from your Saturday night to hang out with me and talk about this absolute shit show of a game.

Michelle Thompson 38:24

This was so fun. Thank you for just like, this is like bloodletting for me. **[Marcelle laughs]** Like it's just like letting out the ghosts in my brain. That won't stop talking to me about this. So thank you so much for letting me let all this out. **[Michelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 38:38

Oh, my pleasure. Michelle, do you want to plug your podcast? Can listeners still find it? If they're like, wow, this chick seems smart. I'd like to hear her talk about games some more.

Michelle Thompson 38:49

For the zero to one of you who reached that conclusion, I had a podcast about video games that I did as an early pandemic project with my partner. It's called Never Was a Gamer. You can find it at neverwasagamer.com. It's about like my weird journey to coming into this community and like falling in love with something silly and frivolous as an adult. And sort of taking control of my right to have like play and like joy in my adult life. It's pretty fun. It ended last year but it's all still there.

Marcelle Kosman 39:22

I think a lot of our listeners would be into that whether they're gamers or not. Sounds great. I'm not, I don't, it's part of my aesthetic. I don't listen to podcasts so I'm actually not a good friend.

Michelle Thompson 39:38

I'm a book person. **[Both laugh]** You and I respectfully support each other's podcasts and have never listened to them and I love that for us.

Marcelle Kosman 39:43

I do. I love it. I love it. Let us model this. This like, I love that for you sincerely. Okay, thank you so much.

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra)