**Tuck:** Wondery’s new investigative podcast miniseries, *Harsh Reality: The Story of Miriam Rivera,* digs into behind-the-scenes drama of one of the most controversial reality TV disasters of all time. It’s a story of love, lies, and reality television. It’s hosted by Trace Lysette. Stick around to the end of this episode to hear a preview of *Harsh Reality: The Story of Miriam Rivera.*

[*Gender Reveal* theme music starts]

**Tuck:** Welcome to Gender Reveal, a podcast where we hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I’m your host and resident gender detective, Tuck Woodstock.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

**Tuck:** Hey, everyone! I hope you’re all hanging in there, got through last week okay. This week, I am delighted to share my conversation with game designer and cultural consultant, Yeonsoo Julian Kim. In this interview, we talk about one of Yeonsoo’s most recent projects in which all of the characters are nonbinary. That game is called *Women Are Werewolves*, which we encourage you to not judge by the title alone.

**Yeonsoo:** (laughing) If I named the game *Men Bring Home the Bacon,* you can be pretty sure that the game is not actually about the merits of the patriarchy.

**Tuck:** We also talk about colonialism as a popular game plot, trans representation in both mainstream and indie games, sex LARPs, and the D&D to HRT pipeline.

**Yeonsoo:** If I look back at my life and my preferences and how I felt about myself, I just didn’t have the vocabulary at the time, and I learned a lot of that vocabulary through games.

**Tuck:** But first, it’s time for “This Week in Gender.”

[*This Week in Gender* opening theme plays]

**Tuck**: Okay, y’all. This week in gender, we are doing another rapid-fire news round. I’m going to alternate good-ish news and bad-ish news to make a little club sandwich of feelings, so here we go.

[guitar strumming]

**Tuck**: At least nine US states have Medicaid rules that explicitly exclude coverage of gender-affirming care, and one of those states is Iowa. Or it *was* Iowa. But last Monday, a judge ruled that it was against Iowa state law and the state constitution to do overt transphobia. We love to see it. So Medicaid in Iowa must cover quote-unquote “sex-reassignment surgeries” when deemed medically necessary. Just wanted to say congrats to Aiden Vasquez, Mika Covington, and the ACLU of Iowa for winning that case and wishing the same results in those eight other states very soon.

[guitar strumming]

**Tuck:** Three trans people took a picture in front of the gate to the grounds of JK Rowling’s castle, and by “JK Rowling’s castle,” I mean one of JK Rowling’s multiple castles. JK Rowling was so appalled by this breach of privacy that she tagged the trans protesters individually on Twitter and sent her 14 million followers after them and, because of this, when I googled “transgender news today,” the bulk of the results were news clips about whether it was morally reprehensible for private citizens with a handful of followers to post the street number of a billionaire’s castle gate. No word on whether it’s ethically dubious to do transphobia and own multiple castles. Y’all, I really thought castles were basically fictional like horcruxes or whatever, but Europeans just really live in them, huh?

[guitar strumming]

**Tuck**: Stu Rasmussen passed away last week at the age of 73, and it reminded me that most of y’all wouldn’t know who Stu is, so I will briefly tell you. Stu spent 26 years as a local elected official in Silverton, Oregon, which is an hour south of Portland, has a population of like 10,000. He was first elected mayor in 1988, served two terms, and served some other positions. Then he did a gender transition, and then, in 2008, he was elected mayor again—for three more terms, actually. As he wrote on his website, “I just happen to be transgendered, something I didn’t even know the word for until I discovered it on the internet. I’ve been a cross-dresser or transvestite my whole life, only coming out recently, and thereby discovering that life goes on very nicely. Apparently, I was the first openly transgender mayor of any US city. Although there are T-star people serving in public offices around the world, this was a first for the USA. Well, I guess somebody had to do it.”

Mmm… y’all remember T-star? Anyway. Stu had a very chaotic gender that I think confused a lot of people, including trans people and allies trying to figure out how to be respectful. He was transfem, but he mostly used he/him pronouns. He didn’t go on HRT as far as anyone knows, but he did get breast implants, was very excited about them. Also, his name was Stuart. So, very cool, very chaos. There were less cool things about him, like his stance on police, but let’s not worry about that for now. I just like that a small, vaguely conservative town in Oregon had a beloved trans mayor for six years and whenever someone would try to be transphobic, people would just be like, “That’s Stu. He owns the movie theater. Shut up.”

[guitar strumming]

**Tuck:** Okay, a dramatic tonal shift. Last week was Trans Day of Remembrance and, even though it is only November, 2021 is already the deadliest year on record for trans and gender nonconforming people, according to the HRC. Not Hilary Clinton, the one that’s an equal sign. The HRC has counted at least 47 homicides of trans folks this year, most of whom were Black or Latine. 47 murders is 47 too many, and also, when we are making TDOR memorials and using phrases like “the deadliest year in history for trans people,” I hope we are also thinking about the much higher number of trans people we have lost because they were killed by state violence, by the prison industrial complex, by colonialism, by anti-trans medical discrimination and neglect, by being denied housing, by being denied employment, by being criminalized for existing, by existing in a world where we are encouraged not to exist. Just something that I’ve been thinking about a lot and wanted to say. Moving on.

[guitar strumming]

**Tuck**: As of this recording, Amy Schneider from Oakland, California is a five-day Jeopardy champion with total winnings of more than $170,000, which I assume is at least two months’ rent in Oakland. This guarantees her a spot in the next tournament of top Jeopardy winners and, I believe, makes her the winningest openly trans contestant in Jeopardy history. She has been live-tweeting recaps of her episodes @Jeopardamy if you’re interested. That’s J-E-O-P-A-R-D-A-M-Y. And that’s it. This has been “This Week in Gender.”

[*This Week in Gender* closing theme plays]

**Tuck:** You know that shopping for sex toys can sometimes feel overwhelming or dysphoric. But shopenby.com aims to create a better experience for the queer, trans, and gender nonconforming community. 2% of all profits are donated to organizations focused on improving the lives of queer and trans people of color, and you can improve your life by visiting shopenby.com—that’s S-H-O-P-E-N-B-Y dot com—and using the code GENDERREVEAL at checkout to get 10% off your order.

[Background music plays]

**Tuck:** Yeonsoo Julian Kim is a game designer and cultural consultant who designs tabletop role-playing games, LARPs, card games, and writes interactive fiction. Some of their games include the interactive horror novel *The Fog Knows Your Name*, published by Choice of Games, and the card game *Battle of the Boybands*, published by Game and a Curry. Other games they’ve contributed to include *Kids on Bikes, Magical Kitties Save the Day, Mutants & Masterminds,* and *Avatar Legends: The Roleplaying Game.*

[Background music ends]

**Tuck:** The way we always begin the show is by asking, in terms of gender, how do you describe yourself?

**Yeonsoo:** I am genderfluid and nonbinary. I use both those terms to describe myself, and that pretty much covers it.

**Tuck:** As a person in the world of games, did you have the quintessential trans experience of exploring your gender through roleplaying games before you came out?

**Yeonsoo:** Oh, yeah. (laughs) It was funny because I knew it was a thing before it happened to me, and it wasn’t any one game. It was kind of a series of, “Huh. Why does this feel so right?” And also, giving me reason to pause and think back on former parts of my life and my childhood and things that feel obvious to me now about my gender fluidity. If I look back at my life and my preferences and how I felt about myself, I just didn’t have the vocabulary, and I learned a lot of that vocabulary through games. Just cause I’ve met a lot of great queer people and trans people and nonbinary people through the gaming community. I say that as if it’s one community, it’s like LARP community, tabletop. It’s also all regional subgroups also. But I definitely was one of the people who explored gender feels through games.

**Tuck:** Yeah, you just mentioned meeting a lot of queer and trans people and—I feel like I ask this question to different people in different fields all the time—but LARP and tabletop RPGs feel like a very queer and trans space to me, but I can never tell if that’s true, or if I just only talk to queer and trans people and thus my perspective is skewed. Obviously, like you said, it’s not just one community, it’s a bunch of different communities. But from your perspective, do you feel like those are particularly queer and trans spaces?

**Yeonsoo:** I might also be biased here because… I talk about this with my friends a lot. “Is this a very queer space, or are we all just gravitating towards each other like magnets floating through a community that might not actually be what we feel like it is?” I do think it’s a little bit of both. I think that a lot of different parts of nerd culture and geek culture tend to attract people historically who feel like outsiders in some way, or they don’t quite fit in with whatever the mainstream is, and whatever their community predominantly is, and games can be a safe space to—can be being the key word here, *can* be—a safe space to explore those things and to meet other people. There’s a little bit of the… you can just say, “Oh, well. It’s only a game. Just because I’m playing this character doesn’t mean that I actually feel….” And then, one year later, you’re like, “Oh. Only a game.” (laughs)

**Tuck:** Yeah, the playing D&D to HRT pipeline. (Yeonsoo laughs)

**Tuck:** Before we dive too much into your work, I want to make sure we’re all on the same page. I’m sure when some people think “game,” they’re thinking of something that is either like checkers, or is something that has competition or a way to win the game. And I know your games are really heavy on the storytelling, roleplay, collaboration. Can you talk about what appeals to you about that style of gameplay just so we can all get our heads around what kind of thing we’re talking about when we’re talking about games?

**Yeonsoo:** Yeah, I think this is a really important thing to touch on with people whenever you start talking about games because, for a lot of people still, I think, there’s this idea that games are something frivolous, and there are clear win conditions and mechanics that you get to use to get to that win condition. And it’s something that’s supposed to be fun in the very traditional sense of the word fun, like in the way that tag is fun. But in the world that I reside in and work in, that word “game” is even contentious, because a lot of what I do… I work in LARP. I write LARPs, and I play in LARPs that are really, really intense sometimes, and touch on really, really heavy subject matters. And some people will have a really adverse reaction to that where they’ll be like, “You can’t make a game out of something this serious.”

But we’re in a space now where games are more widely accepted as a form of art so, if you wouldn’t say, “Oh, you can’t make a play or write a book or make a movie about this subject….” People will still apply that thinking to games if they don’t apply it to other art forms. I think we’re starting to make some progress where more people are understanding that. But the games I make tend to be a little less mechanics driven, and a little more narrative focused, and they often ask players to drive their characters into some places that you would not consider happy or victorious. I make games where people will sometimes, like, crying is what you get out of it, you have a nice cry during it.

**Tuck:** Yeah. Well, thinking about this game, *Women for Were*… Women for! (Both laugh) *Women are Werewolves*, which is in Kickstarter mode right now. The safety card says this is primarily a game about navigating microaggressions within a family and I can imagine folks looking at that and being like, “I actually do that enough already.”

**Yeonsoo:** Oh, yeah.

**Tuck:** So what feels valuable to you in creating that kind of space in the games you’re making, instead of making some kind of escapist fantasy where nonbinary people are treated as valuable human beings?

**Yeonsoo:** I think one thing that I want to emphasize is that there’s no one right way to make a game about the one monolith that is nonbinary experience. I want there to be a plethora of different games that explore different facets of it, and also don’t hyper-focus on it, so people can just be themselves, or someone who they think they might be, or someone who is nothing like them, and it’s not the center of the game.

For this game in particular, we did want to center that theme, largely because we were trying to make a game essentially that you can use as a tool for processing your own feelings, specifically feelings about how do you navigate family traditions and dynamics and big family group gatherings, when those family members might not understand you? And to give people a space to talk about that directly, instead of trying to weave it into another game. If you’re just playing D&D, and you’re like, “I wanna also play a nonbinary character,” there’s not necessarily going to be points built in for “Okay, now is the gender reflection section of the game.” *Women Are Werewolves* is specifically entirely gender reflection as well as family reflection and sometimes, supernatural stuff reflection.

**Tuck:** Yeah, so do you have an ideal player in mind and is that player maybe a trans or nonbinary person who’s trying to process? Or a cis person who’s learning what it is to be a trans or nonbinary person who deals with this? Or something else?

**Yeonsoo:** Yeah, so we definitely intentionally tried to make the game approachable for anybody who is curious about playing a game where you’re gonna talk about gender, feelings about gender, and how people relate to their bodies. It’s a nonbinary and queer game, but you don’t have to be nonbinary or queer to play it, and we certainly had a lot of people in playtests who were not nonbinary play it and get something out of it. And that’s not everyone. For some people, it’s a game and they move on. And during playtests, for other people, it was something much more meaningful, and I think our hope always was that yes, nonbinary people can use this to explore some of their own feelings and understand what they’re going through, through a fictional frame, and to have some distance there because of it.

Something happened during playtesting where it became apparent that it was doing that a lot harder than we even hoped for, because people were bring a lot to the table with them, and they were being very brave about what they wanted to put out there. There’s a term we use called “bleed.” There’s bleed-in and bleed-out. Bleed-in is when your real-life self—your personality, your traits, your behavior, your feelings—they seep into your character. Bleed-out is when experiences you had as your fictional character start to bleed into your real life, and you start to feel them or experience them outside of the game. People were experiencing a lot of bleed with this game, which we knew would probably happen. We didn’t have to work super, super hard for it to happen, though, cause people really wanted to have that experience.

**Tuck:** Yeah. I want to keep talking about that, but I feel like I may be edging the listeners by not having you explain what *Women Are Werewolves* is. Do you want to give us a quick synopsis of what the game is?

**Yeonsoo:** Oh, yeah. *Women Are Werewolves* is a story game, or a stor-telling game, which essentially means that it’s kind of like a tabletop game in that you’re playing it generally while seated at a table or, in this day and age, usually over Zoom. And it’s card-driven, so we have prompts on cards that you draw throughout the game, and they’re gonna ask you questions. And after you answer the question, your fellow players will take turns coming up with follow-up questions to deepen your answer, and they can be very directly related to the prompt, or completely loosely connected. They can be leading questions that kind of insinuate an answer already. And you always have the option to pass up on any of these things. We have safety mechanics built into the game to try to help make sure that everybody has a safer gaming experience. And the game is also divided into three different phases.

The first one is “Werewolf,” where you’re answering questions about “What do werewolves look like in this world?” Cause the one thing we have set in the game rules is that you are a nonbinary person, in the game, you’re playing a nonbinary character. And your family has a very gendered practice, like many families do, but this one happens to be supernatural, in that only the women transform into wolves on the night of the full moon and go and roam the wilds and the men are meant to stay at home and hold down the fort. You’re exploring, where does that leave me if I don’t feel I’m a man or a woman, like if I don’t feel like I strictly belong in either of these groups, what do I do? Then, the second phase is “Gender,” where you’re going to be talking more about your gender feelings and how you realized that you might not fit in with either of these groups perfectly. And the third phase is “Family,” where you’re answering more specific questions about relating to your family and how they might show their love to you in imperfect ways, or how they might just grate up against you and try to go out of their way either to not understand you, or try to understand you and still miss the mark.

**Tuck:** Ahh, yes. Obviously, that could bring up a lot of existing family trauma, maybe you’re inventing some new family trauma for the game. Like you said, there’s a lot of bleed there, and you mentioned safety mechanics. Can you talk about what exists to make sure that this is not a harmful experience for folks that are playing?

**Yeonsoo:** Yeah! We use a couple different, or a few different things. One of them is called the X card, which if you’re familiar with tabletop and LARP stuff, is pretty commonly used. It was originally designed by John Stavropoulos and, essentially, what it used to look like in the days of sitting around a table and playing a game and not doing it over Zoom, is you have an index card or some kind of scrap paper with a big X drawn on it, and you put it in the middle of the table where it’s accessible to everyone. If a subject matter comes up that you, for whatever reason, are like, “I don’t want to play on this,” you just reach out and touch the card and what happens is that subject matter gets completely removed from the game, maybe you backpedal a little bit to rewind around wherever it came up, and then it never gets brought up again. There’s no questions asked, so people aren’t grilling you, “Why do you want this removed from the game?”

The primary tool we use, we also put something in that’s a mix of something called lines and veils, which is also very common. A line is “this cannot come up in a game,” and a veil is “this subject can come up, but we’re not going to go into any explicit detail with it.” So we’re not going to describe anything having to do with it; it’ll be kind of a fade-to-black situation. We have a preemptive X-carding list. One of the things playtesting was great for is that we got to learn what sensitive subjects are more likely to come up in this game because, if somebody has a clown phobia, chances of a clown coming up in *Women Are Werewolves* is relatively low. I’m not going to say it couldn’t happen, but the likelihood is not skyrocketing. But other things, like menstruation, or emotional abuse that’s very explicit, or physical abuse even, or harm to animals, because if you have families who are wolves that are out hunting, that might be a thing that comes up. We made a list of those things that players can go through beforehand and tick off anonymously and are given to whoever’s facilitating gameplay, and you have a master list of “these are the things that are just not going to come up in play.” It also gives people a sense of what they might expect. They can steer around it right from the get-go.

**Tuck:** Yeah. In one of your other games, you wrote this guide that’s amazing and that I think has gotten a lot of attention for being great. It’s called “Notes on playing a Korean if you are not Korean.” I love it. My favorite part is where it says, “This isn’t a game where you can win or lose, but if you say the word ‘kimchi,’ you automatically lose.” I’m curious if you either have something similar, or thought about writing about something similar for having a game where everyone plays nonbinary characters.

**Yeonsoo:** We don’t have something that’s directly similar to the “no kimchi” rule. That game is called *Long Drive Back from Busan*. It’s a K-pop group falling apart game. But I was thinking about that a lot when we were discussing safety, and how people can play and portray characters of a gender that maybe they don’t identify with in real life. This is kind of weird, but a lot of the safety stuff outside of the direct mechanics that we have listed at the beginning of the game is built into the way that we wrote prompts. Granted—and this is something I struggle with in all games—there’s no way to make a game where there’s no possibility of somebody who sits down to play the game and ruins everybody’s time because they don’t want to be respectful at all, they came in to be a troll.

We talk about this a lot in safety in games. How far can you go to prevent that? And there is only so much you can do, and I do know that there are people who would only feel comfortable playing this game with people they know pretty well, rather than go to a convention and sit at a table with a bunch of strangers and play it. And that’s totally valid. I think people should curate how they play games pretty carefully, especially when it comes to sensitive topics. But we rewrote every single prompt in this game a million times to try to make sure… not that we’re feeding answers to people, but that it’s going to discourage sketchy, mean, disrespectful answers if that makes sense.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I like what you’re saying about making a game where you’re not overly concerned about intentionally bad actors, because I think that gets in the way of a lot of our work regardless of genre, of “How do I make work that cannot possibly be interacted with in bad faith?” And that doesn’t actually work; that stifles a lot of creativity. So I think that makes a lot of sense. You mentioned your K-pop LARP, and there’s this interview from a few years back where a colleague described you as one of the only designers brave enough to write explicit cultural signifiers into a game. Can you talk about how these cultural signifiers show up in your work? And was that a sincere thing; is that actually a very rare thing?

**Yeonsoo:** I think there is a lot of fear around trying to place cultural signifiers within games because—and I’m one of these people—many people have had very bad experiences not exclusive to, but especially at conventions and stuff, where you are often sitting down at a table with people who you don’t necessarily know, and it’s not like a friend has vetted this person for you. And I did sit there, staring at my computer for I don't know how long, debating is it the right thing to do? Is it okay for me to make a game that explicitly asks people, regardless of what their real-life ethnicity is, to play a Korean character?

I have three games that do this, off the top of my head, that I can remember. And I definitely know that there are people out there who feel like no, you should not ever play somebody outside of your own ethnicity. I happen to not agree with that. I do think you need to be very careful, and do some research, and be very mindful. And I know there’s also… this is recent discourse from Twitter, hot off the Twitter press or whatever. There was recent talk about, should you play a nonbinary character on a live stream if you yourself are not nonbinary? A lot of my friends felt like, a lot of us in games came to realize that we were nonbinary or trans or they realized some facet of their identity through a game. So for somebody to gatekeep that and say, “Unless you are absolutely certain that you identify this way and that this label applies to you, then you cannot play this type of character,” I think is a little bit too restrictive.

But there’s a lot of nuance to it. It’s not a one size fits all, there’s one solution to all games. I just know that there are going to be people, when I put out a game like this, who want to push back against it for various reasons. I mean, I’ve written a game where the characters were explicitly Korean for a good reason, and that Korean culture was a big part of the game, and some of the feedback I got was, “Do the characters have to be Korean?” It comes from that angle. And it also comes from, “You’re just giving people an opportunity to be racist and to appropriate if you put this game out there, and say that people can play it regardless of their actual ethnicity.” But I don’t know. A lot of art would not be made if we adhered to that.

We had similar stuff… we had some pushback against the name *Women Are Werewolves* because, for a little while, some people, the only thing they knew about the game was the title, because it had been announced and we didn’t have a lot of information out there. People were really worried about that. But the title is meant to be… It’s similar to if I named a game *Men Bring Home the Bacon*, you can be pretty sure the game is not actually about the merits of the patriarchy. Or if I made a game called *Capitalism Loves You*, it’s probably not about how great capitalism is. The title represents something you’re actively pushing back against within the game.

**Tuck:** Well, that was… Monopoly started out that way and then, they corrupted it. But Monopoly was supposed to be anti-monopoly.

**Yeonsoo:** Now, look where we are. (laughs)

**Tuck:** Now, look where we are. We messed up Monopoly and now we have capitalism. That’s how it worked.

**Yeonsoo:** Direct correlation. (Both laugh)

**Tuck:** It’s the meme with the tiny domino that goes to the big domino. Anyway! So, you work as a cultural consultant for other games. I think it’s pretty clear how, if someone writes a story set in Korea and they’re not Korean, there’s a lot of space for them to do racism, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that people will go out of their way to find ways to be racist. I’m curious if you often run into situations where either the game either doesn’t appear to have racial elements on its face, or if it’s set in some high fantasy world where race and culture are different, and you still have to explain, “This is actually also harmful.”

**Yeonsoo:** Yeah, it’s interesting because, luckily in my experience, if somebody is willing to bring me on and pay me for my labor…. It’s not always the case. A lot of people try to get consultants or sensitivity readers to do work for free, which is not cool. But generally, if somebody is going out of their way to hire a cultural consultant, they are at least willing to have the conversation. Again, this is not always the case. I know plenty of cases where culture consultants have been hired very late in the process, where it’s kind of too late to make any significant changes because things are already set in stone, or illustrations have already been made, or the game’s basically about to be printed and there’s only a chance to change one or two little things.

But I’ve lucked out in that I’ve had people hire me and explicitly tell me, “I don’t want you to worry about my feelings. Just tell me. Just give it to me. Lay it on me straight.” And that’s the ideal situation going into a job, where they actually want your feedback and to integrate it and they’re willing to hear you on things that are microaggression level, or on a more abstract level where it’s not just, “Oh, this is racist because it’s using a slur or using a dated term,” but like, “This is racist because this fantasy race seems to have a lot in common with this real world culture, and here are some of the signifiers here. Maybe here’s some ways in which you can steer around that.” And, again, it has so much to do with when consultants are brought into the project. If it’s pretty much done, or has been written, but also, the core of it has something that’s super racist built in, that’s a big problem, and it’s going to take you a lot of time to rework that. And sometimes people aren’t willing to put in the work at that point.

**Tuck:** I was going to ask you what some of the more common issues you run into as a consultant are, but someone else already asked that in an interview, and you said not being aware of the impact of colonialism. How does not being aware of the impact of colonialism come up in games?

**Yeonsoo:** People romanticizing colonialism without realizing that’s what they’re doing. I grew up with *Dungeons and Dragons*, so I understand that’s a big cultural milestone for a lot of people in geek culture. But there is something to be said about why is it now that all these fantasy games, and a lot of sci-fi games as well, have this central mechanic, or the most common storyline, of “We’re going into a place and we’re killing monsters who are indigenous to this area because they’re in our way, or we’ve deemed they’re causing harm to us, and we’re going to take their stuff, and that’s the game, folks.” That’s the core of the game. It’s really hard to divorce that from colonialism a lot of the time. If that is the core mechanic, if that’s the core premise of your game, you can certainly subvert that, but I think so many games start off with that premise that it’s hard to progress in a healthy direction from there.

**Tuck:** Yeah. Well, if so many of our cultural stories are literally about colonizing new lands, it feels hard to think of a way to reinvent an adventure storytelling game in which you don’t do colonialism. That’s actually a really interesting point, and I’m just going to sit here and try to think of how to not do a colonialism game. Interesting. Your work, at least the games you make, exist in the indie game sphere. But I realize that larger corporations also realize that trans people spend money sometimes, and are increasingly trying to create quote-unqoute “representation” for us. I was talking to a friend about this interview and he said that *Magic: The Gathering* introduced a nonbinary character last year, and I’m sure there are other examples. I’m curious what you make of large game companies trying to cater to queer and trans people more.

**Yeonsoo:** I think it’s like… again, it takes a lot of nuance here. Because you could end up, depending on how it’s approached, and who’s creating the content within those companies…. Are they asking their nonbinary or trans employees to write them? Or are they just grabbing a cis person who is like, “Shrug, I guess I’ll do this,” and having them do it? There’s plenty of both, I think, out there in these bigger companies. I do think it’s important to have the representation in there. That’s kind of my main thing. I would rather it be in there so long as it’s done…. My standards are so low at this point. I was going to say, “well enough.” I mean, ideally it’s done by somebody who is pulling from their own experience or somebody on the team is pulling from their own experience.

Of course, you don't want a situation where you're only getting characters who are built on stereotypes, which is another thing that does happen. You also don't want it to become the weird corporate thing that Pride has become in a lot of ways. There are plenty of people who are happy to use their, “Oh, look at how diverse our characters are, or our setting,” as a big marketing point, and then the follow-through is pretty disappointing. Or again, it’s… I love the emoji meme of “This is what DEI looks like in our company,” and it’s the emojis of a bunch of white dudes for the most part. Then, you get a couple of women and a couple people of color. And they’re like, "That’s it, folks. That’s what we've done. Give us a pat on the back, please.”

**Tuck:** Yeah! A lot of your games have horror elements. What speaks to you about horror that leads you to put a lot of that in your stories in that genre?

**Yeonsoo:** An appropriate question, too, because we just came out of Halloween times.

**Tuck:** We did.

**Yeonsoo:** Yeah, and I went all in for that. I think about that every year. About why I… what’s going on with me? Why do I like horror so much? It’s a lot of different things. Part of it is that I’m testing myself, and also that, in some ways, I think the horror that you generally find in horror games where it’s supernatural things—ghosts, demons, monsters—they almost feel more approachable, and like you have a better chance at victory against them than real-life horrors.

Also, horror as a genre in pretty much every form of media has a tendency to reflect what’s going on in the political landscape at the time, and the cultural landscape. It’s a very good way of tapping into what’s going on during this era. What are people afraid of during this time period? It does take some digging to find those correlations but, once you do, it’s really fascinating. And I try not to be too intentional with like, “Okay, what's a good metaphor for all the crap that I have to put up with in my real life right now?” I don't go into a game being like, “Okay, what monster will represent the Trump administration?” (Both laugh) I try to make it a little bit more organic. Like, “What am I scared of?”, without trying to think of what this is going to represent. And then, automatically, it tends to represent something bigger than just that theme on its own.

And we just… C.A.S. Taylor, my co-designer on *Women Are Werewolves*, we have had talks about, “Okay, werewolves are often really presented as a monster from a horror movie, and sometimes, they’re the sexy urban fantasy werewolf,” and where did we…. We don’t have any really built-in werewolf mythology in the game. Players build that from the ground up. You could have a cozy werewolf game. It doesn’t have to be a scary game where people in your family are werewolves. It can be a cozy game where people in your family happen to be werewolves, and you might be, too, potentially. Cozy and horror actually go together really well, if you want to do both. That’s kind of, I don’t know. I feel at home in horror in ways that I don’t fully understand.

**Tuck:** I love that, though. I was reading… we’re gonna talk in just a second about erotic interactive fiction. But I was reading one of them in prep for this, and it was this erotica about a trans girl flirting with an actual demon from hell, and I was like, “Yes. Let’s write more stuff that’s just hot and gay about demons.” *Montero*, let me also point to. I would love more cozy werewolf content. It doesn’t have to be scary. I’m a baby, so I don’t want it to be scary. I want it to be hot and cozy.

**Yeonsoo:** You’re talking about Anna Anthropy’s… I’m the editor on this anthology, I should remember the order in which the words come for the title, but I always—

**Tuck:** Lusts and then loves, I think.

**Yeonsoo:** Oh, yeah, *Strange Lusts/Strange Loves* is the name of the anthology. Anna’s story is *Heat from Fire, Fire from Heat*, or the other way around. I’m dyslexic, so whenever you have multiple words appearing more than once in a title, I unfortunately mess it up. But that one was… it is scary and it’s sexy, and I really like that combo. It’s very satisfying, and I was really happy with how that story came out. It’s on Strange Horizons for anybody who wants to take a look at it. I have several short story anthologies that are specifically about pairing sex and death or romance and death. And it’s not a niche thing. A lot of people are into, “You know what? Scare me a little bit, or maybe a lot, but turn me on at the same time.”

**Tuck:** Mm-hmm! Let’s talk… you coedited this anthology, *Strange Lusts/Strange Loves*. You also contributed to *Honey & Hot Wax*, which is an anthology of erotic art games. Can you talk about what, literally, that means, when we say something like, “erotic art games”?

**Yeonsoo:** The coeditors on that are Sharang Biswas and Lucian Kahn. I’m obsessed with some of the games in that anthology, because there’s one that’s by Jonaya Kemper that’s about Dracula and Lucy, and I’m all-in for Dracula stuff still. That anthology is, they’re all LARPs, and they vary in how… not only in how sexy or sexual or sensual they are, but what the mechanics are. Are the mechanics actual sex acts of some sort, or are they game mechanics that represent sexual acts or talking about sex? My game in there is called *Pass the Sugar, Please.* It was also done as an interactive theater experience kind of, by a company in Salem, Massachusetts called Intramersive. Essentially, it’s a BDSM tea party game where the players are taking on the roles of guests who are all members of the same super-exclusive BDSM, very secret club, kind of *Eyes Wide Shut* inspired, hoity-toity BDSM club. And you can’t speak about it at all outside of the club. It’s like the Fight Club rules but for BDSM.

They all end up at the same tea party for a friend; it’s their birthday party or something. And their partner who they only know from the context of this sex club is there, and they have to communicate messages about their relationship like, “Oh, I would like more of this in our scenes,” or, “I would like less of this,” or, “I’ve always secretly wanted to ask you, I’ve been wanting to do a collaring ceremony but I’m afraid it’s too much of a commitment.” You’re trying to communicate these things without actually talking about BDSM or sex at all. You can only refer to the items of food on the table, which are also represented by cards. So you can talk about tea, like what kind of tea you’re ordering, and why you’re ordering it, or why you want one finger sandwich over another, but you can’t actually mention anything directly about body parts or sex or BDSM.

**Tuck:** This is almost more of a personal question, but I am personally obsessed with how differently different people think about sex. And I always go to “straight people don’t know anything about sex,” but also, there’s more than that. In that game, I’m curious, do you need an advanced knowledge of things like what a collaring ceremony is going into that game? Does the game work if you don’t know things about BDSM already?

**Yeonsoo:** It’s probably a good idea to have at least a barebones idea of what BDSM is, definitely. You don’t need to know the ins and outs of all the terminology. A lot of the stuff is set up so that your character sheet has different options for you to select of what secret message you want to try to pass on. I tried really hard to include options, some that were more deep-dive BDSM things, and some that were more approachable for people who didn’t really know a lot about the community or different terminology. And there’s one character sheet in specific of somebody who’s very new to the community and to that scene. A lot of games I really like do that as kind of, “This is the tutorial character,” or the entry level, if you’re nervous, you should probably choose this one; it’ll help support you through the game.

At one con, a lot of people… I don’t know what happened. A lot, a lot of people tried to sign up for that game at Dreamatio—the last Dreamation before pandemic times struck—and I think one of the reasons people were really eager to play it…. Hopefully, it’s also because it’s a good game. But also, it’s a game about communication, more than anything else. Almost more than sex or BDSM, it’s a game about how important communication and honesty are and, “Hey, doesn’t it suck if we can’t actually talk about the thing we’re trying to talk about, and instead we’re trying to worm our way around weird semantics and stuff?”

**Tuck:** I love that. A great lesson that we could all take. Let me know if… this is a hard pivot, and let me know if this is just not something you want to talk about, but you changed just your whole name a few months ago—just the whole thing—which I felt was really cool as someone who did it one little piece at a time. I’m just curious what made you feel like it’s time to just rethink the whole thing.

**Yeonsoo:** One part of the name has stayed consistent, except I changed the spelling, because no one can pronounce Yeonsoo. I mean, nobody who’s like… a lot of white people really struggle with Yeonsoo, and the way that Korean names have been spelled has also changed a lot since 1990. It’s a name my grandfather chose for me as my Korean name, and also my middle name initially, and I just wanted to change up the spelling to be something that was more aesthetically pleasing to me and also, it was a little bit like, if somebody looked at it and knew a little bit of Korean, they’d probably be able to pronounce it a little bit more correctly, if that makes sense.

And so I go equally by Yeonsoo and Julian now. I have friends who call me Jules also. And…. (Laughs) Oh my god, I’m just gonna be honest about this. Julian came because of a *Deep Space Nine* episode. I always liked the name, I’ve known many very solid Julians in my life. But there was an episode where Julian Bashir in *Deep Space Nine*—the doctor character—is talking about how his parents were calling him something, and he changed his name specifically to Julian, and that was him claiming his identity for himself. I had a moment… I was sitting with my partner on the couch and I was like, “Oh! That’s it! That’s gonna be it!” I just knew. It snapped in place for me. I watched that episode exactly when I needed to. Then, the Kim part, that’s my mother’s last name, and my grandparents’ last name. That’s the family that really raised me and I wanted that to… I had been thinking about that change for a really long time. Finally, I was like, “You know, if I’m making these changes anyway, might as well do them all at once.”

**Tuck**: The way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

**Yeonsoo:** I think I’m going to go with a very broad answer for this because, otherwise, it’s a very, very long bullet-point list. I think the general gist of it is I would really like if gender and fear could be completely divorced from each other. Where it’s like, there’s no fear because of societal standards about transitioning, and also no fear about having your access cut off to medical procedures and resources, and no fear about your family disowning you or being terrible to you if you come out, or if you don’t have really solid answers. And also, no fear of being policed by people who want you to fill out very specific checklist items in order to apply any kind of label to yourself. No reasons to be afraid for, “I will not have my rights anymore if I transition or if I come out or if I have whatever identifying words attached to me.” That’d be very nice.

**Tuck:** I love that. I feel like that ties back in… less spooky werewolves, more cozy werewolves; less spooky gender, more cozy gender. (Both laugh)

**Yeonsoo:** Give me those cozy gender feelings.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music starts]

**Tuck:** That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time, or you learned something, please share this episode with your friends, and consider supporting us and the work we do here at patreon.com/gender, where you can get all sorts of fun rewards for supporting the show. You can find Yeonsoo at YeonsooJulianKim.com and @YJulianKim on Twitter, where you can stay updated on all their newest games and Kickstarters to fund those games. We are @Gendereveal on social media and at genderpodcast.com, where you can find episode transcripts and other useful resources. This episode was produced and edited by Julia Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Special thanks this week to Rich Posert. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

**Tuck:** I’m about to play you a preview, as promised, of *Harsh Reality.* While you’re listening, be sure to follow *Harsh Reality: The Story of Miriam Rivera* on Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, or you can listen early and ad-free by joining Wondery+ in Apple Podcasts or the Wondery app.

[background music begins]

**Narrator:** It’s morning in Ibiza. Up on a mountainside, a gorgeous white villa bathed in sunlight, and on the patio of that, a group of hot, young single men and a reality TV crew. For the past three weeks, they’ve been competing for a cash prize and the love of a beautiful woman. But something is wrong. What’s about to go down is a total disaster, one that will change the lives of everyone there that morning—the production crew, the contestants, and the woman at the center of the show, Miriam Rivera.

**Speaker 1:** You can’t just do that, just throw a trans girl into a straight man’s lair. That’s putting, you know, a deer in a lion’s cage.

**Narrator:** From Wondery and Novel comes the new story about love, lies, and reality TV.

**Speaker 2:** Someone said, “Hey, we’d love to have you on a show. This is what happens next. Give us a few weeks, we’ll fly you out to Spain, and screw your life over.”

**Narrator:** Follow *Harsh Reality: The Story of Miriam Rivera* on Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, or you can listen early and ad-free by joining Wonder+ in Apple Podcasts or the Wondery app.

[background music ends]