

Enthusiasm - Robot Wars

Content Warnings

- Mentions of: Flames and blades

LYDIA

It would just be like, oh no, who's been naughty and then comes along with a lance and roasts this gigantic machine like a marshmallow. And it's like, if you are not into that, then I don't understand.

ALL

[laugh]

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers. And today we're talking about Robot Wars and I am mechanically overjoyed to be joined by Jonny, Lydia, Marguerite, and Nathan. As always, we'll be introducing ourselves alphabetically. So Jonny, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

JONNY

Look out, it's Jonny [laugh]. He / him. Writer, voice actor, games designer. I'm just around. I could be in your house right now. Who can say?

HELEN

[laugh] No, no; disclaimer. Jonny is not in anybody's house. Next up, Lydia,
what are your pronouns and what do you do?

LYDIA

Hi, pronouns are they / she, mostly relevant stuff is I'm in the Gaming podcasts
and in fact, depending on when this comes out, I either live stream my chickens
or I used to live stream my chickens.

HELEN

Oh, are you stopping the chickens?

LYDIA

Yeah.

HELEN

Okay, that's all right.

LYDIA

No, I'm moving house, so it's,

HELEN

Oh,

LYDIA

Just, it's gonna be lots of disruption and then it'll be really like where I put the chicken run I dunno if I'll be able to put the cable to the camera. It's not gonna...

HELEN

Oh, well. I'm grateful for the time that we had with the chickens. [laugh]

ALL

[laugh]

HELEN

Let's finish the introductions. Marguerite, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

MARGUERITE

Hello, I'm Marguerite Kenner. My pronouns are she and her and I do a lot of things like streaming and running a whole group of podcasts and doing the law. I do the law [laugh], which is to say I am a lawyer. I'm also an American, as you can tell.

HELEN

What's the name of your podcasts?

MARGUERITE

Oh God, I've lost track. Our latest one is called Cats Cast. Yes. We invented a monthly podcast about cat fiction because the internet. Cat stories every

month with pictures of the cats of the authors and the narrators, and
sometimes interviews with the cats and...

HELEN

Oh, I love it!

JONNY

That is some top class pandering, like just, mmm, beautiful!

LYDIA

[laugh]

MARGUERITE

It's literally an April Fools Day joke that ran ferrell. We did one story one year, then she wanted to do another one the next year, but she wanted it to be in April Fool's April Fool. So it was a dog story [laugh]. And then she asked to do an original this year. Um, and it turned into, well, I'm in love with 12, Can I have a year's worth? And so now we provide the internet with Cat fiction.

JONNY

Yep. No, that's fantastic.

HELEN

I love it. And finally, Nathan, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

NATHAN

Hi everybody, I am the androgynous Android game show host from the future, Nathan Blades, pronouns, he / they, uh, tabletop RPG designer, streamer, voice actor, and general internet to ne'er do well. Uh, you can find my work on Twitch dot tv forward slash the neon caster and voicing Captain Orimar Vale on the campaign Skyjack podcast.

LYDIA

God he's professional, isn't he?

JONNY

So smooth.

MARGUERITE

Very smooth. I need, I need pattern like that. I need

LYDIA

Geez.

HELEN

I know. It's gorgeous.

MARGUERITE

Well done

HELEN

As always. You uh, blow me away with your professionalism.

NATHAN

[laugh], glad to be here again for the third time as well. You keep hav.. I haven't scared you away yet, which is delightful. How rare [laugh]

HELEN

Genuinely, I mean, Lowri can confirm this. When we were thinking about who to put the Robot Wars episode, I was like, Nathan would be good. Let's put Nathan in here. I would like, I'd like Nathan [laugh]

NATHAN

And a good thing you did cause I have some very unique stories that, well, I'm sure we'll get into.

MARGUERITE

Lovely.

HELEN

Oh, I can't wait. Before we get into those though, let's try and describe Robot Wars to anyone who hasn't seen it.

JONNY

[laugh].

HELEN

Um, I would say it's almost exactly what it sounds like, except it's a reality TV show instead of an anime as you might expect

MARGUERITE

Kinda like almost a proto reality show.

LYDIA

It's sort of important to be like it was achievable, grimy made in sheds tech. Like all the stuff that you think is possibly going on in the back gardens of the people who actually live in the cyberpunk cities that, you know, the camera follows violent people through in the films. This is what they're getting up to is there's like a legal robot wars rings, you know.

JONNY

It is a fever dream of the late nineties United Kingdom.

LYDIA

Yeah.

NATHAN

[laugh]. It is. Uh, BattleBots, but British

MARGUERITE

Nathan, I am high fiving you so hard right now. [laugh]

JONNY

Yes. Obviously we just took the American concept and made it like just really weird and got weird about it.

NATHAN

Actually, I actually have a feeling it's probably the other way around, but I wanted to tell that joke anyway.

MARGUERITE

It is.

JONNY

Really?

MARGUERITE

History; it originated in the UK. And then the same creator took it back to San Francisco, where he was from and got it involved in the university and the technology communities. So it took a much more tech bent in that they would do not just the combat fighting robot part, but they would do swarm battles and they would do, oh, you know, different walker tests and all sorts of different like robotic showcase events.

LYDIA

Far too intellectual. Give us the chainsaws. [laugh].

MARGUERITE

Well I mean it was the Valley in the nineties. That's what we did. Yeah. Right. And then it had the kind of combat component of it. But then of course Hollywood got involved and you got Carmen Electra and you know, all of the like big televise sorts of stuff. Then it went back to the UK and where it innovated again and, and on and on.

NATHAN

It's a scrap heap challenge. But tiny.

MARGUERITE

But it's not tiny at all!

LYDIA

It's not tiny. The robots were massive. Absolutely gigantic.

NATHAN

The robots are actually quite large. They're, they're disturbingly large considering how much weaponry they all have. But you know [laugh]

MARGUERITE

They give like the weights for some of the house bots at the end and like one of them is 600 kilos or something ridiculous.

LYDIA

Absolutely staggering.

JONNY

The way that the house robots were able to just demolish any competitor robot that stepped to them was cause they were allowed to be like half a ton and all the competitor robots were like much lighter. So I think Sir Killalot was almost a ton.

LYDIA

Although still bigger than you think. So basically they would go at each other with blades, but whichever was the wedge that could get underneath the other one and flip it usually won, like whichever one had that kind of element.

JONNY

Uh, the evolving meta.

LYDIA

Yes.

NATHAN

Mm-hmm. [affirmative].

JONNY

So you start out your early seasons of Robot Wars flippers are king.

MARGUERITE

It's all about the wedge.

JONNY

Chaos 2 with a flipper just gets in under there, tosses them up because a robot's on his back and they're wheeled. What are they gonna do?

LYDIA

Because they got panelling over the top, they've got armour, right. But underneath they've got a vulnerable belly.

JONNY

Then you get the era of the *Srimech*.

MARGUERITE

Right. The self-righting mechanisms.

NATHAN

The self-righting mechanisms.

JONNY

Self-righting... Yeah. So if they get flipped over they can flip themselves back. Suddenly, all these wedges that were dominating the early season are useless rubbish, except for the ones that are so powerful that they literally toss like half a ton of metal into the air and it crashes down.

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah. If they could get out of the ring, cause there would be pits with fire in.

HELEN

Yes, there was a flame pit.

LYDIA

Obviously

JONNY

Then the meta evolved to Hypno-Disc.

MARGUERITE

Oh god.

LYDIA

Oh god Hypno-Disk!

JONNY

Which was, it was a robot with a big spinning blade that spun so fast and so powerfully that it shredded like [laugh]. The first time you saw it, it just, robots literally flying into pieces.

MARGUERITE

But it wasn't a blade, it was a big mass of metal. Like the guy who designed the bot, his son helped him design it. It was a little round piece on a little base and it was a gigantic heavy flywheel that they would get up as fast as they could and you could hear it, you could hear that thing just crank up and, okay, so I'm American, we watch Robot Wars PBS very late at night, always delayed. We never got them on time. We always got them like a week later.

HELEN

Of course.

MARGUERITE

And they had this great segment where like they would have all the fights in the front and then they'd go and do all the interviews with the crews in the

back. They had a camera in the back the first time hypno disc came out and that whole entire gigantic room went silent.

LYDIA

Mm-hmm [affirmative]

MARGUERITE

It was the arms race in real time.

JONNY

Mm-hmm [affirmative] fascinating.

MARGUERITE

Because that robot changed everything. Like the first competitor literally went out there with a broom and a bin bag to get his bot afterwards. And you could see the psychology of it too. You could see the pilot going, I'm about to make an enemy of every single person standing behind me.

LYDIA

There was so much psychology behind the scenes as well.

MARGUERITE

Yes.

LYDIA

Not just the stuff that was on the show. If you know anyone that tried to compete there were leagues off screen before you could get onto it.

MARGUERITE

Yep.

LYDIA

And like there was a lot of stuff of like I heard from mates that had tried to put something together to go on that it was like they mock it in Spaced where a...

JONNY

Late nineties, early two thousands British sitcom [laugh]

LYDIA

With Simon Pegg and Nick Frost where, their breakout thing and like Nick Frost's character, his name I can never remember in the real thing

JONNY

Mike.

LYDIA

Like, Mike, Mike makes a robot and someone else steals or destroys it. And that was so real. Like that was so real. That was literally happening. I heard about people who, like my mate there is a big center of like art stuff now is like, oh yeah. Like we, we mate, I was making it with my dad in the shed and we couldn't get hold of the iron that we needed to get to the [laugh] to get to the centre. And like you, you go there and people were just trying to give you bad advice to like undermine you. It was grotty, cyber punk but British sheds.

JONNY

But at the same time, sometimes there was an eight year old child whose dream it was and the eight year old child would be watching their dad try to drive it because their dad was more competitive. Their dad was always the competitive one. The kid was just there like kind of crying cause their robot got absolutely obliterated by Hypno-Disk or crushed by Razer [laugh].

HELEN

I feel like it's important to, to make clear that a lot of the competitors were indeed children.

LYDIA

Yeah.

HELEN

But like who made robots with like a teacher or a parent. Like I seem to remember there was like a little group of people all from the same class at one point or probably at several points sending their robots into this arena of mechanical death.

LYDIA

There was no pity.

JONNY

Oh no.

LYDIA

They were actually quite sweet to each other backstage clearly. And like people would help each other.

HELEN

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

You always got the human interest stories whenever they were helping each other, like a part would break and somebody would go and give them a hand or things like that. There was very much an attempt to downplay the must have been roiling clouds of testosterone that were drifting backstage as these competitions were going on.

LYDIA

Oh yeah. It was almost universally male.

JONNY

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

Yes. Unfortunately. Very much so.

NATHAN

The whole process of that hobbyist building really makes me think of how, uh, prior to this, like in the eighties and so there was the kind of like hobby programming and it seems like that kind of enthusiasm of parents probably

then carried over to their kids working on house projects of building those kind of robots together.

MARGUERITE

You almost would've expected it. And I say this as an American for a different perspective, that this would have been a different socioeconomic group of people who were doing this. And I think my memory of it is that it may have started that way, but it did not stay that way. It became university teams and then as it took off in popularity and then you started to get advertising money and sponsorship money and then you get universities and you know, it was on primetime television in the United States at its height, you know, it was really big money. It never really got away from those like eighties maker roots, but it definitely started to get that Hollywood gloss to it as like the arenas evolved and the, and the house bots evolved and all of that.

JONNY

Yeah, no, I think that the, from what I remember, generally you had two sort of types of teams. You had your organization teams which were like, oh we are from a university, we like love to do robotics, or we work at some high-end engineering firm and have been doing this. And then you had like the family or like properly hobbyist sort of groups, which tended to be the ones with kids. But those were also the ones which clearly had money because this was an incredibly expensive thing to build.

LYDIA

Yeah.

JONNY

Although it interestingly, it's, it's one of those things where like it was back when you still got quite a wide array of accents on UK primetime tv.

MARGUERITE

It was like my first exposure to them because it would say it's from Sheffield, blah blah. And then somebody would come out and talk and the voices would be different. And it was like one of the few opportunities at that time, in my experience at least we got exposure to regional accents.

LYDIA

It's the thing where it did, I think yeah. get more expensive. I, I was more aware of the earlier seasons because I know you're planning to ask later of like, how did you get into Robot Wars?

HELEN

I think we're, we're organically moving that way It's completely fine.

LYDIA

Okay. How did I get into Robot Wars? Kids, in the past TV was on at like what was on was on.

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

And other people decided what you would be into, because like if you had Thursday night free or like Saturday afternoon free as say most kids did, that was the thing that you were going to be into, to a broad extent. But the thing is Robot Wars, it occupied a kind of similar headspace to me as say Tomorrow's World.

NATHAN

Sure.

LYDIA

Whereas like Blue Peter is younger, right? But those two things, they're like, oh, you're beginning to mature and think about how tech is. But Robot Wars was always like, it always felt fundamentally accessible and raucous and like, these are people that you can meet at the end of your street.

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

And you could chat to them and it, so it did get a bit like at the end when they would sometimes go behind the scenes and talk to them, they'd be a, a little kind of distant and a bit posher than you'd expect. But in the ring it was lots of people screaming about boxes of metal in a way that didn't feel like this is what you should learn and think and do about all of the technology that was, you know, everyone was at that in the nineties was saying, this is how your world is gonna change. I'm like, no, but I just wanna see a robot.

NATHAN

That, that's quite interesting cause I, I was around what, in the ballpark of 8 to 10 when, when this was big, but this was also at the point where early kind of like aimed at kids shown in anime was airing a lot on tv. And there is both, uh, a through line of shows like Pokémon and Digimon and like Bay Blade where there is like a lot of customizability and uh, having a lot of kinship with a project that you're working on and have a connection to. And uh, Robot Wars came out in an excellent time to kind of be alongside of that. So because I was super into those anime TV shows, I was then also super into Robot Wars.

MARGUERITE

The Robot Wars to Voltron Pipeline, [laugh]

NATHAN

I never, I never got into Voltron actually, but, uh, it was actually at the same time. I, I do, I distinctly remember there being like a, a weekly or like fortnightly most likely magazine for Robot Wars that was both-

JONNY

Oh, Robot Wars magazine!

LYDIA

Yes.

NATHAN

Gossip about the show, but also it had instructions and pieces on how to build a basic robot.

LYDIA

I made a robot from one of those sets of magazines. And it was like genuinely so incredible.

NATHAN

Yeah.

LYDIA

And I remember they were so freaking expensive and like it was this thing. I remember like the, the first one was really discounted as those sorts of collector sets, to build your thing was, and I remember like seeing it in Smith's and like my eyes lighting up and like my mum [laugh], my mum just like sagging cause [laugh] like, oh God, there's gonna be like a whole load of these and they're all gonna be like six, seven pounds. Which was a lot back in the day. And being like, okay. And I'm like, but I wanted so much [laugh].

NATHAN

But it, it, it, it, it definitely stands to that the idea that it was framing itself is super accessible.

LYDIA

Yeah. Yeah.

NATHAN

Because you could build a, it would be tiny and sit in the palm of your hand. It's not gonna be something that could go against Sir Killalot or whatever, but, you know, uh,

JONNY

Nothing could go against Sir Killalot, Nathan, you're talking ridiculous. You can't, you can't stand against Sir Killalot. He's Sir Killalot [laugh].

HELEN

Can we talk a little bit about the house robots? Cause I still feel like, okay, there's an arena. You put your poor defenceless robot in there. There are pits, there are flames, there are weird things that will try and smack your robot about and there are house robots in that arena who will try and tear your robot pieces.

MARGUERITE

Yep.

HELEN

There was Shunt who just pushed people around

JONNY

Shunt!

NATHAN

With a big swinging pickaxe as well, I think.

JONNY

Yes. They always told you how many PSI that pickaxe was and I can't remember,
but it's so much PSI [laugh] just like; thunk!

ALL

[laugh]

MARGUERITE

If Shunt missed and hit the floor, it would bounce the entire robot up. That's
how powerful it was.

LYDIA

And the robot was massive. So that is not a small thing.

HELEN

Yeah. These are big, big metal contraptions. [laugh]. There was Matilda.

LYDIA

Who, Craig Charles, was always so like sweet about like, oh, Matilda's coming.
[laugh]

JONNY

Craig Charles was the very effusive Liverpudlian host of Robot Wars.

HELEN

Oh yeah, there was commentary.

JONNY

Everything about this. Like, it feels like it could only have existed at this exact period of the nineties cause everything is just a distillation of like it's extreme. Like it was all sparks and like early computer graphics and like, oh, the robots are going to fight [laugh]

LYDIA

Craig Charles would announce it all at the beginning. Is that where the poem happened at the beginning?

JONNY

No, there was a poem at the end. He, he always had a little poem at the end that never made any sense. [laugh]. I've actually found some of them.

MARGUERITE

Oh gosh.

HELEN

Please, please give us a dramatic reading.

MARGUERITE

Go on.

JONNY

Okay. Do you want it with my Liverpudlian accent or without [laugh]?

HELEN

No.

JONNY

No? No Liverpudlian accent. Got it. [laugh]. Okay. You can ask for robot presents off Santa Claus, but you'd better ask for mercy on Robot Wars.

MARGUERITE

There's always a horrible couplet.

LYDIA

That's incre - That's beautiful. That makes perfect sense.

JONNY

Your dad might hit the ceiling when he hears the footy scores, but he'll do himself a mischief watching Robot Wars.

LYDIA

[laugh]

MARGUERITE

Just so wonderfully awful.

JONNY

Some strange things happened behind closed doors, but nothing quite so wicked as Robot Wars

NATHAN

Mmm, edgy.

HELEN

Was Craig Charles the one reading these out?

JONNY

Yeah. At the end of everyone.

MARGUERITE

That's how, how he'd wrap up every episode. Yeah.

LYDIA

And sparkler guns would go off next to him as he read them out.

HELEN

Yeah.

NATHAN

Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

MARGUERITE

Like he was a wrestler riding out to pyros. It was...

LYDIA

Yeah, like the delivery. You, you, you believed him. Whatever. He said.

JONNY

One of my favourite bands is The Doors [laugh], but we'll really light your fire on Robot Wars. [laugh].

LYDIA

Incredible.

MARGUERITE

It's like one part couplet, one part Dad joke.

LYDIA

Incredible.

MARGUERITE

Oh, should we finish the rest of the house bots?

NATHAN

Oh yes, yes, yes.

JONNY

Like Matilda was the girl house robot. And by the girl house robot, we mean a dinosaur.

LYDIA

She was shaped like a triceratops.

HELEN

Yes, she was very powerful. She had big blades on her back.

NATHAN

Eventually. A pink flywheel or chainsaw at the back.

JONNY

Yeah. It was like a chainsaw tail.

HELEN

Yes. She was great. I was always [laugh]. I remember always being happy when Matilda was there because I was like, it's, it's a girl robot. [laugh]
representation for me. [laugh]

LYDIA

That was what representation was in the nineties folks.

MARGUERITE

Right. But she wasn't pink, which was a really nice change.

HELEN

Diversity win [laugh].

JONNY

Oh, who else was there?

NATHAN

There was uh, Sergeant Bash.

MARGUERITE

Sergeant Bash

NATHAN

Who had a pincer at the front camo painting on it and a giant flamethrower that was too high to really hit in the thing, but looked really rad.

JONNY

It was not too high to hit Nemesis though, because every series there was Nemesis who was just a rubbish robot. Like explicitly. Well no, it they covered Nemesis in red polka dot fur.

MARGUERITE

Yes, yes.

JONNY

With big googly eyes. And every season Nemesis would get set on fire by Sergeant Bash.

HELEN

[laugh]. I completely forgot about Nemesis.

NATHAN

Oh yes. I was like, wait, I know this thing by a different name. But it's because there's been multiple eras of this robot.

MARGUERITE

Yes.

NATHAN

Eventually there was son of Nemesis; Diotoir. [laugh]

LYDIA

[laugh] and there was Sir Killalot

MARGUERITE

Sir Killalot

HELEN

Who, he was like a little person. There was like a little head on him.

LYDIA

He had a helmet.

MARGUERITE

Yeah, he had like a knight's helmet and a lance.

HELEN

That was it.

LYDIA

Yeah. Two Lances. Oh, one of them is a flamethrower. I'm, I'm looking at a picture now. [laugh].

JONNY

Yeah. The thing about Sir Killalot's lance, it wasn't flashy. Like all the others had like Deadmetal as well was like a sort of crab scorpion thing. And his face was a circular saw and he'd like grab a robot and like [makes electric sawing noise] into the robot and it would look really terrifying. He'd be like, he's cutting up that robot. But actually it was always superficial damage. Whereas Sir Killalot just had a big lance. And the thing he'd do with that Lance is pick the robot up, carry it over to the pit and drop it in the pits

MARGUERITE

Or hold it over the flames.

JONNY

Yeah. Or hold it over the flames

LYDIA

Like a little marshmallow.

JONNY

It was one of those things where, okay, that's not the flashiest weapon, but like if Sir Killalot wants to just end a robot, that's it.

LYDIA

I dunno whether this is something I should say publicly, but I do remember like, to say that I had a crush on Sir Killalot is to simplify the complex array of emotions.

NATHAN

[laugh], I mean similar energy to people having a crush on the fox in the Disney version of Robin Hood, I suppose,

MARGUERITE

Don't you shame me, there's something wrong with that.

LYDIA

It's that kind of energy except it's even less anthropomorphic.

JONNY

No, I I'm sorry. There's a psychosexual nest o' serpents lying there. [laugh]. It's great. Love it.

LYDIA

It's just, you know, you, you're that age where you're not sure what you're... and he is just so powerful and he destroys everything.

MARGUERITE

And they did such a good job of personifying them.

HELEN

Yes, yes.

MARGUERITE

They gave them characteristics. They gave them emotions because remember the house bots were the enforcers most of the time. They were just there.

JONNY

They just hung in the corner.

HELEN

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

They just sat in the corner and they stayed out of the way. But if a rule was violated or if the, if like a robot was left in a certain zone that let the house robot activate. And so, you know, they had to talk about the house robots and they gave them motivations and emotions and feelings. So it's no surprise to me that people like developed, you know, pseudo social relationships.

LYDIA

Yeah, it's, it's a, it would just be like, oh no, who's been naughty and then comes along with a lance and roasts this gigantic machine like a marshmallow
And it's like, if you are not into that, then I don't understand [laugh]

MARGUERITE

Fair.

JONNY

If you want to feel even more psychosexually defused by Sir Killalot...

NATHAN

mm-hmm?

JONNY

May I recommend Googling the music video to Sir Killalot v. Robobabe
bracket's Android love [laugh].

MARGUERITE

Oh my god.

JONNY

Which is a music video that was released in the late nineties in which Robobabe, who is as far as I could tell, a normal human woman dressed in like sci-fi silver does a sexy dance and sings a song while Sir Killalot has been taken over a lit apparently by a hacker and is rolling slowly down some corridors. One assumes one is intended to assume to ultimately have sex with Robobabe, this tiny weird tank. But actually in the end, Sir Killalot bashes down the door to the hacker's room and murders the hacker.

LYDIA

That's because Sir Killalot is a creature of morals.

JONNY

Yeah. Well he's Sir Killalot.

MARGUERITE

He's a knight!

JONNY

He's not Sir Shaggalot.. He's Sir Killalot. He kills.

LYDIA

Exactly, he knows what he does and he's good at it. You respect that.

NATHAN

[laugh] To wind the conversation, just a hair, before we got circo-sexual...

ALL

[laugh]

NATHAN

A note crossed my mind that I'm now remembering bits and pieces about the nature of this weird nineties show and wanting to be involved. Is that because it did so well and because it was so immediately skewed from kids and families to like, uh, university sets. They actually did a sideshow for CBBC called Oh Techno Games. There we go. It was, it kind of ran in tandem with the Millennium Dome, that kind of Olympics period. So it was kind of applying all of those, hey we've made a robot in our back garden. And then doing versions that weren't specifically designed to fight other robots [laugh]. So you, if you couldn't afford to put a circular saw on your project,

JONNY

You can just say rubbish robots.

MARGUERITE

These were lover robots, not fighter robots.

NATHAN

Real talk. There was a a rope climbing competition as one of them. And a lot of them were kind of like, hey, what we're gonna do is we're gonna get two wheels and the friction will make it scoot up the rope really easily. Somebody built like an accurately hinged human skeleton to do a rope pulling motion up.

MARGUERITE

Whoa.

NATHAN

It always lost because it's obviously much slower than the robots that can just use wheels and friction. But you know, there was astounding designs on that show when you didn't have to think about the scope of using a weapon. It was really cool. [laugh],

LYDIA

What if our resources were put to purposes other than flame throwers, [laugh], you know, how could humanity have advanced

JONNY

This whole conversation, it feels like that candle cove creepy pasta. Just unlocking memories because I'm now like, was there a point where there was a trap in the arena for at least one of the series where they would drop a washing machine?

NATHAN

Yeah.

HELEN

[laugh] Surely not?

MARGUERITE

Oh yeah. The American version didn't have house robots. It had full on hazards. There was a man named Pete, he would crew all of the hazards like there were hammers and saws and like compressed air to blow robots away and the whole nine yards. I would also like to point out from a health and safety perspective, [laugh] that in the UK there was like a 12 - 18 inch little maybe guardrail. Yeah.

Around this giant box in the US it was bulletproof glass.

JONNY

[laugh]. Uh, so what you are describing, Marguerite is correct for the first series of Robot Wars.

MARGUERITE

Oh thank God [laugh].

JONNY

And then there were some, from what I understand, very close calls [laugh] some very close calls with flying metal. And then they put up the big, I don't think it was like full bulletproof, but it was definitely like thick perspex. I'm absolutely sure at some point Hypno-Disk, like embedded a shard of metal through the perspex.

MARGUERITE

I can tell you my favourite story about that. So when these aired in the US, they were recorded on Treasure Island in San Francisco and I lived in the Bay Area. We went, we went to the live recordings for three days on aluminium benches. Oh my God. It was brutal. But they had the giant, you know, 20 by 20 by 20 box and we all got pissed off cause every 10 minutes they would bring Carmen Electra in four inch heels into the middle of a box to record little segment, then leave again. But there was an incident where there was a spinner bot who got wedged up on the side of the arena and you could hear that thing spin faster and faster and faster and faster and faster. And we're all going, oh crap, [laugh], you're starting to see the security guys run [laugh] and the other robot in the box. The opponent's like, I gotta get him down, goes to nudge him and he hits the box. And there was a cameraman right there who two security guards grabbed and pulled out of the way because that blade went right through the box, right through the bulletproof glass. And as we left that day, every single person in that arena walked by it and put their hand through the hole that had been carved in the box. It was a four hour late start the next day they had doubled the pyrex around the box.

HELEN

Wow. And on that cautionary tale, I think we're gonna take a little break.

NATHAN

Just to cool off.

[BREAK]

HELEN

Right. So we have mostly been talking about the nineties version of this show, but Nathan during the break you brought up that there was indeed a reboot.

NATHAN

Yes.

HELEN

And I believe you have things to tell us about this reboot. I think it was 2016 ish.

NATHAN

Yes, yes, yes. Perfunctory coverage of the deal. It ran for three seasons worth and you know, I was very excited. Definitely the, the nature of a childhood memory thing coming back in a cool new form hosted differently now with Dara O'Brien and Angela Scanlon being the hosts.

HELEN

Yes.

NATHAN

But at the time I was working in the education department of the BBC.

HELEN

Oh!

NATHAN

Yes. I I mean I've been, I've been working for that media mega corporation for the last almost decade anyway. But specifically I was working on a project called The Microbit, which was like a,

HELEN

Oh cool.

NATHAN

A micro controller designed to get kids into programming. And then just like the conversation we were having earlier, it immediately moved from a thing focused on kids to kind of big name tech people wanting to take all this device for themselves and make it about them. But that's the way STEM goes.

Haha. But [laugh]. But to try and do that tie-in we, we were doing a lot of tie-ins with other BBC IPs at the time to kind of, you know, do that bridge, oh you're really interested in this show where here is a stem programming project that you can do with the microbit that's tied into it. And Robot Wars was one of them, which meant that I got to like go to the studio where they were recording one of the episodes of series two, I think just to kind of like interview a lot of the kids who were there and about their experience with making new things. And it was really interesting to see from the kind of like production perspective how a decade's worth of reality TV and reality TV storytelling had kind of come into how they then produced the show because they had sorts of backroom bits and pieces in the nineties, but they were really more focused on that kind of storytelling of what was going on in between the fights now.

MARGUERITE

Yeah.

NATHAN

And I got to see one in particular happen live, I, I have the, the robot details handy cause it's actually relatively useful.

HELEN

Oh, robot details, [laugh]

NATHAN

Robot details. So there was, in the first week of season two, what they did was like introduce eight robots every week and then eventually made them do whittle format stuff and they clearly decided to have the most expensive and the cheapest robot in the same week.

MARGUERITE

Mm.

NATHAN

So there was Jellyfish which was made basically out of like scrap, it had high density polyethylene. So essentially polystyrene [laugh] with like lots of like stickers from Staples, big googly eyes, so on and so forth attached to it.

HELEN

Oh that's very cute.

NATHAN

Basically made of paper. Really, really cute. Same week we have Rapid from Central London with, according to the website and it's built at the expense of 25 thousand pounds.

HELEN

What?

NATHAN

Mmm.

LYDIA

You could buy a flat with that in 2017

ALL

[laugh].

NATHAN

Designed to be impenetrable. Super powerful flipper. They clearly paid attention to the meta that we were talking about in the early series. And so we see this gigantic robot Rapid clear it's round effortlessly. Nothing can beat it.

MARGUERITE

I am so team Jellyfish right now.

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah [laugh]

NATHAN

Jellyfish clinches through, because it goes to like a tie and they randomly decide on, I, I think a really powerful robot just happens to break. And so it just goes through on the technicality and amazing next round they frame it, it's gonna be Rapid versus Jellyfish. Oh my gosh. It's gonna be David and Goliath [laugh] a bit inside Rapid breaks. And because this thing is built like a tank, they can't get inside to fix it.

LYDIA

Oh!

NATHAN

So it's out of the running and Jellyfish just happens to go and then the, the gets snapped on in the final round of the episode. But the delight you could see in the producer's eyes in like the gallery as this story is unfolding live behind them. It's like we could never ask for better television [laugh].

MARGUERITE

They're like, this is gonna be a great story.

JONNY

They have filmed the fights before they decided on the framing cause they would be editing it together afterwards. So like could it be that like, because Rapid broke down in this way, they're like, let us frame this as David and Goliath financial hubris.

HELEN

[laugh]

NATHAN

Oh no, no, no. The fights take place over multiple days in real time. But they do actually have the process of setting those brackets in advance. They clearly saw how round one went and then stacked to that for round two.

JONNY

Yeah, yeah.

NATHAN

But they didn't necessarily know that there'd be a piece breaking on the inside in between. If it is delightfully serendipitous.

LYDIA

I'm just looking at pictures of Jellyfish. I think it is worth describing, it looks like, you know, like a sort of DJ set up [laugh] or like a standing desk. It's like three sides of a square, white, I assume the polystyrene kind of colours and then these dot stickers and these massive googly eyes and a little smile. So it does look like this gigantic thing is about to give you a hug. And then I think inside, I'm not sure if those are weapons or just like fluffy cotton balls?

NATHAN

Yeah. I don't think this thing actually had any weapons attached. It was maximum joke hours.

HELEN

[laugh]

LYDIA

In its little like write up it says that it's weapon cause they have these kind of like, ugh, this is Jellyfish from here. Stats. Look at its weight, look at its speed, look at its whatever. And it just says attack; clamp.

ALL

[laugh].

LYDIA

So I assume maybe the bits come together on the side. It's not very clear, but it, it does just look like a happy, but then when you see it next to a picture of a human or other with a human in the photo, it is clearly enormous.

HELEN

Yeah.

LYDIA

But yeah, it's, it's three sides of a standing desk with a couple of bits of like, well three sides of a square with dots.

MARGUERITE

It's like if you took the guts out of an old dot matrix printer Yeah. And put it onto really wide skis.

LYDIA

[laugh]. Yeah.

NATHAN

Mm-hmm. Definitely made from my broken ink check printer energy [laugh].

LYDIA

Yes. Yes.

MARGUERITE

Yeah.

HELEN

I am really loving these visual descriptions for this audio medium. You're doing so well.

JONNY

[laugh], I bounced off the reboot a bit, to be honest. Like, I watched the first season and like, it, it was fun. But I, I think there was so much of like attempting to recapture an energy,

NATHAN

Like lost nostalgia. Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

JONNY

A moment that couldn't exist anymore in that same way. And as you say, like there was like a much more reality TV feel to it. Because like the original, I think it was before even like the first Big Brother

NATHAN

Yeah.

JONNY

Ever aired. Like reality TV just wasn't a thing in Britain and like the backstage stuff would be like, oh well. Yep. We, uh, originally we were using a smaller motor, but we uh, realized that the power consumption required was actually better if we re-routed it through, uh, a larger motor and then used this resistor instead. Uh, and actually it upped the performance by, uh, up to 20 percent.

That was the sort of backstage stuff that you used to get.

LYDIA

And I, one thing I really remember is that they'd be coming backstage after the robot had been damaged.

MARGUERITE

Right.

LYDIA

And ask them like, oh, do you think that you'll be able to fix it? And they hadn't quite reached the stage of production sophistication to probably record them after as always happens. And things like, like RuPaul's Drag Race, they record all of the clips after obviously like all these things and even Bake Off and stuff like this. But here they were clearly trying to fix the freaking thing and they would just be like, yeah, yeah, it's gonna be fine. Just get outta the way. Like while they're trying to,

MARGUERITE

[laugh] there's smoke coming from some panel on the table in the background

LYDIA

And they'd be there trying to stuff a microphone in their face where they're like elbow deep in robot guts [laugh].

NATHAN

Yeah. I definitely understand and agree with you about it, trying to capture a lost nostalgia. But I always, I guess because I have this background in making content as an educator and the thing that kind of encourages new generations of young people to want to make things and understand how things are made, I always have a soft spot for it's, it's actually quite, I quite like Angela Scanlon as a presenter cause she actually has, uh, a background in kind of like a technology so she understands what they're doing, but can then spin it in a way that us as the audience who don't know this technological information would be able to get. Uh, I, I do wonder if I mentioned offhand Scrapheap Challenge at the start of that. And that always had little bits of physics explanations, as to why the scrap that they were building was able to do certain tasks. And I, I think robot wars would actually be delightful with that information because, PSI means still kind of means nothing to me. I'm very bad at physics and maths [laugh]. Uh, I know what it is and means, but you know, a number would mean nothing to me.

HELEN

It, it means force, right?

NATHAN

Sure. Right. Yeah. So big number must be good.

HELEN

[laugh]

MARGUERITE

More equals good.

NATHAN

Number go up.

HELEN

Wait pressure per square inch

JONNY

Please mash it.

NATHAN

So having a a fun like visual explanation of why the axe is so cool and does what
it does would be great.

MARGUERITE

Yes.

LYDIA

Yeah.

NATHAN

You know, I think that would be really useful in kind of capturing the imagination of why these robots are so rad.

LYDIA

Yeah, yeah.

JONNY

No, don't get me wrong. I'm not like I, the robot wars reboot was really well made and really cool. It was very much, it made me realise a thing about me.

Uh, which was that I would never be young again.

ALL

[laugh]

HELEN

Oh Jonny!

JONNY

My youth was a lost dream fading like sea foam. So I only watched the first season. [laugh]

MARGUERITE

It's really interesting that the focus on the reboot and a lot of like the American focus on it has been on more on the programming side of things and less on

the, like the physical engineering that certainly in the starting point because like I said, in the US they would do these robotic like showcases and fighting was one component of it. But they would have like obstacle courses or they would have swarm teams like, you know, essentially ai, automatic response controlled teams of robots who would have to play football or soccer, however you wanna call it, against each other without human intervention. They had to have automatic responses and programming to handle that. And I think certainly like in the maker space now these days when you talk about drones and you talk about swarms and you know, a lot of that is less emphasis on the physical component and more again on the programming of the behaviour or the reaction.

LYDIA

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

As opposed to the actual physical engineering of this motor and this wheel and this flame thrower all in, you know, one coherent mass.

LYDIA

It's much more common now if you're gonna do a little robotics project to get your Arduino and everything else in a, there are so many kits

MARGUERITE

Mm-hmm. [affirmative], raspberry pie kits and all of that. Yeah,

LYDIA

Well yeah, yeah, yeah. Exactly. And like so many kits that have all the, the wheels, the cogs, all of the stuff there and then it, it sets you up to do what is assumed to be the interesting bit, which is the programming. Which made it very interesting when I was doing stuff like trying to create the twitch controlled Arduino chicken feeder because none of the things that come in kits are prepared for the chaotic environment that is a chicken run.

HELEN

[laugh]

LYDIA

Where obstacles include being filled with dust from them constantly dust bathing and kicking things around and then physically being attacked by dinosaur creatures that have knives for faces and have understood that seeds come from you, sometimes.

JONNY

[laugh]

MARGUERITE

This is like the pilot of the new season of Robot Wars. You have to build robotic chickens.

LYDIA

Well, yeah, well things that can stand up to attack from chickens. But it was, yeah it was just very interesting to actually have questions about like how do I make this thing stronger [laugh], how do I make the motor work with layers of

protection? So I've just been very aware of how annoyingly easy it is to get flimsy kits that will set you up for a very particular kind of thing and kind of programming, which in itself, I'm sure we could talk for ages Nathan, about the ways that challenges are set in such a way that make you think about how to solve the problem. Like and what's the interesting bit like I think people are generally less interested now in the physically bit because the coding bit is easier to access.

NATHAN

Yeah.

LYDIA

It's cheaper, right? Like you can learn all like a lot of the stuff for free and with brightly coloured things. Whereas like if you're buying kits, it's like yeah that's an expense. There's a like will it actually fit together? And also the programming will supposedly get you one of these overly paid jobs. [laugh].

JONNY

Yeah. Like it, it is this thing that like everyone's like, oh the programming's very interesting. The programming's the most interesting point. No, the most interesting point is when you drop a washing machine on a robot.

MARGUERITE

Or you light it on fire.

LYDIA

Yeah. Like a flame thrower. I mean we could even say like there's this whole thing about like the de-emphasis on the skill involved in like trades and manufacturing and actually like doing physical hard things.

NATHAN

Sure

LYDIA

Because like literally the people that I know that were interested in doing local Robot Wars stuff and hilarity one of them, they couldn't apply for the main one cause their thing was too heavy, like it's a sort of thing where, yeah it might not be accessible to everyone but if you live in the sticks but your dad is a mechanic. Yeah. It's accessible to you. Like you've got a lot of scrap metal

[laugh]

JONNY

Class analysis of Robot Wars!

LYDIA

Yeah.

HELEN

[laugh]

JONNY

Like legitimately like it is fascinating.

LYDIA

Yeah, exact, it felt like it was more accessible cognitively, even if it actually, like you're saying it, it got less and less affordable. Like you could watch it and you didn't feel like people were telling you what you were supposed to be and to be hopeful, like insert expletive here; ** it all. You just wanna smash stuff.

MARGUERITE

No, no, no. That's a good aspect of it because you're right, one of the downsides of the reality television model is at least aspiration pornography, the idea that you have to set somebody self up with adversity because you have to give yourself an underdog to cheer for. There has to be somebody who's failing and succeeds so that you take that emotional journey. And that wasn't as present in the earlier shows. It was literally about, okay, what did I build in my backyard with what I had available? And I found other people who love that thing as, I mean it is a very early fandom. It's other people love that thing that I love that we did and now we are going to test ourselves against each other. Not just physically but like who had the better engineering. You know, who had innovative developments and techniques,

JONNY

Who was the better driver.

MARGUERITE

Who was the better driver was a huge component. You could have great robots and crappy drivers and that would just completely throw a match. It was much less about we're going to script an emotional journey for our audience to consume. And it was more, you as the audience of the show we're the observer

of the development of this community. And there was something really pure about that.

LYDIA

Yeah.

JONNY

Also the nineties robots of robots were superstars. Like I had action figures of -

MARGUERITE

So did I!

JONNY

some of the robots and not just the house robots, like some of the really successful competitors. You had little action figures of these little box.

MARGUERITE

They were McDonald's happy meal toys in the US, the height of childhood consumption. Yeah. They were happy meal toys in the US and Razer Chaos 2 and Hypnodisc were three of them in this set.

JONNY

I mean I would love a little Razer figurine. Are you kidding?

LYDIA

The fact that a decades later we're like, ah yeah Hypno-Disk and Razer.

MARGUERITE

Right?[laugh].

LYDIA

Yeah.

HELEN

I mean tangentially related. Did anyone have like a favourite robot? Like do you remember one that's like being...

MARGUERITE

I loved Razer so much.

JONNY

Definitely Razer. I agree.

HELEN

Yeah?

JONNY

Yeah. Like I mean I'm, I'm sorry. Hometown hero. Like it's [laugh].

MARGUERITE

They told us in one interview segment that the reason that gigantic pneumatic press has holes drilled in it is to lower the weight. Because they had to get it under wheat in order to be able to keep the engine up because there like technique involved.

JONNY

[whispering] And cause it looks sick as shit!

MARGUERITE

It looked amazing [laugh]. And he had a really good driver cause he had to like pin a bot and hold it long enough to crush it. It just, I loved Razer.

NATHAN

It had such a like a Y2K period design, like the holes were clearly to lighten the load but it had such that kind of a web 2.0 brushed steel design energy. I have such a soft spot for that aesthetic even now.

JONNY

And it was relentless cause it wasn't like Shunt where it was like sunk and it wasn't like a lot of the crushes, which were quite fast. It was slow and relentless and just squeezed a robot to death.

MARGUERITE

Which means it had to have a really good driver.

JONNY

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

Cause it had to get that bottom mobilised long enough for it to actually apply the damage. But then it would literally like a tin can opener cut the sucker in half [laugh].

JONNY

Yeah. It was just like you watched a match with Razer and it like the first half was a like a dance and then the loser robot would make a mistake. Razer would like get them in the jaws and then it was over. and then it was just like 10 seconds of watching a robot be gradually crushed by this relentless steel beak like one of your chickens led. But metal and just a bit more evil.

NATHAN

More evil?

LYDIA

Mmm, I don't know if more evil

JONNY

[laugh]. Okay. No, fair enough. Comparatively evil.

LYDIA

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

[laugh]. And we probably have to give props to Hypnotist because that bot literally changed the conversation about how you do damage.

HELEN

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

And just watching those folks come out with like garbage bags full of the robot

JONNY

Every time. Like a flipper tried to flip Hypno-Disk missed and like exposed its flipper innards.

MARGUERITE

Oh [laugh]

JONNY

Hypno-Disk would slide in there and just absolutely rotate.

LYDIA

Just tear it apart.

NATHAN

Very grindhouse movie actually.

HELEN

Yeah.

MARGUERITE

Right. Serious. Seriously.

HELEN

Metallic disembowelling. Nathan, you're like, you're going to say something.

NATHAN

Uh, yeah, I just remembered again, just remembering cool robots now [laugh], um, with Hypno-Disk changing the meta and then people thinking that spinning discs was the key to victory. A, a robot that put a handful of times, Gemini, which was two separate robots with mini spinning discs.

MARGUERITE

Oh yeah.

NATHAN

That split apart to go and do business. They were too small to do that much damage. But it was such, going back to that, talking about that those kind of like nineties cartoons like Pokémon and that were having such personalities to these individual robots. And I think I have a feeling like the pilot had like two kids, they may not have been twins, but just the idea that, you know, this proud parent could give the controllers to his kids and be like, go ham. [laugh]

MARGUERITE

Cause the rule was like total combined weight, wasn't it?

NATHAN

Mm-hmm. [affirmative].

MARGUERITE

And so there were a couple of different teams who were like, okay, well what if we had two robots? Would that make a difference? And I, I loved that. That was so creative in terms of thinking. But I think you're very right Nathan, that it was probably driven a lot by, I got two kids and they're gonna fight over the controller. [laugh].

NATHAN

[laugh].

JONNY

Yeah. Like the two robot ones were never super competitive usually. Just because like the weights were low enough to begin with that when you halved them, you generally got two robots that just were sort of less than the sum of their parts, but they were so much fun to watch.

NATHAN

But in the uh, theoretical tie in anime Oh yeah. Where the main character is like, oh

JONNY

My god,

NATHAN

Yes. Got into this tournament and they have to fight Gemini. Wait I have to fight two?

JONNY

No. Cause it starts off looking like one robot, but then the controller breaks apart. And the two people, they each get half the controller and then the robot, yeah, yeah.

NATHAN

Mm-hmm. [affirmative].

MARGUERITE

Totally scripting this.

HELEN

I could listen to you all talk about robots all day, but we're coming towards the end of the episode.

JONNY

Oh. In which case I'm gonna give one last robot war shout out to Jonathan Pearce's commentary,

NATHAN

Oh he's a football commentator, right?

JONNY

Yeah, cause they got professional football. Shout man, Jonathan Pearce to do the commentary and he was actually really good. Plus, I don't know if you all are aware, but it brackets the football recently came home.

LYDIA

Ah, yes.

JONNY

So the England women's team recently won the Euros. And Jonathan Pearce does an awful lot, if not the majority of commentary for women's matches usually is part of a two-hander. But it's just been fascinating that, uh, occasionally be watching a game and be like, hang on, I, I reckon Oh, Us winning the football sounds like Robot Wars [laugh].

NATHAN

Yay.

HELEN

Very nice. And on that, I'm going to ask people if there's anything that you would like to plug. Um, let's go in reverse order. Nathan, would you like to plug or shout out any of your projects?

NATHAN

Of course, as I say, you can find all the streams that I do at [twitch.tv/the neon caster](https://www.twitch.tv/the_neon_caster) and also [vs youtube.com/the neon caster](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8). At time of recording, I just finished producing a series of eight one shots of different systems run by different GMs. In total 24 hours worth of dice rolling and card flipping action. [laugh], uh, I am very tired, but they are all astounding. So even at the point that you're listening to this in the future, please do go to [youtube.com/neoncaster](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8) and listen to all those fantastic bits and pieces of storytelling.

MARGUERITE

Nice.

HELEN

Fabulous. Marguerite, how about you? Which of your many projects would you like to look today?

MARGUERITE

You can just go to Escapeartist.net and you can find everything we do. We do science fiction, horror, fantasy, and young adults. We've got lots of award nominations this year, which is absolutely delightful. Congratulations. Across the British Fantasy Awards, the Ignite Awards and the Hugo Awards voting will have closed by the time this is announced and probably the awards themselves. So wouldn't it be lovely to take home a giant shiny rock [laugh]?

HELEN

Fingers crossed for you. Lydia, how about you?

LYDIA

Yeah, I just do Rusty Quill podcasts, so if you're listening this, you have probably already heard me on RQG or Chaps, uh, as of now. And so enjoy those. Enjoy those things.

HELEN

Excellent. And finally, Jonny, which of your many projects would you like to plug?

JONNY

I think I'll firstly plug I'm one half of a games design MacGuffin and Company and one of our recent books was nominated for an Ennie which is really cool.

HELEN

Congratulations.

JONNY

So check out <https://www.macguffinandcompany.com> And also I have a second novel, it's called Family Business. It's about death and cleaning up after death and it's really cool and spooky and it should be out now in hardback, in UK bookshops.

HELEN

Well, thank you all so, so, so, so much for coming on this episode. It's been great. Just a fantastic chaotic, nostalgic energy in the air today. I love it. Yes. Wonderful, fabulous people. Thank you and thank you listener for I assume listening to the episode. If you're still here, I will see you on the next episode, but for now, it's goodbye from me. Goodbye and it's goodbye from all of them.

Would you all like to say goodbye?

ALL

Bye-bye.

[Show Theme - Outro]

Hosted and Directed by Helen Gould

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Executive Producers: Alexander J. Newall & April Sumner

Editing by Lowri Ann Davies and Cathrine Rinella

Music by Samuel D.F. Jones

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