CHRIS DEALS WITH IT episode notes

EP 80 - A Creative Process: Reflections on The Boy & Bus 13

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🤖 *AI Statement: All elements of this episode are products of the author, Chris Kreuter, made without any use of AI tools.*

> This is conclusion of a multi-part series about the creative process. We'll cover my thoughts on how this process applies to creating & publishing works, and how it applies to games, fiction writing, other creative endeavors, and our professional careers.

As always, the views expressed on this podcast are mine. What works for me isn't likely to work for you exactly the same way. The usefulness of these various pieces of advice will depend on your project, experience, tools, and more as I'll get into.

The goal of this series is to share my frameworks, mindsets, strategies, and experiences that have led me to this point of my creative journey. This is an ever-evolving process, as it should be for everyone.

This episode wraps up this series on the creative process. It also coincides with the release of my latest book, The Boy & Bus 13. On today's episode, I'm going to reflect on the stages of my creative process that were needed to bring this book from idea to finished product.

About The Book: The Boy & Bus 13

My new book is a sci-fi story written for middle grade & young adult audiences.

Verlin Buckley is a shy & lonely eighth grader whose parents are going through a divorce. While playing his favorite city-building video game, he finds bizarre hidden messages. But it's not a prank: The messages are actually a test put there by Twin River Transit Bus #13.

It's the dawn of a true artificial intelligence. And it wants to be Verlin's friend?! Can they figure out how to relate to each other before politics tear apart their small midwestern city's transit system? And what does this mean for 13's favorite driver, Jasontae Hooper, aiming to advance his career? Or will this newly self-aware bus get destroyed by accident before they figure out how to save it?

The Story Graph - Goodreads - Buy A Copy
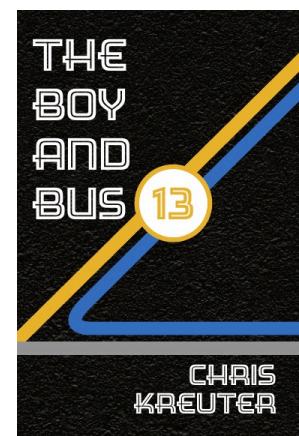
Ideation

- Around January of 2021 I got the first inklings for this book

- I wanted to tell a transit-related story, preferably within the genre of sci-fi that I love.

  - I've spent more than two decades as a professional in the transit industry.

  - Through the COVID-19 pandemic, and the supply chain hassles that followed, retirements and lower ridership had major, lasting impacts.

  - I wanted to expose younger readers to this amazing field, giving them an inside look at the issues, opportunities, and realities of working in transit.

- Around this same time I read Max Tegmark's incredible book - *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*.

- Added to this was the aftermath of the 2020 election, the Jan 6th attack at the US capital, and of course COVID.

  - It felt then like the rifts between ideological sides were widening, as they continue to do now: Red vs Blue, Humans vs AI, etc...

  - As a father, I reflected on what impacts all these rapid changes will have.

  - It also brought up memories of my own childhood: Especially living through my parents' divorce.

- All these ideas mulled in my head for a while - clicking together

  - As I said back on Episode 75 - good ideas tend to gather momentum.

  - This felt like it would be a fun novel to write - and based more in our current world than past sci-fi books I've written.

  - I liked the parallel between stops on a transit system with chapters of stories.

  - I also had a pretty good sense of the kinds of characters I wanted in my story - especially Verlin Buckley and Bus #13.

  - I knew too that it was a story I could write well given my experience in the transit industry: Writing what I know.

    - Similar to how I wrote the Rainy River Bees trilogy: Merging my love of science fiction & hockey

Scaffolding

- Early on, it was clear I didn't want to base my story in a real-world city or use an existing transit system.

    - I wanted my story to take place in a small, somewhat rural city around the central United States.

    - I researched places that had interesting geographies, not too close to any major cities - but preferably a place that would make sense to have a larger population.

    - I found it in a place in south-east Missouri, a few hours from Memphis, Louisville, Nashville, and St. Louis. While not the most practical to position a city right where two major rivers (The Mississippi and Ohio) merge, it worked perfectly for a work of fiction and I loved the idea of a city named Twin River.

- It's daunting to have to come up with an entire city - but I found inspiration from a video game called Cities: Skylines.

    - The game allows you to procedurally build up a city - similar to what happens with my fake game Stadtbauer Extrem - so it was cool having this research serve multiple purposes.

    - Cities has an option that lets you import heightmaps of real-world topographical data. So I grabbed the data for the exact region I wanted in my fictional city and setup my fictional city.

    - The game auto-generated road names & buildings, while allowing me control over where key buildings, bridges, neighborhoods, and highways went. And of course how transit buses were routed.

    - Most of the places in the book, like the bus stop road names, and even the description of Verlin's house came directly from what was procedurally generated by the game.

TWIN RIVER TRANSIT
GOLD LINE ROUTE MAP
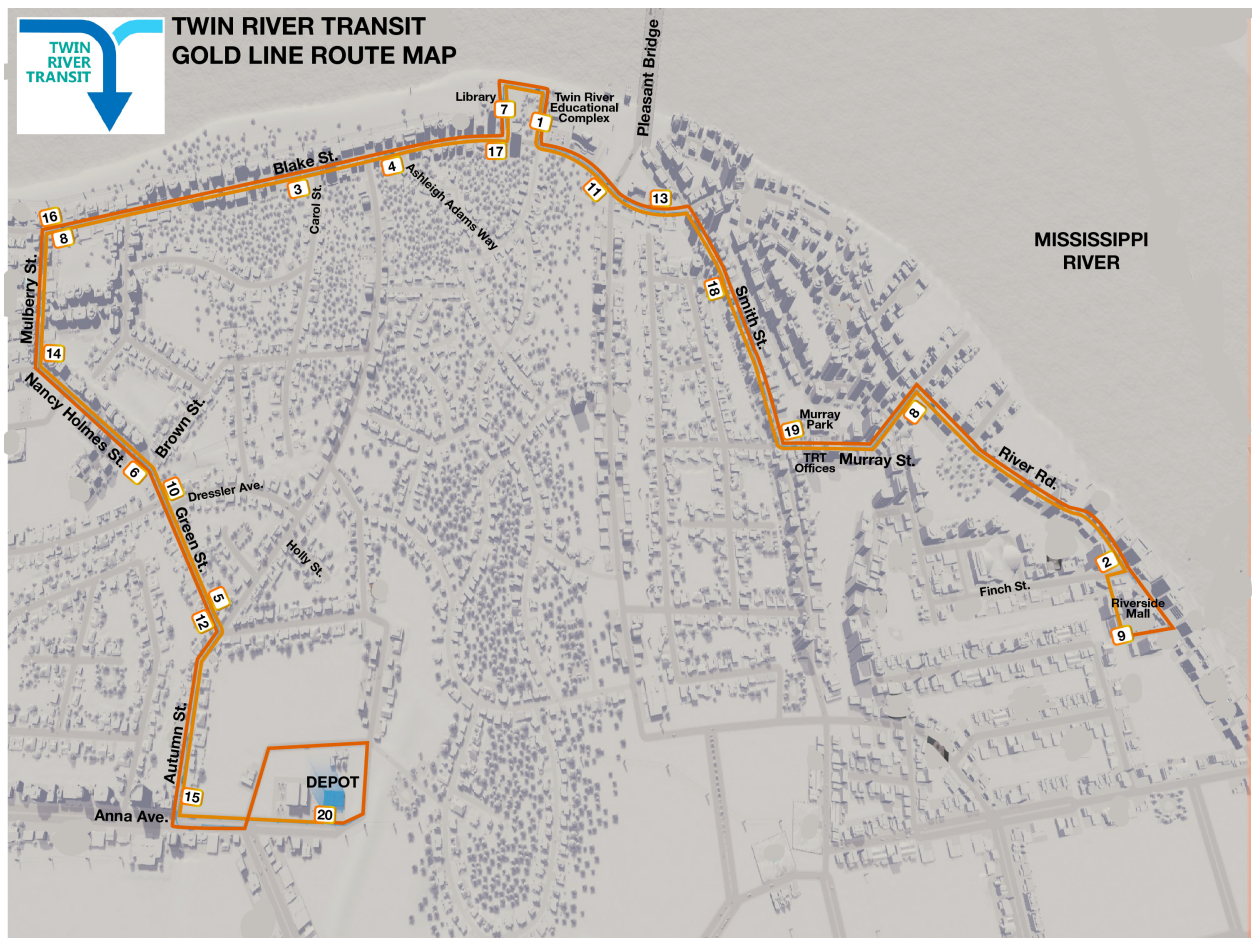
- I needed to make up a video game for my main character Verlin to be obsessed with.

  - I landed on a city-building game, inspired by Sim City, Railroad Tycoon, and the aforementioned Cities: Skylines.

  - I named the game Stadtbauer Extrem (which is German for City Builder Extreme - there's an undercurrent of German language & culture running through the book).

  - I scaffolded rules, playstyles, a development backstory, a fan base, needing to go as far as to how it was programmed (more on this later).

  - I didn't need every detail of the game - since it was mainly a plot device: Something my main character loves to play, and could be exploited by my newly sentient bus.

  - But during writing, Stadtbauer Extrem provided additional, unexpected opportunities to reflect on various aspects of urban development and cultural differences.

- I also did a lot of research on sentient vehicles in popular culture - wanting to both inspire my work and avoiding doing anything too similar

  - At the time, my kids were younger and enjoyed shows like Thomas the Tank Engine, Tayo the Little Bus, Trash Truck, and of course Disney's Cars series.

  - I also re-watched old episodes of Knight Rider, Herbie the Love Bug, and The Transformers.

- Classic sci-fi movies like AI, The Terminator, and Bicentennial Man were also influences

- Alongside my city taking shape, I was also developing the plot.
  - I typically scaffold plots using index cards - one card per scene
  - This allows me to group scenes into chapters, and easily move them into a sensical order.
  - I love this way of plotting as it also allows me to gauge pacing of a longer story: Where I need to add or remove scenes - and keeping consistent action beats.

- I did have to come back to this process after the first draft of the book, since the original story structure wasn't working.
  - After conversations with early beta readers and a writing coach I hired - I landed on the triangular story structure with 3 main characters, rather than everything taking place through only Verlin's perspective.

Production

- Writing the book came in three major phases, with large breaks between them.
  - During the first phase, encompassing the first three drafts - I wrote in a program called Scrivener.
    - I've written the early drafts of all my books in this program.
    - It's excellent notecard view mimics my scaffolding process for scenes & chapters
    - It also allows you to compile all of your notes in their own section of the editor.
    - It's split-screen views of what you're writing alongside notes is extremely helpful.
  - When I'm working on later drafts, I like to transfer over to Microsoft Word.
    - While Scrivener has great export & publication tools - I find Word is more like a finished book and easier to do editing & tweaks.

- - I also have more control over fonts, chapter headings, and layout options - which is important given I tend to self-publish.

    - This helps me get more of a feel for how the words will look as a finished project.

  - Later, when I talk about the Editing phase, I'll talk about what led me to a new, third phase of production using Adobe InDesign.

- Research was important not just during the scaffolding stage for this book.

- Over the years and drafts, I remained open to inspirations and opportunities to learn and get inspired.

  - It was fortunate that I get plenty of time around buses during my day job.

  - One key example was researching the methods Verlin uses to eventually change Bus 13's wiring. I based much of it off of real-world bus cabinets and wiring diagrams.

  - Since one of my goals was to honestly reflect the transit industry - realistic reflections were important.

  - Being very familiar with bus systems & technology allowed me to ensure things like cameras, mirrors, the operation center, and business practices were accurately represented.

  - While at a customer office waiting for a meeting, I picked up a copy of a route book - which eventually inspired the traffic map I made before Chapter One, as well as the styling of the back cover copy.

GOLD LINE ANNA AVE. - MULBERRY ST. - PLEASANT BRIDGE - MURRAY PARK - RIVERSIDE MALL
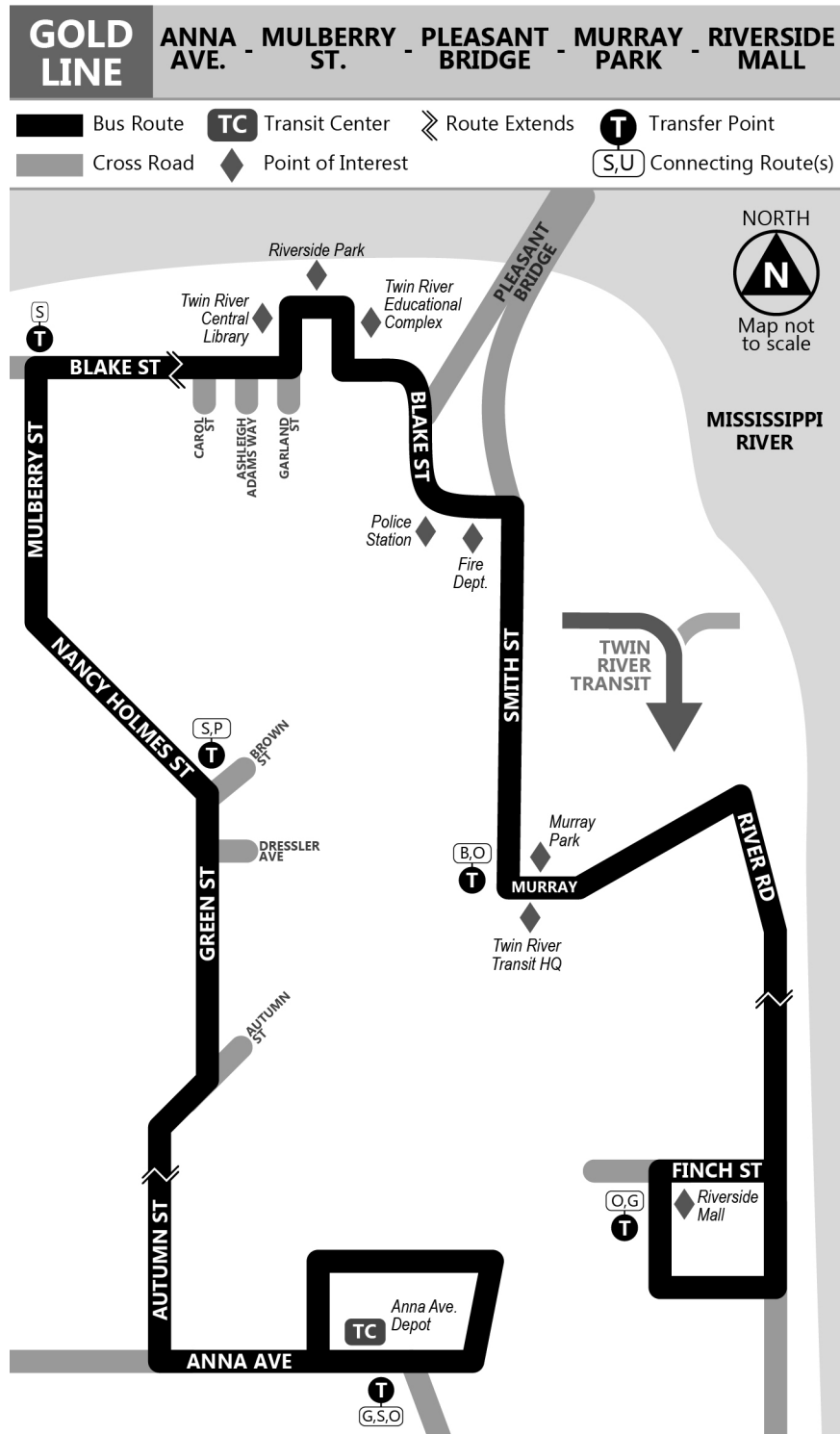
- Another important area of research: Adding some realism to the fake city-building game. I'm fortunate to have a large & diverse network of friends with expertise in many different fields.

- One of these good friends is not only a high-level video game programmer - but he's also a fluent German speaker who has lived in Austria, where one of Verlin's parents is from.

- We had an amazing conversation that helped me base the game, how Verlin plays it, and come up at least a plausible way for a newly sentient bus (very fictional) to mess with it to attempt contact with Verlin.

- The conversation did way more than produce a list of facts. It resulted in some excellent plot ideas and concepts for Stadtbauer Extrem's backstory - based on the realities of game development, programming, and history.

- The conversation really helped fill in gaps in my knowledge.

Editing

- Early feedback from beta readers & coaches were vital to seeing the major flaws in my first drafts:

  - I was trying to cram too many 'issues' into the story: Like shoe-horning in political commentary that wouldn't age well and wasn't necessary to the plot... although they still informed my character's backstories.

  - Friends pointed out where I wasn't being sensitive enough in certain areas - or going to a level of depth that was too distracting for a middle grade reader. Especially on the technical side of things.

- Even late in a project, conversations, ideas, and real-world events can still have a major impacts on your work.

  - For example: Between the fourth and the final fifth draft was the 2024 election - which necessitated some changes.

  - I was also pushed to explore a new tool thanks for inspiration from my friend Jes (Shout out Shore Gamers!). She's a professional graphic designer who pushed me to consider Adobe InDesign for the layout of the book.

  - It was a daunting idea to push back releasing the book by months in order to learn a new, deeply involved tool.

- But it was the right tool, especially for a book that had more typesetting and formatting things going on than any of my previous books.

- The end product was much better for it

- Now I have another, excellent tool in my toolbox for future jobs - ***it was totally worth that investment!***

- As a bonus, I discovered that InDesign has awesome features from exporting content into .EPUB format for eBooks, making their creation much easier. I'm excited to be releasing both print & digital versions right around release!

Out In The World

- This step came in two phases, with a major reversion to editing in between.

  - Initially I pursued traditional publishing with the book. After the third major revision, I felt confident in starting to pitch literary agents.

  - I had built up a large database of agents in Airtable appropriate for my genre and age range. From May to November of 2023 pitched many on there.

  - While going through that process I kept writing, working on the first draft of a new novel.

- I want to quickly dig deeper into this concept of Project Nesting:

  - This is something that's been helpful with fiction writing as well as board game design: Where projects often require iteration & waiting for feedback/playtest opportunities

  - Sometimes feedback periods can be weeks and months, often enough time to write or design the first draft of something new.

  - It's also helpful to have other projects ready to go when you reach a roadblock on a project and need to change pace - so you can continue to make forward progress at a regular pace.

  - In my case, it's also helpful to have projects at different stages of the creative process - as tasks related to that process often have different

environments or times where its feasible to get work done.

- For example: I've found the quiet of early morning hours, before my wife & kids wake up, to be the best for deep, focused writing - either novels or podcast episodes

- Late afternoons / evenings tend to be when I can get more project-management tasks done (pitching an agent, editing/publishing a podcast, etc...) - This allows me to still make progress if there's background distractions & interruptions from kids, phone calls, and other commitments.

- Keep in mind some projects (especially books) have a lot of content/context that needs to be loaded up in your brain before meaningful work can be performed.

- The caution is in having too many projects on the go at once - which can result in context switching too often or spreading yourself too thin.

- Eventually I made the decision to pursue self-publishing

  - Whatever the reasons: I love the degree of control I have over the design of the final product.

  - Part of the reason I wanted to get it out in the world is due to the timing of artificial intelligence. It's a very timely book and I didn't want to miss this window where it's relatable to my target audience.

  - I went through another major editing pass - polishing minor elements.

- Did a print test - checking how cover TERM? printed + graphics/fonts/margins

  - Did another final pay through every page - flagging little format fixes or missed edits.

  - Setup the project in my printer (Lulu) - got a ISBN

- MARKETING

  - Goodreads / Story graph

  - Transit industry connections/knowledge

  - Have realistic expectations - especially when self publishing

- Like all of my past work: I'm playing a long tail: You can't get discouraged in those early stages when few have heard about your project(s).
- How did I level up?
  - Impact InDesign will have for future books & day job
  - Ebooks for past books now a possibility
- Reflect on time scale for this particular book being way longer than others.
  - More complex story structure - 3 unique points of view
  - Focus on quality: this was a big level up book
    - More than one main character & perspective
    - Imbuing more emotion & purpose driving my character's actions
    - More based in current / real world required more research & validation - where my process for taking & organizing notes on books, articles & discussions paid huge dividends.

Closing Thoughts

- All that thinking & research on artificial intelligence for this book led to more refined viewpoints
  - Made me more aware of the impacts both as a creator and as a human.
  - If that's all that happened with this book - it might be enough.
- But if someone wants to make a movie on this book or any of my others
- I feel that I've become a more refined thinker & writer through the process of this book.
  - This isn't to say I've achieved some destination as either: I want to continue to level up & get better.
- This whole series has been about what's worked for me.
  - Your process may look a lot different, or evolve differently.
  - Things clicked together in a unique way on this project, as it does on all projects.

- You get better at making things by making things.

🗨 Episode 80 Quote:

To close out this series, I'm going to quote from one of The Boy & Bus 13's main inspirations: Max Tegmark's book Life 3.0 - which can be related to the creative process as a whole:

> *The growth of our intelligence over our cosmic history has transferred boring uniformity into ever more diverse, differentiated, and complex structures that process information in ever more elaborate ways.*