Student Podcast Transcript

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Biographical Note:

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Podcast Transcription: Blade Runner and Replicants. The Future is Now: Tackling Serious Questions Indirectly Raised by the Film

ECN: Hi everyone! Today we we're going to be talking about Blade Runner and Replicants. My name's Erika.

EG: I'm Edwin. And I want to jump right in and start talking about the "Tears in the Rain" scene. Right before the ending. Roy, the Replicant, in the last moments of his life, the two things he does [are]: he first saves Deckard's life—the guy who was trying to kill him—and he also talks about his life a bit. His short life being in the outer world, he sees things, he says "you people wouldn't believe," right? So, it's weird how sentimental a replicant can be, and how forgiving he can be as somebody who was being hunted. And, I was reading this book called *The Death and the Machine* by Siobhan Lyons, and [she] talks about the robot death. [She] first starts by explaining that, to talk about the "robot death," you first need to talk about what it means to be alive. So, I think that's something we can try to answer in this podcast. What do you think?

ECN: Right. What it's like to be alive as a replicant? Or as a human?

EG: What does it mean for anything to be alive? Like, would you consider a computer to be alive?

ECN: It's a difficult thing to really think about, because sometimes you can say "yes," but I—. In a way, I think, if only if there's any **self-awareness**. But then, it's like, how do you even categorize "self-awareness" because we only categorize that from—I believe—a human perspective.

EG: Right.

ECN: But it's funny that you mention that last scene because in the article I was reading by Benjamin Schrader, I think the article is called "Cyborgian Self-Awareness: Trauma and

¹ The Death and the Machine by Siobhan Lyons — ISBN: 978-9811303340

Memory in Blade Runner and Westworld." So it's talking about the concept of Cyborgs in general. But he talks about that scene specifically, and why he chooses to save Deckard—like you said—the guy who was trying to hunt him down. Here, he plays on the fact that memory is a dangerous weapon. And, in this case, when he saves Deckard, in a way, he's kind of showing the compassion of a replicant, and in this case, *that* memory can live in Deckard. He will, then, recall on that memory when dealing with any future replicants. I thought that was pretty interesting because in that way, he did now ingrain this memory into Deckard's mind of a replicant or a robot being more compassionate than a human.

EG: Damn.

ECN: I just thought that was interesting.

EG: Yeah—you have so many points there that I want to talk about. Yeah, that last part: [that memory] really does carry [on] with him for the rest of his life. In the sequel film [2049], he stops being a Blade Runner, he goes out and tries to live his life with Rachel, and she ends up dying in childbirth. And she wasn't supposed to have a long lifespan anyway, but regardless, he definitely had more sympathy—or, you know—compassion towards Replicants after the fact. You mentioned, in the article you were reading, that there was a discussion of *Westworld* and *Blade Runner* with memories. I know you haven't watched *Westworld*, but memories are pretty much the defining thing that stops those cyborgs from doing anything because at the end of each day, their [memories are] completely wiped, and it stops from them from really developing any thoughts of their own.

ECN: Hmmm.

EG: Here, they're limited with their life spans—being only four years—they can't really develop anything for too long.

ECN: Yeah, so that *is* something he talks about. How memory in itself can be a form of resistance. Or can, maybe, encourage resistance. He kind of likens that into the state *Chuckle*. But as far as the *Westworld*, he talks about how the programing can be manipulated in order to ensure—I guess—he uses the word "docile," but obviously it's just a form of control.

EG: Yeah.

ECN: And so, in that sense, it's really similar to the replicants in *Blade Runner*. Yeah, because, you said they're wiped out after each day...?

EG: Mhm.

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² "Cyborgian Self-Awareness: Trauma and Memory in *Blade Runner* and *Westworld* — https://muse.jhu.edu/article/736564

ECN: Yeah, so like with the time span of the four years, there *is* a limited amount of memories that can be stored within that lifespan.

EG: Yeah,- and,- so,- I want to take a step back really quick. I know we were talking about memories and *that* being a really focal thing to share a Replicant's emotion, and everything. But would these emotions be genuine if [their emotions] were implanted or their memories implanted? Or if we program them to feel certain ways?

ECN: So, you asked, "Are the emotions authentic?" Is that what you're—

EG: Yeah, because I think the authenticity of these emotions are what we would [judge] as human-like. Or to use an example to say, "yeah, this person *is* alive" and not just a robot.

ECN: Well, I'm not sure quite how to answer that because every time I try to think of the emotions and how it connects to the replicants; and emotions and how they connect to humans; people express emotions and even authenticity in emotions—are varied. So I think that's something you're kind of—I don't want to say "indoctrinated" with—but it's something that's passed down to *you*, for the most part, by the adults that are around *you*. And so, you kind of learn how to react in different scenarios with different emotions. Like, you see your mom cry at something sad; therefore, you then create those same associations.

EG: Hmm.

ECN: At least, that's *chuckle* my opinion on that. So as far as trying to authenticate an emotion for a Replicant, I think they *could* be authentic, because even though we implanted that emotion, they don't have to necessarily recall on that emotion for different scenarios. They can choose between the various programed emotions, so I guess I'm not sure. *chuckle*

EG: That's good. I like what you said. I wanted to talk about the way the film tries to separate humans from replicants with the empathy test—the Voigt-Kampff scale—which basically just tests their ability to empathize with things that are alive and their reaction time with these emotions. I was reading this article by Daniel Lauffer ³. He basically talks about how certain people can fail this test, even though they're human. Many people within the Asperger's spectrum struggle to empathize in the same way that Replicants would, in the film. I'm not trying to mirror them, but I'm just trying to say that: If the same test was used on humans, many would fail. How would they not be considered human—

ECN: Mhm.

EG: —with this test.

ECN: Yeah, that's true. Like, it's interesting that you bring up—you know... I'm thinking about different groups besides people with Asperger's, or even people like the Military.

 $^{^3}$ Daniel Lauffer's "Letter to the Editor: Asperger's, Empathy and Blade Runner" — https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-004-2553-x

That's something that's also talked about by Ben Schrader. He mentions the fact that troops or veterans have to live with the emotions of what they've done. And some are better acclimated after their tour. But at the same time, one can't reasonably conclude that some are better fit for war than others. And they've been trained to—I wouldn't say, necessarily, *not* have empathy—but push that empathy aside when at war, because you would act differently in war than you would with your neighbors. So in that sense, I would wonder what the statistics of the empathy test would be amongst our military.

EG: Yeah, there are definitely different emotional maturity levels with different people. Or, you kind of have to control these emotions for certain things like that. Or, you know, some people just become very apathetic towards others. Or they are more individualized, so they think more on their own self-preservation than on the lives of others. I didn't think of the military people, but many people would definitely fail this test, if not struggle to pass it.

ECN: Yeah, there's definitely a lot of components—even, just amongst humans. You know, even Deckard himself, says that they're not supposed to react to emotion, but neither are Blade Runners. He already, in that sense, kind of defies or takes away the credibility or legitimacy of any empathy test. But then, I guess, you can start that whole conversation of whether or not he was a replicant. So, maybe not.

EG: Yeah, I think that's a good thing to acknowledge here because he was definitely acting different ways that made it seem that he was a replicant, and it would make sense that he is suited to do these things—not just because he could kill replicants with this strength, which is kind of shown throughout the film, and by his intelligence, with his perfect aim—well, maybe not-so-perfect—

ECN: *Chuckle*

EG: But, he's really as effective as the rest of the replicants, even though they are supposedly much stronger, much smarter than the humans that created them. P

ECN: Mhm.

EG: So, in a way, the things that make him—or would make him—a replicant are the same things that make him great for hunting them.

ECN: Mhm. And then, to some degree, you have to consider "are all blade runners replicants?"

[Incoherent laughter and confusion]

ECN: I don't know, I guess that was my immediate thought: If he's one, and there are these skills found in him, a lot of which can be very similar to the replicants. You kind of have to disassociate or disconnect yourself from who it is that you're hunting. If you're a human, "it's supposed to"—quote on quote—"be something difficult to do" by their own definitions. In that case, the fact that it looks like a human, it walks, talks, runs away for its life; all of that is pretty human. So to try to disconnect from that and disassociate the fact that you're actually hunting—I guess you can call them "robots" but essentially,

they're very human. So, I'm not sure how you'd be able to disconnect from that and still reach the conclusion that all blade runners could be human.

EG: When you bring up the idea that all of [the] Blade Runners can be replicants. That's definitely a thing that can be true because in the sequel—Blade Runner 2049—the main character "K" is a replicant and he *is* a Blade Runner.

ECN: Hmm.

EG: That's his main job. And that makes him better at being a Blade Runner because he's strong enough to fight them, as we talked about here [in] the original film. And eventually, he questions himself if he *is* or *isn't* a replicant.

ECN: Hmm.

EG: And I think that's a very human thing to do: humans tend to question themselves. Sometimes, we have this thing called Imposter Syndrome that makes us question "am I really the person that I think I am," and you can see that with K in the sequel. And you can see the ambiguity of it within the first one. Where, the "dream" sequence, when he's (Deckard) thinking if the unicorn, and the end right before it cuts to black, there's the unicorn again. The ambiguity of whether or not Deckard is a replicant. It raises the question, "Would it or should it matter?" We could come back to this, I just wanted to introduce that idea. Let me know what you think, in general?

ECN: I kind of want to talk about that imposter syndrome, like you were saying, how it kind of makes you question yourself. In that same article⁴ they do write about—in the show, Westworld, and in the movie—both of the artificial intelligence have a higher level of reasoning, right? And therefore, they are more able to be self-reflexive. So if they're continuously reflecting on themselves, or asking themselves questions, in a way, it's almost like they're more self-aware than humans are. I don't know, because as I'm talking, I think Rachel kind of defies that because Rachel was under the impression that she *was* human. I was going to say, they kind of know what they are, but, I guess we go back to the memories. The memories [take] away their true identity by implanting a fake one. And that—*see*?—it all turns back. Now I'm taking that back to the whole military aspect, and what it means to be a patriot because it's all basically the same thing. Memories are implanted and *indoctrination*. It's just so weird how everything kind of circles back.

EG: Yeah,- because,- like-, umm-, I forgot the theorist, but there's this guy who basically says that "no thought that you ever have is your own."

ECN: Oh, yeah. I've heard that.

EG: And, that's so crazy to think about here because we think that *that*'s what makes us human. We think that our memories are genuine, and that's what guides us to act certain

⁴ "Cyborgian Self-Awareness: Trauma and Memory in Blade Runner and Westworld — https://muse.jhu.edu/article/736564

ways. And if everything is just indoctrinated, then "would we even call ourselves human?" like, of course we will. But, wouldn't you feel the same way for an artificial intelligent life? What's the difference?

ECN: Yeah. Because that does take you back to your original question of "what does it mean to be human?" or "what does it mean to be alive?" I guess we're all just programed too. Just more individual-type programing.

EG: Yeah, I believe it.

ECN: For the most part, I guess.

EG: But it's not as creepy or, it doesn't sound as bad when it's like,—you live it your whole life.

ECN: Yeah.

EG: But once you say "it's artificial because it all happens immediately" like they were born with those memories, then it doesn't feel right. But ours is no different.

ECN: Yeah. Well, yeah, because the truth is that: we think it's all happened within a certain timespan. But in reality, it could all just be *the now*. I mean, to try to get philosophical, right? There's no past, there's no [future], there's only *the now*. Back to the whole—what's his name? is it Descartes, right?

EG: [confused] Deckard?

ECN: No,

EG: Oh! Descartes. Yeah, Rene Descartes. Yeah.

ECN: Yeah, basically, "I think, therefore I am."⁵

EG: Yeah, and that quote's used in film, right?

ECN: Mhm.

EG: Roy says it to J.F. Sebastian. And that's his way of proving, "these thoughts are my own, I am real" but it kind of comes off, like, Artificial because you don't know whether to believe it or not. And if you're a human, and you say that, people are going to be like, "Okay, this person is [an] individual," but if a Replicant, or a robot, or an Artificial Intelligent life says that. Can you believe it? There's so many questions here. It's crazy how the film really plays with our idea of what it means to be alive—what it means to be human. Because, like I mentioned before, you can't really tell the difference, so would it matter? I think that's one of the questions that this film really raises or asks.

⁵ From *Discourse on Method* (1637) by René Descartes — https://www.britannica.com/topic/cogito-ergo-sum

ECN: Yeah—just. I don't know, man. *Chuckles* I feel like a lot of it is circling the memories and what that plays with life or death, you know. Like, in the death of Rachel, she's a replicant, but you still have the memories of Deckard, of Rachel, and the same thing with Roy. The whole memory aspect and how it fits with indoctrination but that also is kind of what makes us human—and all of that. I was just kind of thinking about that some. The fact that I think memories really are pretty important. I had notes on my little thing here, so part of if that keeps standing out to me—because, you know how lifespans are shortened, and the same could be for memories. They're implanted to ensure that they stay complacent and controllable. But, interestingly enough, lifespans for us humans, according the Bible, were also adjusted at a certain time in Genesis. Some people in the Bible—some of them were like a thousand years old. I think one of them was named Methuselah⁶ and so I think, from there, they shortened the lifespan to one-hundred and twenty days [years?] and I think that, too, from my understanding of it was to be able to control not only humans' actions, but their memories, right? And what could be passed down or gathered within that timeframe. I think that's kind of interesting and I wonder if it had anything—or any sort of input—in the movie.

EG: Yeah. We talked about this a couple of times through messages, but, the idea of "playing God" is really a theme that's anywhere in Artificial Intelligence, or something that is "unnatural" that guides us to think, "are we trying to play God by creating life" in this way. And then, in what ways are we copying from that idea, of creating the *perfect* being, or creating a being that's better than *us*. And, here, we see Tyrell talking about limiting the life-span because he knows that they're going to be better than humans. The quote he says is "[light] that burns twice as bright [burns] half as long," or something along those lines. So, I think this is, like, Tyrell's confession that he *did* want to play "God" in making something *much better*, but he had to sacrifice how long it lasts, and this goes back to your idea of this being an idea from the Bible.

ECN: Yeah, I think there is some parallel there for sure. Even that same scene where Tyrell's talking to Roy and he says that about the fire. He also talks about those questions that we humans ask to ourselves and of God, like, "Where do we come from?" "Who are we?" all of that is a very human thing. And that, you know, draws parallels to all the questions that the replicants ask the humans who created them, we ask the "God" or gods—plural—that created us. For sure there has to be some parallel there because I think there's too many—I don't believe in coincidences, there's just too much to draw from that's both Biblical or Christian in its symbolism.

EG: Yeah, definitely. In our notes, you mentioned the pin in the hand—Roy's character, he stabs himself in the palm with a pin to try to give himself some life to keep up so he can go talk to Deckard. But it also symbolizes the cross that he, Jesus, was pinned.

ECN: Yeah! That's the same thing. Like, he's holding the dove where (I think) the dove is supposed to be a symbol of the Holy Spirit, right? Or something like that. And another thing that gets drawn on in the movie that's also Christian is that the—Jesus, after he's on

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⁶ Methuselah — Genesis (5:27)

the cross, I believe his last words are actually "It is finished" ⁷ and that's what Deckard says at the end, after Roy dies and lets go of the dove. I think that's pretty—

EG: Damn. There're so many parallels with that. Like, when he goes to talk to Tyrell, he says "everyone tries to meet their maker" or something along those lines. That's a very human thing to do, try to understand where you come from and where you're going to go next. Something that Roy and the rest of the Replicants—the reason they came back to Earth was because they wanted to live longer. They knew that they had a short life-span. Clinging on to life is a very human thing to do: that's like one instinct that everyone is hardwired to do—self-preservation.

ECN: Yeah. That's definitely true. I think, ultimately that's why (in a sense) we are searching for Artificial intelligence. Some of the arguments or reasons people make—or even some advancements that have been made—you're basically downloading your consciousness or uploading your consciousness into whether it's a program or an actual program. You know, they *are* doing that stuff already: it's an extension of us—and how to preserve our lifespan or our consciousness in that way. That's pretty eerie, but that is actually happening right now, so that's kind of crazy.

EG: Yeah, and. You can still tackle that original question: would you consider *that* being alive. If you create either a clone or just a robot that has your exact memories and *everything* that relates to *you*. And is its own individual being—it creates its own individual thoughts—is *that* alive? What do you think?

ECN: I'm not sure, man. Ultimately, in trying to liken them to humans, I can't really see any difference except for—they're supposed to be made out of wires and stuff. The most basic life-form I can think of are plants, and there's no way of telling or not they're self-aware. But they're definitely alive. So then sometimes, that even plays the question "does self-awareness have anything to do with being alive?" and if that's the case, how does that have anything to do with being human.

EG: I like the plant connection. It's definitely alive. It's *not* self-aware—

ECN: Well, you don't know that!

[Both Laughing]

EG: You're not wrong!

ECN: It does move towards the light! You know.

EG: Yeah, but I think that can be explained, "it's an instinct, right?" it doesn't know that it's doing that. It's programed to do that, much like Replicants! Or animals. They have this natural urge to survive—they work on primitive instincts of eating food, surviving, running away from things—

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⁷ John 19:30

ECN: That's human...?

EG: [Slightly confused] Would you consider an animal human?

ECN: I'm just saying those traits that you're describing are human traits as well.

EG: Yeah, but animals aren't self-aware—they wouldn't be considered human, but it's definitely alive. And I think the opposite would be true for the computer: it's self-aware but it's not breathing, it doesn't have any necessities—except for electronical current. And you mentioned, it's made of wires, but our brains are kind of just pure electrosignals to one-another. I don't know. *I would consider* a replicant or a clone of someone who has their memories uploaded into it, I would consider that alive. I don't know if I would consider it human.

ECN: That's definitely true. I guess, even all the replicants—they'll still meet both of those criteria, I think. Because they *are* self-aware, and they *are* alive. And they basically share in almost everything else.

EG: And that really goes to the second question—and final question—I want to explore more is like, "if there's no [?] distinction..." like, if we make a perfect robot that looks exactly like a human, it has the same bodily fluids, it has the same heart, even if it's artificial, "if there's no difference, *should it matter*?" that it's a robot. I'm sure we're going to get to the point where that's the truth here in like 2060, I don't know. And we're going to need to talk about that by the time the time comes.

ECN: Yeah. "Should it matter that it's a robot?" You know. There's that whole—I think we talked about it in our previous meetings, how—"why does it have to be human-like" in general? It can still have all of the components and be aesthetically a robot. It doesn't have to look like us, but in that case then why are we making robots that look like us? And why, in the movie, do the robots look like us? I feel like, in that sense, I don't know if it matters whether or not they're robots. I think that's definitely a question we have to get an answer to soon because it definitely seems like we're moving in that direction. All of the movies I've ever seen about this leads to a horrible destruction. I don't feel great about it.

EG: I kind of want to try to tackle that question you just asked. Why *are* we trying to give it these human-like features? Physical features. Why not just keep the robot a robot aesthetic? And I think the reason is that we are intentionally trying to humanize it in order to care for it a bit more—or invest ourselves more with it. If we're trying to make something that is self-aware, I don't think that people are going to be okay with talking to a lamp. They're going to feel ridiculous, I think talking to a *being* that has a face and has a mouth, even if it doesn't *need* that makes us care about it a lot more... I think we *want* to ask ourselves the question of whether or not we should care.

ECN: See, as you were talking, I kind of made: if that is the case, right, if we want to feel more comfortable while we're talking to something, and not just talk to a lamp, then why couldn't we just talk to a person? So it kind of, ultimately, leads me back to the sense of: we want to have **control** of another entity in general. Because we *could* talk or speak or

have dialogue with a person. But if we're then trying to do that with a robot to make us feel more comfortable, then why couldn't we just stay in the "human lane"? So I feel like, in a sense, it's almost to have a sense of control, so like, "I know I can control this other being," you know? Because, in a sense, we could just be speaking to another human if we wanted to feel comfortable. I feel like, in a way, it's making us feel comfortable about our desire to control. Maybe not just other humans, but our surroundings in general—our environment. I guess that's why they're created in the first place so that they serve us in all of their various fields, but it is ultimately to control the service.

EG: Hmm. Wow. That's—you just blew my mind and I'm not sure if I want to keep talking about this. Like, I don't have anything to add. That's so—that's such a crazy thought! Imagine. We're just trying to create a being just to control [it]. That's kind of like: we're just trying to create slaves. *Nervous laughter*

ECN: Yeah. Seriously. And then, who has the power to create these *slaves*? It's already the people who come from—you know. For the most part. A lot of American money—or even foreign money—has been made from *that* institution, and you can even expand that to incarceration. From there, "okay, they won't let us enslave them anymore, so" *nervous laughter* "we got to create something else."

EG: Damn.

ECN: Because, ultimately, it is governments, it is corporations. Our prisons are run by both governments and corporations. You know?

EG: Then,- if,- If it is the higher ups that are trying to create these human-like beings to control them. And they do the same things, maybe a little better. Maybe the question isn't "are we trying to see if this thing is human or not," I think, the thing is, *ethically*, they want to control a life without it questioning back and it also not being a "*morally* wrong" thing. They'll claim, "okay, but it's a robot. You don't have to worry about its rights. You don't have to worry about its life." But it'll still be the same thing. So, I think *that* would definitely be the case of "it does matter"—or, it doesn't matter that it's not a human, its life still matters.

ECN: Yeah, that is actually something that I thought about, because what moral responsibility do we have to a being—even if it is Artificial Intelligence—that can seemingly produce emotion or even the self-awareness. I feel like, to a degree, we do still have a moral obligation. And I think, as a collective, we do. I would say because those who've been in constant power have used the same tactics on *us* humans, right? So by liking the enslaved African to an animal, therefore, "it's not human" and thereon. And in that sense, it leads back to that a way in which they can centralize power and create or maintain the social hierarchies so even throwing in another type of being—we're not going to call it human—is just another way in which to promote those same things; to promote "we're different from them." Which is basically othering them, and, of course, marginalized people *have* been othered—are still othered. Again, this is where memory comes into play, because how does memory act as a form of resistance? And I think this is part of it. "We remember what you have done to us, so we cannot let it occur to someone else,

whether they're 'human' or not." Ultimately, there still has to be some sort of responsibility. We have to be able to investigate the true legitimacy of—yeah, they were manufactured, but that doesn't mean that there's no actual (what's the word?) sentiency (is that the word I'm looking for?).

EG: Yeah.

ECN: So, you know, there's arguments about animals and sentient beings in general (I feel) need protection. And so, in that sense, to try to create the Replicant in order to say, "okay, we're doing it to them now," it's just. I don't know. It wouldn't necessarily sit right, I think—well, with myself and some other people.

[Both Laughing]

EG: Yeah, I have quite a bit to respond to that. To go back to the slaves that were taken from Africa. One of the key elements to dehumanize them, colonizers would make sure that they did not get an education. They didn't want stories or communication to be passed down, which would empower them by remembering what has been done to them, what they can do to escape, or to be self-aware to the point that they understand the social institution that they have been locked into. And it also can parallel to Holocaust people who were taken into concentration camps. They were dehumanized, they were told, "oh, they're just rats⁸, we have to collect them all" and do what they want to do. And, we've seen, through history, the dehumanization of humans. That's definitely going to be a thing. It's definitely still a thing for animals. People do not consider animals as a being worthy of living—as much as a human. So if you introduce a new being—as you said, a Replicant—that is marginalized, that is "us-versus-themmed" they're definitely going to be dehumanized and used in the way that they were "meant" to.

ECN: Mhm.

EG: Well, that conversation strayed a bit. I think we could wrap it up here before we keep talking all day. So, to recap. Today we discussed whether or not replicants in the film are "alive" or "human." We discussed that entities and beings (such as Replicants, AI, and computers) that have these emotions, memories, and self-awareness who definitely *are* alive, even if it is "unnatural" and not considered human by those who create them, even though they arguably are. We also tackled the question regarding whether indistinctions between Humans and Androids matter, and we agreed that the distinction *should* not matter and while their lives *should*. Is there anything you want to add, Erika?

ECN: No, I think you pretty much summarized everything well-enough. It's a very controversial topic.

EG: Yes, a topic we will definitely talk about in the next century.

⁸ "Defining The Enemy" by United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC — https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/defining-the-enemy

ECN: 100% for sure.

EG: Well, thank you for your time, Erika. It was great talking to you.

ECN: Thank you for *your* time. It was great talking to *you*.

EG: Wow....

[Both Laughing]

EG: Anyway, that was Blade Runner with myself (Edwin Gonzalez) and Erika Casillas. Thank you for listening.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]