You're listening to imaginary worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky

I recently did a call out on social media asking for suggestions of topics to explore. A few people mentioned Sailor Moon – the classic anime series from the '90s -- because there's a new two-part Sailor Moon movie on Netflix. People suggested that I look into the queer content of Sailor Moon and why it was so groundbreaking and controversial.

And I said – wait, what? I remember when Sailor Moon came on Cartoon Network in the late '90s. I was studying animation at CalArts, and these women in my program were painting murals of Sailor Moon on the walls of the dorms. It was the first time I had seen the characters with their big eyes, long hair, long legs, and short skirts, and I thought it was like the anime equivalent to The Spice Girls – fun, empowering but not subversive.

I was so wrong. Although I think I got that impression because the American and Canadians companies that dubbed different seasons Sailor Moon did everything they could to censor the queer content. But it was still there.

Sara Century is a journalist who wrote about Sailor Moon for the website Syfy. She was in junior high when the show came to American TV.

SARA: It was definitely around this time where I was definitely coming into my queerness, like at least a little bit, like it was a long and winding road as it is for so many people. But I was definitely realizing around that time that I was probably not a straight person. So it was definitely something where it was just like, Ooh, I'm going to watch Sailor Moon. And then I was like, I love this series. And then I was like, why do I love this series so much?

Sailor Moon originally began as a manga series in 1991 by the artist Naoko Takeuchi. She was influenced by the manga she grew up reading in the 1970s – which was created by a group of female artists that were pioneers in writing manga for girls in a field that's dominated by men.

The premise of Sailor Moon is there's a team of teenage girls who can transform into superheroes that wear sailor uniforms – that don't look that different from their school uniforms. Besides their Japanese names, they also have superhero names based on planets like Sailor Venus, Sailor Mars, or Sailor Jupiter. And they use jewels, tiaras, and wands to create magic to defeat different kinds of villains.

SAILORS: Mercury star power! Mars star power! Jupiter star power!

The main character is of course Sailor Moon:

SAILOR MOON: I'm Sailor Moon! And now in the name of the moon, I will punish you!

Watching the show for the first time, I appreciated the way the show has a sense of humor about itself. It can be silly the best possible way. Like Sailor Moon's love interest early on is a male superhero called Tuxedo Mask because he wears a tuxedo and a mask.

TUXEDO MASK: Well done, Sailor Moon. I won't soon forget what happened here tonight.
LUNA: He's right. You did great, Sailor Moon.
SAILOR MOON: He's so cute!!

But it can also be dramatic and heartwarming when it needs to be. In fact, Sailor Moon was so popular in Japan, it kicked off a whole genre about girls with magical powers.

DAWN: This was a show for girls that didn't treat girls like they were stupid

Dawn H is the host of the Anime Nostalgia Podcast. And she's goes by letter H online for privacy's sake.

DAWN: Each girl had their own distinct personality and style and look, and sound. The main character herself, like Sailor Moon, she was sort of a klutz, she was a crybaby. She didn't get very good grades, she loved comics and video games and all this stuff. And, you know, a lot of times she would get teased for, you know, the thing she liked or, you know, just her overall personality flaws. Uh, but you know, when push came to shove, she was the one who was saving the galaxy. And that was pretty amazing because in a show like that, in any other context, like you would expect the hero in to be like, like wonder woman, like, oh, she's perfect. And she can never do anything wrong and she's flawless. But in this, this show, it was like, oh, well, I can be like a normal person and still be strong and powerful and cool. Like, I think that really resonated with girls at the time.

At first, the queer content wasn't obvious -- especially if you were watching the English language version of the show.

In the first season, there was a pair of villains called Kunzite and Zoisite. They were a gay couple, at least if you were watching it in Japan. But since Zoisite had a ponytail and long eye lashes – which is not unusual for male characters in anime – the company dubbing the show into English hired an actress to do the voice of Zoisite. Suddenly they were a straight couple.

It's hard to find videos of the problematic dubbed version of Sailor Moon from the '90s. But there's a new version on Hulu, completely redubbed, with a male actor playing Zoisite. This is what they sound like in the restored version of the show.

ZOISITE: You're cruel, Konzite! How can you suggest she's more lovely than me! Underneath she's just an ugly monster!
KUNZITE: Shh. I'm kidding, don't let envy ruin your beautiful face. Look at me.
ZOISITE: Go away!
KUNZITE: This rose can't compare with the beauty I see in your face.
ZOISITE: Thank you my dear.

In later seasons, the same thing happened with a character called Fish-Eye, who was clearly a gay male character wearing women's clothes. But in the '90s dub of the show, Fish-Eye was given a female voice.

But the most infamous example of straightwashing happened in the third season when we meet two teenage girls, Michiru (mitch-I-roo) and Haruka (HAH-roo-ka), also known as Sailor Neptune and Sailor Uranus. They're two girls who are very much in love. So, people who dubbed the show in English, had a very interesting idea how to "fix" this problem. They changed the dialogue, and now Sailor Neptune and Uranus were cousins.

GIRL: How did you guys meet?
NEPTUNE: We're cousins, we grew up together!

Even as a kid, Sara knew that something had changed from the original anime.

SARA: I mean, I have a lot of cousins, but I don't, um, like hold hands and like gaze dreamily into their eyes, or, you know, date them generally.

URANUS: Hey what is it?
NEPTUNE: Haruka. It will be all right. I'll always love your hands.

SARAH: When you look at Uranus and Neptune, there is an episode that is completely dedicated to them as a love story. Like that episode is etched into my mind because I always have related so much to Neptune is this kind of standoffish, like has her mirror and just kind of is so introspective and, um, dedicated to art and things. So, I always found her to be a really compelling character and I love that character being queer because so often it would just be like, oh, she's just waiting for the right guy or something like that. So, I loved Neptune. I think Neptune is one of the most influential characters on me because I just related to her a lot as a kid.

The U.S. was not the only country that struggled with how to handle that storyline. In France, they dubbed Sailor Uranus with a male voice when she was wearing civilian clothes – which kind of worked because she wore a tie and jacket and had short hair. But when Uranus transformed into her sailor outfit with the short skirt, they switched the character to a female voice, and explained that she was always a girl, but her secret identity was pretending to be a boy and her cover story was that she was in love with Neptune.

I asked Dawn, what was the context for this relationship in Japan? Why was the show not censored there?

DAWN: In Japan, there was like plausible deniability when it came to the well, supposedly plausible deniability when it came to say Uranus and Neptune being a couple. Stuff like same-sex romance and gender was very much explored in, uh, Shojo Manga, uh, which would be a girls' comic basically. And famously in Japan there is a thing called a well, there's a way of thinking called Class S where it's implied that if a girl has like lesbian feelings or even explores like a lesbian relationship, that's just practice for, you know, when she's older and graduates and decides to get married and finds a husband and settles down. Um, but then there are other times where they are like very conservative about certain things, which is why you don't ever see them say like Uranus and Neptune, for example, you never see them kiss or anything. The most you will see them do is maybe hold hands or hold each other, but you will never explicitly see them like kissing in the '90s version because even back then they were like, oh, that would be a little too much.

Although some of the queer content in Sailor Moon was trying to push boundaries in Japan.

DAWN: Naoko Takeuchi, the creator. She wasn't really that involved with the anime actually. Uh, funnily enough, most of the people involved with the nineties anime the original one were men like famously Kunihiko Ikuhara who kind of came on in the, um,

second and third seasons. He, he was the one who was mostly running the third season, which is the season with Sailor Uranus Neptune. He is very well-known for creating, anime with a lot of queer characters and that kind of Sailor Moon was kind of the start of that, uh, because a lot of his ideas that he had that he kind of wanted to do for Sailor Moon, but got rejected, ended up being ideas that he carried on into anime that he would create later. And it's only kind of recently where we have seen in the new Sailor Moon remakes that they're doing, where they allowed some scenes from the original manga that do include women kissing to be finally animated.

And in a 2014 reboot of Sailor Moon, Sailor Uranus was identified as being gender fluid or non-binary.

Going back to the original series, the most controversial season was the final one, which was cut entirely from the North American run because they couldn't figure out how to change it through dubbing.

In the final season, there were these characters called Sailor Starlights. They were a team of super powered women who pretended to be a boy band. In the original manga, Sailor Moon falls for one of them. But even in Japan, where the TV show had been pushing boundaries, they couldn't get away with having the main character be bisexual. So, they came up with their own convoluted solution: The Sailor Starlights were actually men that could turn into women when they needed to fight evil.

DAWN: But that make it somehow queerer, honestly, because then you have these like gender fluid or trans sort of characters that are just changing gender, like magically.

Other countries did air the fifth season with their own ideas on how to make it supposedly less queer. Like in the Italian dub:

DAWN: They made it to where the Sailor Starlights had twin sisters and whenever needed them, they would call them and they would come and do the fighting. So it wasn't even like, you know, oh, we're men that turn into women. It was like, oh, here, I'm going to call the girls that look exactly like us and they're going to fight.

As a kid, Dawn knew the final season never aired in the U.S. So, she got VHS copies of the show in Japanese with English subtitles. And even though Sailor Moon is supposed to be in love with one of the Sailor Starlights only when they're presenting as boys, Dawn got the message.

DAWN: That would be read as bisexual that had a lot of, uh, impact on me because I didn't realize at the time this took me years to figure out myself that like, oh, actually I think I'm bisexual. But like, at the time I was just like, oh, I didn't realize, like, you could, like more than just one gender. Like, wow. So that like put an idea in my head that was like, oh, that's normal. And a thing that happens.

One of the biggest ironies about adults freaking out over queer content in children's cartoons is that first crushes are one of the most common storylines. The girls in Sailor Moon are always swooning over boys. But same sex crushes? No way.

SARA: Because if you're queer, you're trying to indoctrinate people.

Again Sara Century.

SARA: I think that that is such an inherently flawed way of looking at things, because obviously, like, as I'm saying, this is stuff where I was fighting through the subtext, like they did everything they could to make this not be what I wanted it to be or what it was, you know? So, I think that when people look at it like that and be like, oh, well, kids knowing about sexuality is like, well, kids know about sexuality, like, that's the thing is, is that like kids do learn about this stuff as they go along, regardless of what you tell them. And if a kid is queer, then they're alone. You know, like that's kind of the thing with me was, is like, I felt just completely isolated. So, seeing something where like, I felt so represented by Neptune, that it was just like, I needed this like so much.

Times are changing. There's a lot of U.S. animation now with queer content, like Adventure Time, the new She-Ra, Loud House, and especially Steven Universe which had a same-sex wedding between two alien characters named Ruby and Sapphire that can magically merge into a single humanoid character.

STEVEN: Ruby? Do you take this gem to have and to hold on this planet and every other planet in the universe?
RUBY: I do!
STEVEN: And Sapphire? Do you --
SAPPHIRE: Yes.
STEVEN: You didn't let me finish.
SAPPHIRE: I'm just really excited.

SARA: I think that where Steven Universe shines is, is that it's such a good gender fluid and trans metaphor for a lot of people. There's so much changing, merging, becoming

greater because you work with others. There isn't a ton of subtext. Like they're fairly open with pretty much everything. And I think that, you know, we wouldn't have it if it, if we didn't have Sailor Moon first, you know?

One of the new TV shows that has openly queer characters is The Owl House, which is a cartoon on Disney Plus. But when it comes to Disney feature animation – the global blockbuster movies – Disney is still struggling with how to handle queer content, and how to handle their own history of queer-coded villains. After the break, we'll open the Disney vault.

BREAK

The history of queer coding in the U.S. goes back to the Hays Code, from the 1930s. It was a list of things you couldn't depict in movies, including quote sexual perversion. If a filmmaker tried to use queer characters, they had to be villains. And they had to use subtle references – or usually stereotypes of effeminate older bachelors or cold domineering spinsters. And those villains also worked as foils against the heroes or heroines that fit much more traditional gender norms.

Rowan Ellis is a cultural critic who does video essays about LGBTQ representation.

ROWAN: The canon of any kind of art form is very sequential. Everyone is learning from the previous iterations. Um, if you're living through a period where it's still not necessarily particularly acceptable to be queer and you're idolizing, these filmmakers who created very queer coded characters and queer coded villains, you aren't necessarily going to be examining like, hmm, why is it that these villains have these particular attributes? You might just replicate it. And I think that leads to the next generation who were like two generations away from the original kind of, um, Hays Code. But they're still replicating it even decades after it's technically been, been abolished.

The gay villain is a trope that Disney relied on a lot, especially with their feature animation. Although some of their queer-coded villains ended up being more popular than the heroes.

ROWAN: And sometimes villains are cool. They have cool dress schemes. They have cool one-liners.
All the best songs

ROWAN: All of the best songs as well. Absolutely. Like a lot of people feel like a real affinity to that, but it feels to me like an infinity that is being kind of projected with context onto them, rather than something that was being deliberately set up by filmmakers to be like, oh yes, we are going to create some queer villains that people will empathize with and that they will have an affinity to. I think it very much is like a lot, unfortunately of queer representation, something that queer people sort of project onto these characters rather than something that was like a genuine attempt at relating to them.

Thomas West co-hosts the podcast Queen of the Bs.

THOMAS: I think that on some level, I always recognize the queerness. Um, I was actually talking to a friend about this very subject and I was telling them that when I was growing up, I was always, I always wanted to be Ursula or a Maleficent or, you know, Scar. So, I think that subconsciously I recognized that there was something queer that something about their queerness called to me and gave me pleasure as a young viewer.

SIMBA: Heh heh! You're so weird.
SCAR: You have no idea. So, your father showed you the whole kingdom, did he?

I knew that Scar, Jafar, Ratcliffe from Pocahontas were considered queer-coded villains.

RATCLIFFE: Mine, boys! Mine, every mountain! And dig, boys! (FADE DOWN)

But Thomas mentioned characters I hadn't thought about like Medusa from The Rescuers.

MEDUSA: Why did you let her escape? What is your alibi this time, nitwit?
SNOOPS: Nitwit? Don't blame me, Medusa…

THOMAS: Her animosity towards children as just one example, um, you know, the hairstyles, the way she emasculates her assistant Snoops.
Is Cruella too. You think?
THOMAS: I think so. I mean, I think that there's something about her also that it would feel to queer viewers in part just because she's so invested in fashion that she's just so again, emasculating, like I think that gay men in particular are drawn to those kinds of dominant female personalities. And I think that that would help explain why she also would fit into that queer coding tradition.

CRUELLA: My only true love, darling! I live for furs, I worship furs!

To be fair, other franchises have used queer coded villains from Batman to Powerpuff Girls. But Disney is in a unique position because they are so deeply tied to their old IP, and those stories have outlived their cultural moments by decades.

For example, kids are still watching Sleeping Beauty and 101 Dalmatians. Maleficent and Cruella merchandise are sold on Amazon and Wall-Mart. But those movies came out in 1959 and 1961. To put that in perspective, two of the biggest movie stars back then were Rock Hudson and Montgomery Clift – who are known now as a cautionary tales of the damage homophobia can have on closeted actors. That's how long ago those Disney movies came out.

And there's so much stylistic continuity between Disney films. The animators are always looking to the past for inspiration. Like in the 2012 movie, Wreck It Ralph, the villain is like a throwback to the Hays Code.

KING CANDY: Now, I'm King Candy!
RALPH: I see you're a fan of pink.
KING CANDY: Salmon! Salmon! That's obviously salmon. What are you doing here?

Or in the case of Ursula from The Little Mermaid, the animators actually looked at the drag queen Divine for inspiration.

ROWAN: It's not, it's not like a connection. That's only in the minds of people reading too much into this. Like this is, this is very much a, an inspiration that's been talked about openly.

URSULA: Well, angel fish. The solution to your problem is simple. The only way to get what you want is to become a human yourself.

In the upcoming live action remake of Little Mermaid, Ursula is going to be played by Melissa McCarthy, so they're probably going in a different direction with the character. But Disney has found itself in a difficult position. They seem to be aware of the criticism of their films, but they're having trouble imagining villains that aren't queer coded.

THOMAS: And I think that's partially what explains why the villains of the new remakes don't actually land with. It's a great deal of potency. Like, you know, if you think about Jafar from the new Aladdin.

JAFAR: Steal an apple, and you're a thief. Steal a kingdom and you're a statesman. Only weak men stop there.

THOMAS: He's just not that interesting. Like he they've robbed him of all the sort of like overly mannered delivery that made the original Jafar, such an iconic villain in the same way that they took all the things that made scar so interesting because instead of being like a theatrical, like Claudius from Hamlet, he becomes this sort of a menacing half star lion from a nature documentary.

SIMBA: When I'm king, I'll have to give you orders. Tell you what to do. How weird is that?
SCAR: You have no idea.

THOMAS: That's not exactly what we go to a Disney movie to see, like it just robs it of sort of that sort of dark magic that I think was always attendant.

And Rowan says when Disney tries to take a step forward, it can feel like two steps back.

ROWAN: And I think it is in this, this element of them not wanting, I guess, potentially not wanting to get it wrong, not wanting. So they, they have had the first gay Disney character about 17 times at this point. Like, there's been so many, you know, someone's pointed out like, oh, I think there might be a lesbian couple in the background of this one Pixar movie or, oh, I think this character is meant to be gay. They didn't say the word gay, but it seems like they're meant to be gay. And so, you kind of have this weird in-between stage at this point where they're kind of wanting to kind of claim the benefits of saying that they have representation without actually putting it in the movie or losing any ticket sales from more conservative audiences.

THOMAS: They still can't break out of the model that queer is somehow anti-family or anti-family friendly. So rather than they've now jettisoned like queer negativity. So they don't give us queer villains anymore, but they haven't yet given us queer representation. That's positive either. So we're really being left out on both ends. So we don't even have the subversive pleasures of the previous era, but we don't have anything else either. I'm sort of waiting for Disney to just accept that it's okay to give queer people representation

and go with that. Or I wish they would just take paint us as villains. And at least we can take subversive pleasure in that avenue.

So in some way you feel like it's a little bit worse now to some extent?

THOMAS: I think so. Okay. Because that's the thing, I mean, that's sort of the double edge sword of, you know, queer, the mainstreaming of queerness is that even though mainstream site has accepted it. So we get acceptance, but we don't really get the kind of experience representation like experiential representation that I feel like we deserve if we actually are being seen as equal.

For example, in Beauty and the Beast, the villain Gaston was not queer coded but a lot of people thought his sidekick, LeFou, was. So in the live action remake of Beauty and the Beast, the director promised an quote exclusively gay moment for LeFou -- which turned out to be three seconds of him dancing with a man during a ballroom scene. To their credit, Disney stuck by that scene when they got flak from other countries, who wanted the scene cut.

But when The Rise of Skywalker came out, they did buckle under pressure and cut a very brief scene of lesbian couple kissing to get the movie into foreign market.

Now, the upcoming Marvel movie Eternals is supposed to have an openly gay character, but Marvel has a little bit more independence and leway.

Ironically, by being so cautious, Disney has gone back to queer coding. Like with the character of Namaari, who is the antagonist from Raya and The Last Dragon.

ROWAN: We had a very strange situation where we had a sort of reformed villain character who was so obviously queer to so many people watching it, that so many people for almost all the movie were like, this is going to get gay. Right? Like this is, so this seems so obviously like these two girls are going to get together. Like she has an undercut, like she's the most quintessential lesbian haircut you could possibly imagine. And it's this very clear, like enemies, like friends to enemies, to girlfriends sort of classic romance plot storyline.

RAYA: Hey there, Princess Undercut, fancy meeting you here.
NAMAARI: You and the dragon gem pieces are coming with me.
RAYA: Hmm, my sword pieces say we're not.

Kelly Marie Tran, who did the voice of Raya, said that she played the character as if she had romantic feelings for Namaari. But a lot of viewers wouldn't know that

unless they read her interview. A similar thing happened with the Nickelodeon series The Legend of Korra, where a lesbian relationship was hinted at, and had to be confirmed by the showrunners after it was over.

But if the actors or filmmakers don't confirm the fan theories, it can feel like gaslighting or queerbaiting, or as people sometimes say to Thomas.

THOMAS: Aren't you just reading into this? That's the, that's the most common sort of accusation of academics and former academics and people who read and interpret and analyze films, but it's like, yes, but that's part of the joy of watching movies and on television and reading books is like, there's always so much richness to the text. And if you just go the surface level, then why bother? Like, why that's part of the joy of, of culture is the sheer, like the myriad multiplicitous readings than any text offers up.

What's so frustrating to Rowan is that if queer identity is not handled well in children's media, kids are going to look elsewhere for answers. When she was growing up, and questioning her sexuality, there was nothing for her to watch on British TV except Queer as Folk -- which is a great drama, but still:

ROWAN: It's very, it's like, it's very much for adults. There's a lot of like very explicit sex scenes and kind of topics that are kind of for people who are older. And I just know that like so many young people are watching it cause they were like, well, this is the only thing I can find to watch that, that I know is gay. Cause I've like, it's called Queer as Folk. So, I kind of got the memo because they didn't have this nice Disney movie that they could watch, and still don't. It's just to the point where I'm like, I really hope that every time I do interviews like this, that they become super outdated very quickly is my genuine hope because I really hope that it's like someone will listen to it and be like, but we just had three gay main characters last year. What are they talking about?!

When people discover this podcast, they do like to binge the back catalog, and I'll hear from listeners who say that I should do an update on an old episode. So, let me know future listeners in 2023 or 2025. Is this episode out of date? Or does it feel evergreen?

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Sara Century, Dawn H, Thomas West and Rowan Ellis. By the way, if you'd like to learn more about the impact of the Hays Code on American animation, check out my episode from last year, Betty Boop and the Hays Code.

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