

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

This episode is about the Star Trek show Strange New Worlds, which just finished its first season on Paramount +. We'll be giving away a few minor spoilers in discussing the show.

CREDITS SNW

When Strange New Worlds debuted in May, I was excited to watch it. I sat down on the couch with my wife, and when the opening credits were rolling by, I suddenly yelled, Bill! My wife said, who's Bill? Before I could explain, I said, Henry! She said, who's Henry?

Bill Wolkoff and Henry Alonso Myers are writers and producers on Strange New Worlds. Henry is actually one of the show runners. The three of us were film majors together at Wesleyan University. We also moved to Los Angeles around the same time in the mid '90s. Of course, I left L.A. after a decade, and I didn't know they were working on this show.

I had so many questions for them, and I was glad they were able to talk with me. But first, a little background on the show.

The synopsis is pretty simple. It's the story of The Enterprise before Captain Kirk. But the backstory is a little bit more complicated, and it goes all the way back to 1964 – the pilot of Star Trek, which was called The Cage.

Spock was there, but he wasn't as stoic as he would later be. The captain was named Pike. He was not played by William Shatner. His first officer was a woman called Number One.

NUMBER ONE: They could still be alive even after 18 years.

PIKE: If they survived the crash.

SPOCK: We aren't going to go? To be certain?

PIKE: Not without any indication of survivors. No.

The network was not happy with the pilot, changes were made, and The Cage was never aired in the original run of the series.

But rather than pretend the pilot never happened, Gene Roddenberry worked Captain Pike and Number One into the lore and canon of Star Trek. And in 2019, the characters appeared in the second season of the show Star Trek Discovery, which took place 10 years before the original series. Spock was played by Ethan Peck, Pike was played by Anson Mount, and Number One was played by Rebecca Romijn.

UNA: Welcome home captain

PIKE: Good to be back, I wish it were under better circumstances

UNA: Don't we all.

Star Trek fans loved seeing these versions of the characters so much, they lobbied for them to have their own spin-off series, and that's how Strange New Worlds was born.

Personally, I think the show looks fantastic. I love the way they captured the essence of the 1960s sets and costumes while updating them with modern day materials and special effects.

And unlike a lot of sci-fi shows today, Strange New Worlds is not one long serialized story. It's episodic, like the old Star Trek. Critics have praised the show for being a throwback, and they've actually compared it to quote "prestige" TV that is supposed to be superior quality, but those serialized shows can sometimes feel bloated or pretentious or difficult to follow.

Henry and Bill are sympathetic to that point of view. Here's Henry:

HENRY: I find a lot of, um, current prestige TV to TV to be frustrating. And I think, and I don't know if it's, look, this is a, I'm a veteran episodic TV guy. I've been doing this for over 20 years. And I really like the way that television tells stories. And I get very frustrated when people say things like, oh, we're trying to do a 10-hour movie or a six hour movie. And like, I, I, I want to raise my hand and say, you know, if you went to a movie and it was 10 hours long, you'd walk out. So like, what we're doing is a, we're doing a one hour show and trying to create like a, a more, you remember, like in, in Willie Wonka, they had the, uh, the gum that would present you with a full meal, you know, like, uh, uh, from, uh, appetizer to dessert. Uh, you know, that's what we try to do within an hour, so that you tell a character story that feels like it's self-contained, but also, you know, in the classic mode of television, you know, going back to, uh, like hill street blues, we try to arc character stories so that our, our people, you know, learn something or experience something one week. And they're not the same person the

next week, the, the show ends up being more nimble. You can tell more interesting, broad based science fiction stories, because we are only telling short ones.

Well, one thing I think is interesting is like, when you think about the film program that the three of us were in, um, it was like very focused on genre. Like there are so many classes just breaking down what a genre was. And like, one thing I think is interesting about the show is how many episodes feel like their own little sort of self-contained genres? Like you'll have like a romcom episode. And then there's like the sci-fi horror episode and there's like a siege episode. And then there's like a pirate episode. Like, do you feel like the education that we all got, like helped you be more nimble and able to sort of quickly pick up what makes a genre?

BILL: Absolutely. I mean, it, it's the, the great thing about the episodic format is that you can be, you can do exactly, as you're saying, experiment with genre and embrace it fully. And as we all went to the same film school, like we're aware of the limits, uh, and the, the, the rails within each, each genre too, inhabit that fully with, within each episode to really do a pirate episode and to, you know, really do a storybook episode, a fantasy episode, but also have it still be a star Trek episode at the same time. And that, that it's, it's having that balance, that, that power to embrace the genre, but the, the balance to still be a, um, what you would recognize as a Star Trek episode at the end of it that I think makes it fun to write and as an audience member experience.

Hmm. So, Henry, I read that early on, when you were developing this show, you had a lot of conversations in turn in trying to figure out like how Pike is different than Kirk. because I guess on many levels you could have written him as a Kirk, like captain, like what were those conversations like and how did you eventually land on the idea that Pike really likes to cook?

HENRY: Ha!

Because he is like cooking a lot!

HENRY: I do like to cook. That was definitely, uh, uh, in the back of my head, but, but a lot of it actually just came out of, um, we were trying to figure out what was his style of command. And, uh, we were actually talking specifically about his quarters and what his set should look like and how we would do scenes in it. And like, um, in previous star treks, they, all the captains sort of have their own obsessions Janeway loves coffee. It's not really a Picard thing, but there's always a, there's a poker game on next generation. Uh, and we were sort of trying to figure out what, what would represent the way that Pike leads. I'm a baker. And there's a guy who I admire a lot named Chad Robertson who created this, um, bakery tar in San Francisco. And I fall back on his, uh, bread cookbooks a lot. And there's a thing in his cookbook where he talks about how to make, uh, fava beans, which are a real pain in the butt to, to, uh, to peel and his method for doing it is you open a bottle of wine and you bring a bunch of people around the table and you say, Hey, help, help me, you know, peel these fava beans. It's a, it's a way of

having a dinner party that involves everyone and forces everyone to kind of cook and join in and it creates conversation. Uh, and so we had this notion that, that maybe this is how he approaches command. He's got a, uh, a sort of central table that everyone sort of sits around. He likes to bring in people from lots of different areas of the ship and find out what's going on. Um, he's a real listener. Um, and so the idea, uh, that, that he, he cooks more like a conductor. You know, he, uh, he, he cooks at the center and kind of keeps a, a, an eye on how everyone's going, but he sort of pulls people in and has them, you know, try different things and work to their strengths. Uh, it was really just a metaphor for how he leads in a very different way from Kirk. Who's a little more of a maverick at the center of things. He's the one who has the crazy plan. Everyone's a little surprised at him. You know what I mean? He's a more of a central hero and Pike is a little more of a, someone who coordinates between people, someone who tries to see the strengths of the folks who work with him.

My assistant producer, Stephanie's a theory that his hair is like his mood ring, depending on the height

HENRY: Anson has really amazing hair.

BILL: Well, I, I, I happened to be on set one of the days when somebody had done a meme, uh, a, um, an Anson Mount in the Paramount logo with, with his hair as tall as the mountain. And he had clearly seen it and we were shooting one of his scenes, and this is a credit to Anson. Who's got a great sense of humor about himself. And he said, so I'm going to be over here, but my hair's mark is going to be way over there.

<laugh> That's awesome. Um, Bill, actually, I wanted to ask you about an episode that you co-wrote, um, it was called ghosts of Illyria and uh, this is a little bit of a spoiler, but um, in that episode we learned that number one who actually has a, has a name now it's Una. We learned that Una is originally from, uh, this planet of genetically modified people who are discriminated against by, by other humans. And at one point she's talking to Pike about her identity, and he says, don't worry, you're one of the good ones which makes her cringe.

UNA: What if I hadn't saved all those lives? Would the Captain feel the same? What would he do if I hadn't been a hero, one of the good ones? When will it be enough to be an Illyrian?

And I thought that was a really interesting moment. And specially to have Pike say you're one of the good ones, because we've already established how inclusive and sensitive Pike is. I was wondering if you could talk about that scene.

BILL: Part of that came from, and I, I want to, uh, also credit Akiva Goldsman who was, uh, who guided us, uh, very heavily in that episode. And my co-writer on that episode of Akela Cooper that came from a, uh, a desire to, to present the Federation as an

imperfect place that, that has good ideals. And let's have that come out through our character through, through Pike, uh, who is somebody who is well intentioned, who might not necessarily have the experience to, um, to, to understand how his, uh, his, his view of, of a marginalized group would affect that marginalized group. And, and we wanted to give him, um, a little bit of room for, uh, evolution he's somebody who needs a little bit of evolution as, as the, uh, um, Federation does. This was a good, uh, character to, to play that out with. And what better relationship to have that come to a head with than one of Una's closest friends in the Federation who is only just aware that she is part of a marginalized group.

Yeah, there was also another really interesting moment in terms of current day politics. It was actually in the first episode, there's a moment where Pike is explaining the history of the Federation to these aliens that are about to go to war with each other. And as a cautionary tale, Pike is telling the story of how the Federation rose up from the ashes, uh, he shows real footage of Trump protesters in 2020 and the insurrection at the capital. And that leads up to like, LA, New York and DC. We see being wiped out by nuclear weapons, which is a terrifying sequence, which is, you know, like a, a terrifying sequence of events.

PIKE: Our conflict also started with a fight for freedoms. We called it The Second Civil War, then The Eugenics War, and finally World War III. This was our last day, the day the Earth we knew ceased to exist, what began as an eruption in one nation ended in the eradication of 600,000 species of animals and plants, and 30% of the Earth's population.

I'm really curious, why did you decide to include real footage of recent politics in that scene?

HENRY: Uh, Star Trek has never shied away from politics and what we were trying to say, which I think is actually not as controversial as I think I'm sure people in some parts of the media would like to, to believe is that the path towards conflict that we were, we are on now, we'll head in this direction. I mean, the whole point of that episode is to say, Hey, this metaphorical thing that happens in this science fiction show actually has relevance to the world that we live in just as a, as a context thing in that episode, Pike is reaching out to a society that is on the verge of like destroying itself. And he says, look, our society did destroy itself. And to make it feel relevant to people of today, we didn't want to say, oh, we fictionally destroyed ourselves. We wanted to kind of tie together the, you know, because in canon, the eugenic war did happen in the 1990s. And the goal was to say, Hey, yes. Okay. So maybe those didn't happen in the '90s, but the things that did happen are on a path that led to the thing that we are saying will happen.

Another big challenge in writing in the show is figuring out how to tell new and interesting stories about characters like Spock, when we already know what's going to happen to him for the rest of his life. We'll discuss how they made the fate of legacy characters feel a little less certain after the break.

BREAK.

Spock is not the only character from the original series to appear in Strange New Worlds. One of the other major characters they brought back is Uhura. In the 1960s, she was a groundbreaking character, but Uhura never had the same kind of character development as Spock. That has changed in Strange New Worlds, where Uhura is a young cadet fresh out of the academy, and she's really not sure yet what her place is going to be in Starfleet.

PIKE: You know, the Enterprise only gets a handful of cadets a year from Starfleet, you got to be pretty impressive to make the cut.

UHURA: Thank you, sir.

PIKE: I hear you speak 12 languages.

UHURA: Uh, 37.

PIKE: Okay, wow.

UHURA: In Kenya we have 22 native languages, I found early if you want to be understood it's best to communicate in someone's own tongue. So I learned them.

PIKE: Easy as that?

UHURA: For me, sir, yes.

I asked Bill and Henry if there was a lot of discussion around how to flesh out her character and give her more of a backstory. And Bill said:

BILL: Many long discussions <laugh> in a good way.

HENRY: It was very interesting because we talked a lot about, um, we talked a lot about what was there in the past and that performance, uh, you know, Nichelle Nichols performance is iconic and people, you know, rightly point to it. It was, it was, uh, incredibly important for the history of television. It was incredibly important on the show. Um, but there was a, there were a lot of areas that were left unexplored. We really wanted to tell the story of a, a younger character, like an ensign someone who was just coming onto the enterprise. Like the first episode was really a Pike episode. And so with the second episode, we really wanted to kind of come out of the gate and tell a, a very different story and be kind of show the types of stories that we were going to do on the show. So we thought it might be an interesting idea to really focus on her point of view and because she is young, she's a, you know, 21, 22, not the Uhura that we know she's

a, she's an ensign. We really wanted to kind of present her as a character, present her as a point of view character, because like her view of the enterprise is going to be very different from everyone else. On top of that, we were searching for an interesting way to kind of, uh, surprise people with her point of view about star fleet. Um, and one of our, our then writers assistant who, uh, became a writer on the show in season two, Onitra Johnson and also wrote, um, uh, episode co-wrote episode eight this season, uh, she, uh, spent a lot of time in the air force, uh, and her family were all in the air force and she had this sort of interesting military experience and it, and her experience was, it was complicated and she had sort of mixed feelings about having spent time in the service. And we spent a lot of time talking about her specific experience and how that might be an interesting experience to kind of channel through Uhura. So we have this idea that like, what if she's ambivalent about what she did about do about choosing to join Starfleet, that there's a complicating factor in her life that ultimately led to her doing this thing to making what was sort of an impulsive decision, uh, you know, because many people joined star fleet with a dream, but, but also many people joined Starfleet to find themselves, uh, or because they're running away from something. And so, uh, for us it was sort of important to give this young woman some runway like a, a, a, a place to go in terms of, you know, she, she can't be fully formed yet because then there's no journey for this character. Um, because I think the, the challenge with doing legacy characters is that people come in and say, well, they're already fully formed. I know who they are. I know who they're going to be. So I'm not interested in what they were in the past. And the, the thing that I always remember is they don't know who they're going to be. If they don't know, then everything is a surprise to them. So let's approach her like that.

Well, that actually brings me into Spock because I mean, you know, I mean, how do you tell stories about Spock when we'd know what happens to him? And you picked up on the character of T'Pring who is Spock's fiancé in only one episode of the original series, which was called Amok Time And I, it's obviously not much of a spoiler to say that they didn't get married in the original series, like Spock doesn't have a wife for the rest of the show and all this and all the Star Trek movies. But so much of the storyline in Strange New Worlds is about their engagement and them like working out the kinks and their relationship and the actors have such great chemistry together. It's like, you're almost rooting for them.

T'PRING: A shared acceptance of mutual sacrifice is crucial to a successful relationship
SPOCK: Yes, that is indisputable.

T'PRING: I am concerned that your time in Starfleet is causing you to behave in a way that is so human, we may find ourselves incompatible. Perhaps you could go prepare for your important work, if you will excuse me.

And yet, you know, this is going to be a very long engagement because I mean, Amok Time the um, the episode she's in, in the original series will not happen for another decade in their world. So, Henry, why make the decision to make T'Pring a big part of Spock's storyline?

HENRY: I mean, it all kind of started from, uh, Akiva, Alex and Jenny putting T'Pring in the pilot. Uh, and they're clearly in a, kind of a workable nice part of the relationship. And I, I re we spent a lot of time trying to find an actor to play to T'Pring who was appealing and interesting, and that they had, you know, so that, that, that she, and, um, Ethan had chemistry, uh, because we knew that we'd want to bring her back. Uh, you know, I, I, I've done a lot of work with, uh, with comedy and romcom in particular. That's a tone that has not been explored in star Trek in probably, you know, 20 years. It's harder to do that kind of thing if you're not doing episodic shows. And, you know, I think the easy thing to do would be just to like do one episode that shows exactly how they're troubled, and then they're going to end up at Amok Time. But like how boring is that? <laugh> like, what if, uh, what if their relationship is more interesting and promising? And T'Pring is actually a formidable and interesting person. And so we started digging in with the room in ways in which to bring, could be, uh, like a legitimate, fun character to have around none of the things that people expect to happen have to happen tomorrow. You know, relationships are long and many things happen in them.

BILL: And also, also I think the original series sets up such a great dynamic between the two of them in that it's a very long engagement there. You know, they, they were placed together by, by their parents and Spock is half human and she's fully Vulcan. And, uh, so the original series sets all of these things up, but doesn't, uh, it was only three seasons and didn't follow through on that. And, and we get the, the chance to really play with that great, uh, setup. I, I think I, I could speak on behalf of the other writers. It's really exciting to get to, to get, to explore that dynamic more fully and Henry and Robins episode is, is a prime example of, of that, that, that Spock T'Pring dynamic.

I was actually gonna ask you about that. Well, first of all, Henry you wrote, I think maybe one of the funniest lines in the history of Star Trek, "Hijinks are the most logical course of action" <laugh>

HENRY: <laugh>

But um, what is it, what is it like to write for them as a couple, as two Vulcans? Cause you actually there's you actually have them accidentally switch bodies during a Vulcan mind meld, like how as a writer, could you even tell them apart?

PIKE: You guys did a body swap, like your minds are in your...

SPOCK AS T'PRING: That is correct. I am Spock.

T'PRING AS SPOCK: And I am T'Pring. Now you know, you can likely tell the differences in our mannerisms.

PIKE: Yeah...totally.

HENRY: I, I, I, having worked on a number of body switching episodes, I, I was familiar with a lot of the problems and tropes that you run into when doing it. So the, the challenge was to find a way for their voices to be very specific and distinctive. : The, the truth is that our Vulcans are not really the same as the Vulcans of, of 19, you know, the 1960s. And, and the main reason is that back then Spock was sort of the alien he's the other, he's not as much a point of view character. And we were presenting him very much. I mean, that's a very much a Spock episode. We present him as an emo, an emotional way in like, he's the character, who's emotional point of view. We understand which sounds funny because he's a Vulcan and Vulcans have emotions that they suppress, but this is a, a modern audience, like Spock is the person whose emotions that we are tracking in that episode. There's a moment where he comes back to his, uh, he's, he's been kept late at work and he comes back to his quarters and T'Pol is very, you know, she's super logical, but it's pretty clear that she's pissed at him, that he did not, uh, come back in time. Uh, and then she exits and he looks over and sees this like lovely meal she's made and he just shuts his eyes and it's, he's not being emotional, but all the emotions are there. And it's something that I think, you know, the truth is that it's a very human moment and we all can connect with it. So Spock is half human and in the original series, they really spent all this time with him being very, I am evoke in, you know, I I'm, um, half Jewish. My, my, uh, my, my parents are from, uh, different, uh, religions, uh, you know, and I know a lot of people who come from different, uh, mixed backgrounds and, you know, one of the things that you find, I think when you, when you're coming from mixed background, is it, you know, you tend to have an interest in, go through phases where you're interested in different sides of your family. And so we've seen a lot of Vulcan Spock, but we hadn't seen a lot of, like, what if Spock went through a human phase? What if Spock went through a phase that he's different? And then we have a little bit of cannon that we were sort of going back to, which is in the original pilot of the, of The Cage they have what we sometimes refer to in the room as smiley Spock, which is, uh, they show Spock on, uh, I believe, you know, looking at these sort of, uh....

BILL: The flowers.

HENRY: Yeah. These talking flowers, and like having this big smile on his face, just not a Spock we've ever seen before. And so we had some notion that, all right, well, there's a, there's, there's some Canon to explore some ideas about what this Spock is going to, you know, could, could be going through, uh, as a person of mixed parentage who, you know, uh, uh, has a lot of different things that he's still yet to figure out. Um, a lot of this is just about saying, like, let's just pretend that none of this is settled.

Yeah, well actually speaking of cannon and, and um, pushing boundaries and the original series, the Gorn was like a guy in a lizard suit and it became kind of a pop

culture joke. Like even William Shatner did a commercial with a guy in a Gorn costume.

GORN: *Grrrrrrr!*

SHATNER: *Oh no, not again!*

But you brought back the Gorn, and you made them terrifying with like, modern special effects.

SAM: *We got one in the shute!*

GORN SOUND EFFECTS

So I was, I was wondering like, did somebody come in with an, with like an agenda, mean like we are rehabilitating the Gorn, or did you just start brainstorming and say, ah, you know, who could be like the Borg for this crew and then like you eventually landed on The Gorn?

HENRY: I have to, I have to give Akiva credit here, because Akiva who has been with the new Star Trek universe for, uh, you know, since its inception pretty much has always kind of kept an eye on The Gorn, like he's been a huge fan of The Gorn the challenge of The Gorn is I don't think modern audiences who are very sophisticated and expect a certain level of effects and verisimilitude would accept a dude in a rubber suit. So understanding that you really have an expensive proposition, you have to find a way to reinvent them for modern audiences. Uh, because I don't think you could just do it the way that they did do it. I guess you could treat them with kid gloves, uh, or you could just say, all right, what's, what's The Gorn about what's the metaphor that we are trying to do with The Gorn that's different. And so, Akiva even had this idea that, uh, there's a truism in Star Trek, which is that if we just come to an understanding with other species, with other aliens, we will eventually find something that we can connect with. And the idea that he had was what if The Gorn is that is the species. We can't do that. What if The Gorn just monsters? Um, and that kind of leaves us room to tell another type of science fiction story.

BILL: That's that's the, that's the first thing that you said to me when I was hired onto the show was we're we're doing The Gorn and we're going to reapproach The Gorn. And I said yes, because The Gorn was probably one of the key draws for me to the original series when I was six, seven years old, even though it's a dude in a, in a rubber suit, I was fascinated by that. Uh, by that, by that dude, I was, I was kind of terrified by him and drawn into it. And I, I, for, for me that had a certain, and I, again, I was, I was like probably six or seven, but it had verisimilitude, uh, I did believe, you know, that that Kirk was up against this, this unstoppable being, uh, in, in the desert. Uh, so the ch uh, the chance to reapproach that race as a potential Trek villain, um, yes, cannon, you know,

uh, says that they were in this kind of weird caveman suit with a sash on them. And that, that we didn't know anything about them, but what does that really mean? Uh, so, and, and it gave, gave us a chance to, uh, look at canon from a different perspective.

Yeah. You know, one of the things that's really interesting to me is, um, one of the biggest criticisms right now about Star Wars, to bring up the other big franchise with star on the title, uh, is that they're being too cautious. Like people complain that they're just filling in like tiny gaps between canon and they're there's, um, they're not taking enough chances, but you guys are being like really loose and free, you know, with, with canon and um, and you're having, it seems like you're just like having a lot of fun. Like do you not feel that kind of pressure or are you just really good at hiding it?

BILL: I think we feel the, I think we feel the pressure. I, I, yeah, but I, I, I think you have to adhere to the, the spirit of canon and make our best effort to not undo. What, what has been a reality for fans for 40 50 years, we have very Hardy discussions about canon and, and what we, you know, canon can't do. But I think everybody has their eye. Everybody, even the, you know, people that you would call are, can police that are on staff all realize that

HENRY: We don't call them police.

<laugh>

BILL: <laugh>

HENRY: We call them canon experts.

BILL: Yeah, canon experts.

Bill calls them canon police!

BILL: Yeah, in my head canon they're canon police, everybody wants to tell a great story and wants to tell news stories in, in this, uh, universe. And I think looks at, at what's happened before. And sometimes there's a new perspective to look at, uh, canon in a way that you hadn't looked at before that some people might see as breaking canon, but really isn't, it's just looking at it from a completely new standpoint in order to tell, tell deeper stories.

HENRY: Uh, look, I, I, I can't speak to, I mean, look, I'm, I'm a Star Wars fan, as well as a Star Trek fan. I can't speak to the challenges that they must go through, uh, in trying to make those shows. But my philosophy has always been like someone hands you, a Star Trek show, you can't act as if you're going to break it. Um, because if you're too afraid to break it that you're going to break it, you're never going to tell interesting stories. Um, and so, you know, <laugh>, my, my feeling is like, you, you sort of have to find ways to push the boundaries of it, uh, because otherwise, why are you doing it, Gene Roddenberry? Wasn't afraid of breaking it because, and, and, and he wanted to use Star Trek to tell interesting relevant science fiction stories that related to the world that we live in today. Uh, and if we're not doing that, why are we doing Star Trek? It's

not, it's not all fan service. It's like a, it's supposed to be a living thing that has value to the world. I think that's part of being a steward, a good steward of the thing.

So far, their stewardship has gotten a lot of high marks from the fans. And I hope this encourages other writers in well-established franchises to be more playful with the characters, to swing for fences, or you know, reach for the stars.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Henry Alonso Myers and Bill Wolkoff. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can follow the show on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

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The best way to support the podcast is to donate on Patreon. At different levels you can get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, a t-shirt, and a link to a Dropbox account, which has the full-length interviews of every guest in every episode. And in the full-length interview I talked with Bill and Henry about plot twists that happened late in the season that those conversation were just way too full of spoilers to include in the episode. You can learn more at the show's website is [imaginary worlds podcast dot org](http://imaginaryworldspodcast.org).