

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

Jen Uselies is a singer in Chicago. About eight years ago, a friend of hers told her about a show that was looking for performers. The show was A Klingon Christmas Carol. Jen was not a big Star Trek fan.

JEN: But I have this like a hardcore love of really goofy theater and I was like, oh really? What do I have to do to get cast in that? And he goes well. Are you allergic to latex? I was like, uh no. So he goes we'll come out and audition.

And then she learned something else about the show. All of her lines would be in the Klingon language. And yes, Klingon is a fully functioning language that actors who play Klingons on Star Trek have to learn. In this case, at the Klingon Christmas Carol, there would be supertitles over the stage in English so the audience knew what was going on.

That might be intimidating for some people, but Jen is also an opera singer. She was used to performing in foreign languages.

JEN: I picked up on the language very quickly and the pronunciation and my fight skills were my choreography skills weren't so great.

But wait did you say that there's fighting involved in the in the show.

JEN: Oh absolutely. The Fessey wig party -- it turns into a giant bar brawl. Klingons aren't having a good time if there's not a little blood involved.

She did the show for two years. It was a blast. And then she found out that a podcast called Improvised Star Trek was looking for someone to sing "Kiss Me by Six Pence None the Richer" in Klingon. And they were wondering if she was interested.

JEN: And I was like Oh heck yes!

SONG: KISS ME

JEN: Within 24 hours we were picked up by Team Coco dot com and the Mary Sue. And just a whole bunch of other big blogs and websites and we're like oh my gosh! What just happened? The response to it was overwhelmingly positive. It's kind of crazy because like the Internet I always say like the Internet hates everything. But for some reason the Internet really liked this!

Jen thought, what if I put out an album of songs in Klingon? She worked with translators on songs that she thought a Klingon would sing -- like Love is a Battlefield.

LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD

That blew up, so she started doing concerts. And she doesn't perform as Jen Uselies. She created a whole new persona as The Klingon Pop Warrior.

Is it hard to sing in Klingon?

JEN: Yes it does yes. It's not easy. There are some really awkward sounds. It's pretty grating on the vocal chords. It's a very harsh guttural sounds in the language. And you just you get a lot of that kind of stuff and then trying to make it melodic and pretty. I usually don't do more than a 60-minute performance just because more than that and it just starts to feel really wrong.

To this day, she can't believe there was an audience out there waiting for a Klingon rock star.

Although, if you look at the history of constructed languages -- or conlangs for short -- this was a long time coming.

Now people have been inventing languages on their own for centuries -- as a hobby. But those languages would usually die off because not many people spoke them. The difference is now we can see a whole fantasy culture attached to those invented languages.

But what happens when we speak the language of fantasy characters in the real world? Does that change how we communicate with each other, and what we reveal about ourselves?

It turns out -- yes.

Now the grand daddy of constructed languages in fantasy worlds, in the modern era, is JRR Tolkien.

I've talked before how The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings were groundbreaking in lot of ways, like having maps of Middle Earth, which was

a novel idea. The same thing is true with the languages that Tolkien developed for the Elves in his stories.

Michael Drout is a Tolkien expert. And he says Tolkien was one of the first fantasy writers to appreciate how much we can learn about a fictional culture by studying their language.

MICHAEL: And I think that that interaction between culture and language in history is just much easier to see in something like a constructed language you know in a fantasy structure.

And he thinks studying the language of a fantasy culture, can give us a new perspective on our own language and how it reflects our culture in ways we often take for granted.

MICHAEL: And to see it right there in you know a manageable amount in Middle Earth I think gives us great insight into how this is happening in that sort of distributed intelligence of the millions of people who are making the culture we live in right now. And so it's I know it's kind of just a microcosm argument but I think it's a pretty good microcosm argument when you have to see how all the things could fit together and how they would you know you have to keep bending the edges and creating ad hoc explanations in little Middle Earth. I think it gives you a better understanding of how culture works in full big earth.

But Tolkien didn't expect people in full big Earth to try and speak Elvish. And we know that because he didn't create a lot of verbs for the Elves.

MICHAEL: So when they came time they wanted to write dialogue in Elvish for the Peter Jackson films they just had no verbs. And finally David Salo who is a linguist at the University of Wisconsin who was their consultant they said you got to make something up, you know use the same sound system use the same rules, use the same words, but we don't have enough verbs to have a conversation. But really the films gave it such an impetus and you had people wanting to expand the language and people wanting to write poetry in Elvish and write stories in dialect doing what had happened in Klingon.

For people who consider themselves Tolkien purists, any change to the language he created was heresy.

MICHAEL: And so what you get then is a split because people say that's not real Elvish and others saying you know you're a stick in the mud and not allowing us to do what the language should do. And they're like, that's not really what Tolkien said. He never came up with these words and there's always there's always something that you can point to that's like awkward -- there's no Elvish word for milk so let's call it first water because we have a word for water. We have word for first and the more like canonical people like that. That's so ridiculous token would never compound like that. And so not only did you have groups of elves linguists you had two competing groups of Elvish linguists who hated each other.

Of course when Klingon was created, nobody thought that would take off either — least of all the guy who invented the language, Marc Okrand.

Marc was hired in the mid 1980s to invent a Klingon language for the Klingons in Star Trek III. But he didn't invent the language from scratch. We did hear Klingons speaking their own language in the first Star Trek from 1979, but that was gibberish.

CLIP: STAR TREK THE MOTION PICTURE

MARC: And so I listened to that and wrote down you know phonetically what I was hearing, wrote down what the subtitles meant and imposed a structure on it.

Even though the audience wouldn't understand what the actors were saying in this newly constructed Klingon language, Marc wanted it to feel alien in its syntax. So he looked at what were the least common rules for languages. For instance:

MARC: In any language there's sort of three basic parts of speech in a sentence which is the subject the verb and the object and you have to put those three elements in any in any language you have to put them in some order or other English it happens to be that word or the subject and then the verb and then the object the least common by far are the ones where the object comes first. So that's what I chose for Klingon for Klingon and I chose object and then verb and then subject.

Marc says the actors playing Klingons were model students in learning this new he created because it was a creative challenge they didn't expect to get. But then Marc himself faced a challenge when he was brought back years later to work on Star Trek VI.

That movie was about a detente between the Federation and the Klingon Empire that was mirroring the end of the Cold War in real life.

In one scene, the Klingons reveal that they can quote Shakespeare, in English. But the director had a last minute addition; he wanted Christopher Plummer's Klingon character to quote Shakespeare in Klingon – to say, “to be or not to be.”

MARC: And I thought oh no. And the reason I thought oh no is because one of the decisions I made and when I was making up the grammar of Klingon was that there's no verb to be.

So he decided to go with the translation “to live or not to live?”

MARC: So I go over to Christopher Plummer and he says I understand you have a new phrase to teach me. I said yes he says what is it. Well to say to live or not to live there's a number of different ways I've could have done that but I kind of did it a very simple way. So it means live or live not which is (speaks in Klingon) So he says Yeah. I said yeah he says that's too wimpy that's too wimpy. He didn't say that he said something else but that's what he meant he said think of something else that's more Klingon like oh no what am I going to do. So I said what if what if what if we say top ta bet he goes ta ta is good let's do that. Well up until that moment tach was a suffix that meant to continue doing whatever the verb is so you say eat plus tach means to keep on eating to continue eating something like that. So I kind of promoted tach to be a verb in its own right that means to continue to go on to endure.

CLIP: STAR TREK VI

Christopher Plummer changed the Klingon Dictionary. And yes — Marc wrote a Klingon dictionary, which was published in the 80s.

MARC: But what I thought honestly and truly thought would happen is people would buy it some thumb say oh look there's the Klingon word for shoe. Ha ha ha. You know I put on their coffee table. But that's not what happened. What happened is people bought it and read it very thoroughly and studied it and a language speaking community started to get going I think it really got going.

Marc didn't find out about all this until he was invited to a conference of Klingon speakers.

MARC: That was odd and I wasn't prepared for it frankly because I'd go I'll admit I'm not a very good speaker of Klingon because when I was doing all this there was no particular reason to be one. So when it started happening I was kind of taken aback that people were doing it but it was all it was also fascinating to read what people were saying about the language and I realized it was more complicated and interesting than I thought it was when I was going along making it up.

LAWRENCE: I like to describe every Klingon sentence as a murder mystery. The first thing you find out is who's lying dead on the floor? Then you find out how they died. Were they shot? Were they stabbed? Were they poisoned? And lastly, you find out who did it to them. Object, verb, subject.

That is Lawrence Schoen -- one of the founders of the Klingon Language Institute. And the KLI has a rule that only Marc Okrand can add new words to the dictionary. But every year they can petition him to create new words. And the KLI has been using that limited vocabulary to translate all sorts of stuff -- including Shakespeare.

I asked Lawrence why Klingon caught on back then? Was it just in the zeitgeist because of Star Trek VI, and The Next Generation? He said yes, but there was other factor.

LAWRENCE: We came about as the Internet exploded and suddenly you could do real time conversations in this made up language with people all over the world. So in the early days of the KLI, I would get these letters that would begin with some variation of I thought I was the only one.

As I mentioned earlier, language creation is nothing new, people have been doing it for eons.

David Peterson is a member of the Language Creation Society. They create conlangs for their own sake, beyond sci-fi fantasy prosperities.

DAVID: There's also an element of writing to it because when you're creating a lexicon you're essentially creating the entire history of a people through their words. And you don't have to learn a language or use it to appreciate it. It's just

type of thing that you should be able to look at a description or look at a grammar or even just look at a lexicon and see the treasures that language creators have buried there in you know.

David has been hired to create languages for sci-fi fantasy worlds. In fact, he won a competition to create Dothraki – the language of the warrior clans in Game of Thrones.

DAVID: It was incredibly grueling because I just spent every hour working on my proposal. I made it through the first round, which was judged by other language creators that I beefed up my proposal again. I had over 300 pages of material by this point in time. We sent the final four proposals off to the producers and they chose mine.

David thought he had created the next big conlang that would take on a life of its own in the real world – basically, the next Klingon.

DAVID: We were super excited about the Dothraki job. Two months later Avatar comes out. So if you're if you're looking at something that you know took off – the Na'vi language did take off it's still very successful. So then by the times you know Game of Thrones comes along it's like well it's another created language -- it never had a chance.

He has a few theories why Dothraki didn't take off in the way that Na'vi did. But his main theory is that Avatar appealed to a younger audience that has the time and energy to learn a constructed language.

After that, he was hired to few more conlangs, and they didn't take off. And then, he was hired to invent a language for The CW show The 100, which is about the descendants of people who survived a nuclear war. This language, which he called Trigedasleng (tri-GID-a-slang), was supposed to be an evolution of English in the future.

CLIP: THE 100

The 100 doesn't have a big audience, but the audience is young, very loyal – and they love these characters called The Grounders that speak Trigedasleng (tri-GID-a-slang). So the fans really took to the language. In fact, they ask David questions about it all the time.

DAVID: And it's just it's really wonderful it kind of took me by surprise. This is the reaction I thought I was going to be getting with Dothraki and that just never happened at all.

Now that he's seen the potential of how a community of fans can form around a conlang – and the power that language has a tool of worldbuilding -- he's become an advocate for conlangs being a part of any fantasy culture.

DAVID: It's not expensive to get somebody like there are people that already are just spending it almost every single free hour of their day working out a created language that would be over the moon to have created for example a language for the Martians in Supergirl. And so since it's not going to be super expensive why not? And so it's just. I mean God it just kills me to hear when you know shows and movies are skating by on gibberish. There's no point to it right now.

David also thinks there is a correlation between how often characters are featured on a show and how popular the language is in the real world. Another reason why he thinks Dothraki didn't take off is because the Dothrakis were not on Game of Thrones very much after the first season.

And even the popularity Klingon started to wane when Star Trek didn't feature the Klingons for many years.

That's why Klingonists have been excited about the new show Star Trek, Discovery, which features the Klingons very heavily. And there's a lot of buzz around the language consultant on that show, Robyn Stewart, who in many ways represents the next generation (no pun intended) of Klingons speakers.

ROBYN: And there's also I mean let's face it head on there's a stereotype but the Klingon because being a virgin that lived in a mother's basement somebody that has the intellectual capital and the spare time to learn an entire language from scratch for fun has enough other negotiable skills that they do not need to live in their mother's basements and are probably doing quite well for themselves.

In fact, beyond being a Klingon consultant, Robyn is also a pilot. And you'll hear the wind whipping behind her because Robyn was calling me near a military base off the Eastern seaboard of Canada.

ROBYN: You know I have the army life, I have the flying life and the Klingon life. Probably more lives than that.

Yeah. By the way, your Klingon name is spelled Qov, how do you pronounce that?

ROBYN: It's going to sound like a wind noise again. Oh I say it's rhymes with stove except the first sound is like choking on spinach. Oh yeah I need some more color in there. Have you ever choked on spinach like you're eating it. And then you realize something's going down your throat and it's too much and you have to go on to get it back.

Oh yes. I mean it's spinach. But certainly I've had that experience

ROBYN: I actually think that speaking Klingon and having the ability to say that that will may have saved my life. I was actually joking once and did that to.

I said to Robyn, the one thing that has always baffled me about the success of Klingon is that it's such a harsh language to speak and listen to. It makes sense for the Klingons. They're this fierce alien warrior culture. They're often the antagonists in the story, or maybe anti-heroes.

But she says that's the point. Klingons are rowdy, and boisterous. They're also very blunt, which she finds freeing.

ROBYN: It's actually easier to discuss really hot button topics because the same conversation hasn't been said over and over again. The same trite words are coming out. I have a good friend whose father was murdered and he you know told his Klingon friends you know that you know in Klingon and somehow reading it like you there's no use of isms in calling on you just say the things. Another person came up to me as trans and I haven't had that conversation very often in English but for her it was kind of freeing to have it in Klingon because the trite words aren't there. It's so strange to have like learn these new words and have them go like you know right to your soul.

She says Klingon has become a part who she is, in the real world.

ROBYN: We were talking once about body modification. There was somebody that came to one of the Kabamba of the Klingon conferences and they had this tattoos but had done for me no actual interesting body modifications and you are talking about this and you know this kind of a world like you made this huge step thing. And I said you know I mean going on I but you know by speaking going on where we are mapping the insides of our head in ways you know we're altering the business the surgery

That's funny because it totally ties into Arrival. You know the short story it was based on in the movie the idea that the way you speak the language begins to change the way you think

ROBYN: Yeah that concept that way someone speaks entirely is you know changes the way that they can look at the world. No sadly they have found very little evidence for it. It's so appealing.

Jen Useleis, the Klingon Pop Warrior, agrees with Robyn. Taking on the attitude of a Klingon is liberating.

JEN: Because everything about Klingons is hard they work hard and they fight hard. But they also love really hard and everything is very immediate. For them it's very much about living in the present because you know big blue meth cock jaj from today is a good day to die like you know.

If I could start each day by saying, "today is a good day to die," instead of "oy, I have a lot work to do" -- I might have a better attitude as well!

But to keep evolving, Klingon needs to keep branching out, so it's not dependent on Star Trek. I think that's why Jen's music also represents a next phase of Klingon culture evolving in the real world.

As I mentioned before, she tries to pick songs that feel Klingon-like. But she's also pushing the boundaries of what a Klingon would say or feel.

SONG: MY HEART WILL GO ON

JEN: Even when I'm doing silly love ballads like my heart will go on like there's something really powerful about a Klingon singing that song and you know and talk to you about their heart continuing on.

Is there when you sing that. Is there a more literal translation to my heart will go on. Like my heart will not explode or it on myself or something?

JEN: It actually, you hear TACH and that means to continue.

And we know that Tach means to continue because of a change that Christopher Plummer added to the language.

Although My Heart Will Go On takes on a meaning in Klingon because:

JEN: Klingons have fully redundant organ systems so it kind of makes sense on a literal level that if something happened the heart would go on!

SONG: MY HEART WILL GO ON (FADE OUT)

Well, that is it for this week, but before I go, I want to tell you about a podcast series that just wrapped up called Very Bad Words. The host Matt Fiddler is an old colleague of mine from WNYC, and he brings a public radio approach to the history of curse words. And he recently did an episode about swearing in constructed languages. I asked Matt, which conlangs have the most curse words?

MATT: Well, Dothraki is pretty filthy, an interesting thing in my episode that came out is that in the LOTR there is no cursing in the LOTR but Tolkien said the orcs had filthy, filthy mouths but they censored the translation of it because fantasy is supposed to lift society up, not bring it down so the orcs did swear but Tolkien refused to translate their filthy tongues.

Ugh! I love that, and it's so Tolkien too. I love it.

MATT: Yeah I know talk about like layers.

I'll include a link to his episode in my show notes.

Special thanks this week to Jen Usilies, Michael Drout, Marc Oakrand, Lawrence Schoen and David Peterson, Robyn Stewart. Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panolply network. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman.

You can like the show on FB. I tweet at emolinsky. My website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.