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

I have a pet peeve -- something that has been bugging me for years. The kinds of movies and TV shows that I watch – sci-fi, fantasy, superheroes -- I get exposed to a lot of villains with evil plans. And it drives me crazy when the evil scheme is so complicated, and so convoluted, that I can't even understand what the villain is trying to accomplish, and so I can't even root for the hero to stop the plan because I don't understand what they're trying to stop.

It's one thing if the whole movie is bad, but it's really frustrating is when a convoluted evil plan is in otherwise great superhero movie. Like in Spider-Man 2 – the second Tobey Maguire movie from 2004. It's a great Peter Parker story. But the bad guy in the film Doc Ock is obsessed with getting Tritium – whatever that is. And Doc Ock needs Tritium to continue his experiment of creating a fire ball of energy because the evil robotic tentacles on his back want him to.

CLIP: DOC OCK

Yeah, that doesn't even make any sense to James Franco. And that's another pet peeve of mine, when someone says to the villain you're crazy! – like that's supposed to explain the completely lack of logic in the evil plan.

Now when Spider-Man 2 came out, superhero films were not that common. Now there's is a glut of superhero films, which means there's a destructive arms race among super villains who keep coming up with bigger and bigger evil schemes.

Which got me wondering, what makes a good evil plan, and why do so many of these plans go wrong – not for the villains, they always get defeated, but why are they so unsatisfying people watching the films?

Get ready to seriously geek today -- just after the break.

BREAK

Before we begin, I should say this episode is going to be full of spoilers because the evil plan is basically the plot of the movie.

SG: From Lex Luthor to Palpatine, if you really think about it, your favorite villain's plan is really dumb.

That is Spencer Gilbert. He is the head writer of Honest Trailers. And if you haven't seen Honest Trailers, get thee to YouTube. It is a brilliant on-going series where a "in-a-world" type narrator breaks down everything that's wrong with these movies, as if the trailer guy had suddenly become brutally honest.

CLIP HONEST TRAILERS

SG: The room is usually split between me on the oh it's just fun side and Dan and Andy on the no we need movies to be better, we need to take this seriously side. It can get intense.
That's interesting there's a sense of mission to it.
SG: Yeah, our mission is not trash these movies, it's not be a jerk trailers, asshole trailers, we want to be honest, to be the voice of the fan who's out of the loop, has no access, the type of conversation you'd have with your friends after you see it.

So I asked him why are so many evil plans an incoherent mess? He says the first reason is because the writers are usually trying too hard to prove that <u>their</u> villain is an evil genius.

SG: Unless part of villain's character, the Riddler has to have insanely complicated plan he needs to put Batman into cat and mouse plan where he is pealing back the onion layer or Moriarty, he needs to prove that he is smarter for him, super complicated mousetrap plans that he needs to pick apart, but for other villains – no! You want money and power, go get it in the most direct way possible and the hero will try to stop you. You don't need to make it all about the hero.

In fact, one of my favorite Honest Trailers was the one for Batman vs. Superman, where they tried to break down everything it would take for Lex Luthor's evil plan to work.

CLIP: HONEST TRAILERS

And at one point, they stopped showing footage of the film and just has this list scrolling on screen

SG: We just wrote down what he's doing, it's a 28, 29-step plan that requires luck and bank shots and Rube Goldberg machine .
And pee in a cup is a great detail.
SG: You have to do that, that's the best part of any plan.

Seriously, Jesse Eisdenberg's Lex Luthor – who Spencer refers to as EisenLuther -- leaves a jar of urine on the Senate floor to let them he's about to blow up the Senate with Superman there because that ties back to a line of dialogue from earlier.

CLIP: KITCHEN SINK

Spencer says the second problem with evil plans is the issue of motivation. Like in this movie, Lex Luthor gives a lot of grandiose speeches, but it's never clear why he's doing all this. I mean wanting revenge is a good motivation – like Khan in Star Trek. But simply hating Superman for existential reasons doesn't work for Spencer.

He says if a villain is going to have a philosophy, it should be clear and simple, like Magneto.

SG: Magneto from the first X-Men movie where he and Professor X have this war of words, ideals and identity and his plan is part of that, turning everyone into a mutant and see the world from his perspective, in contrast to Professor X who wants humans and mutants to live together. Magneto wants to turn everyone into a mutant. You get it, it's simple enough for both of them.

CLIP: X-MEN

The other thing that makes a compelling villain is that they have a legitimate gripe against the world. In the case of Magneto, we understand why he would assume of the worst of people and want to protect his own kind – mutants -- and so a part of us feel a little complicit when Magneto carries out his evil plan.

I also talked with Abraham Riesman, who is one of my favorite journalists covering comic books. He mostly writes for the website Vulture.

And one of <u>his</u> favorite villains is Ozymandias from the 1986 graphic novel Watchmen. Ozymandias is a retired superhero who stages a fake alien invasion that obliterates half of New York because he thinks that will force the US and the Soviet Union to cooperate avoid nuclear war -- and his plans works, much to the shock of the other superheroes.

AR: Every time I read Watchmen a significant part of me goes maybe Ozymandias did the right thing which is the point of that ending, you're supposed to debate that for yourself, it's hard on some days that drastic, not that murderous but something that drastic is required to fix the Earth to hit the rest button.

This is actually a sub-genre of the evil plan – the utopian evil plan that will *allegedly* make the world a better place. For instance, the new Wonder Woman movie, where Ares wants to rid the Earth of those nasty humans so it can be a paradise for Greek gods again.

Or Batman Begins, where the League of Shadows wants to release a toxic gas that will cause everyone in Gotham to fight each other to the death, until this corrupt civilization falls like ancient Rome and then, um…

CLIP: BATMAN BEGINS

Or as Honest Trailers put it:

CLIP BB HONEST TRAILERS

SG: (Laughs) No one would look into the massive city-wide riot, oh well I guess law and order doesn't work.

In talking with Spencer Gilbert, I began to realize why I'm so fascinated by evil schemes. Most of them rely on magical thinking.

I've mentioned before, I have that problem with magical thinking, in real life, I often take a bunch of steps and assume that everything in the world will fall in line just the way I expect. That's the same kind of logic these villains are operating on.

In most of these stories, the magical thinking is obvious to me, like Batman Begins But in talking to Spencer Gilbert, I realized that the evil plans I thought were ingenious, are just as guilty of relying on magical thinking.

Take Goldfinger – who wants to set off an atomic bomb in Fort Knox so he can corner the market on gold. Even James Bond thinks that's a solid evil plan.

CLIP: GOLDFINGER

SG: Well, I'm not a history buff but I'm pretty sure the US was off the gold standard at the time.

Oh right.

Then I told him about my other favorite evil plan from the first Superman film with Christopher Reeve and Gene Hackman as Lex Luthor.

CLIP: HACKMAN

Lex Luthor wants to set off a nuclear bomb in the San Andreas Fault, which will cause California to break off into the sea. Then he will own all this new beachfront property in Nevada. He distracts Superman from California by sending another nuclear missile to New Jersey. That is brilliant, right?

SG: Okay well it fits the tone of the movie, fun, light hearted, you're going to blow up California and sell property, don't you think when people move in, they're going to notice the third leg growing out of your wife's head when she's sitting by the beach? It's going to be radioactive!
Uh… true. (laughs)
SG: There's easier ways to make a buck than nuking California to sell beachfront property. Yeah, hold the world hostage if you got a hold of nukes, he's taking it a couple steps too far. He's over complicating it.
CA you're not such a boy scout.
SG: It turns out not to be much of a choice, he gets the whole get out of jail free card, the whole time travel thing.
True.

But Abraham Riesman has a soft spot for that plan because it follows another important rule. The evil scheme needs to be rooted in the villain's personality, not just their political philosophy but what makes them tick as a character. That's why he loves Lex Luthor's plan from Superman II when Luthor agrees to help General Zod take over the Earth -- for a price.

CLIP: WHAT DO YOU WANT? AUSTRALIA!

AR: That's terrific! Again on some level it's relatable if aliens invading look certain they were going to win some part of me work with occupying army and see what I can milk out of it – it's not part you're proud of but see how collaborate with invading power.

He likes the 2006 film Superman Returns for the same reason. This version of Lex Luthor, played by Kevin Spacey, decides to create new real estate by throwing a shard of Kryptonite into the ocean and growing a brand new continent.

AR: It's not just relatable it's the whole point of buying real estate, for savings or flip it or have control of own domain.

CLIP: SPACEY LUTHOR

Kevin Spacey is so great, that he almost distracts me from the fact that there's a big red flag in that scene – the line where Lois Lane says you're insane.

Or Spencer Gilbert points out, Luthor is banking his real estate dreams on an unstable alien rock that you can't grow any food on, or even drill into it.

SG: Oh yeah, who wouldn't want to live there?

Which brings me to the next bit of advice that Abraham Rieisman has for super villains: be less ambitious.

AR: When the threat is something incomprehensible like the assimilation of all intelligent life causing universe to blink out something like that, that, when you have situations like that, it's so hard to wrap your mind around what's going on there's nothing exciting about it, it's old line watch someone's arm get blown off

in a movie you go, hmmm, that's bad but when someone stubs toe you go oh God, jeez and can imagine what that feels like!

Now interestingly, when I asked both these guys to name their favorite evil plans, they both mentioned Hans Gruber, Alan Rickman's character from Die Hard, who just wants to rob a building. But the meta-joke is that he's pretending it's a more convoluted political evil plan than it actually is.

SG: Everyone in film and audience thinks that he is a terrorist but it's all a cover to manipulate the police so he can get away with a robbery. That's one of my favorites.

AR: Hans Greuber's plot is one for hall of fame! Again it's small scale enough wrap your mind and relate to it, if I was that clever pull something off, you don't want to kill people, any superhero story and argue that Die Hard is superhero story, the actual violence fades, what people want to do, what their motivations are, what their struggles are.

CLIP: DIE HARD

Another example of an evil plan that's relatable, achievable, and grounded in the villain's personality and philosophy is The Vulture from the new Spider-Man movie, Homecoming. Played by Michael Keaton, this version of the Vulture is a construction foreman who steals alien technology left behind from the first Avengers movie, because he can turn that tech into weapons to sell on the black market. And he's doing this because the city and Tony Stark unfairly took away his contract to clean up that tech in the first place.

CLIP: VULTURE

AR: He generally believes he is put upon working class guy and he hates government bureaucrats, high flying liberal elites, doesn't use liberal.
But literally high flying.
AR: And they are literally high flying in Tony Stark's case. What you see is he's doing well, he's not struggling, he's motivated by grievance against world, and it isn't necessarily grounded in reality or if it is.

In fact, when Michael Keaton gives the villain's speech to Spider-Man – the you and I aren't so different speech -- it actually makes Peter Parker realize

he has more in common with the Vulture – this guy from the neighborhood – than he does with the rich and powerful Tony Stark, and that changes what Peter wants for rest of the film.

AR: There's a reason why we're not so different you and I pops up, because if that line done convincingly I have affection for you, you're someone I care about and respect means a) I've study you enough to defat you and b) tempt you, I haven't set out to destroy every memory of you, I would love it if you came to the dark side. That's the whole Luke I am your father moment right?

That's the other thing he likes about The Vulture – he's a parental figure. Abrahams thinks best types of villains are often parental figures.

AR: Someone who is older or wiser, who can run circles around you, you can't think as advanced as they think, it's like being afraid of parent as child, you feel powerless, brilliant and accomplished and more prepared person, it's the way if you're angry at parent, you feel you don't have ability to outsmart an adult, you don't have any way to out fight an adult as a kid.
Maybe Wicked Witch is such a good ---
AR: Exactly, the Wicked Witch someone in position of authority world bent to their will I can't, and this person has certain degree of control over the world.
Little girl who arrived what do you know about how I got to be the Wicked Witch.
Exactly!

Although when it comes to villains that are too close for comfort, I prefer the ones that are romantically involved with the hero --- like in the TV show Elementary, where Sherlock Holmes is living in modern day new York.

In season one, Natalie Dormer seems to be playing Sherlock's classic love interest Irene Adler. But he discovers that "Irene Adler" is just another alias for his arch nemesis Moriarty – who is typically played by a man.

CLIP: ELEMENTARY

These intimate types of villains tend to work better on TV. When planning a blockbuster franchise, it's usually a more bankable prospect to put the fate of the world or the universe at stake.

But that's changed too over time too.

In my episode about character alignments, I talked about the three types of villains – lawful evil, neutral evil and chaotic evil.

Villains in the Cold War were typically lawful evil because they wanted to manipulate a system for personal gain. After the Cold War in the '90s, you saw a lot of neutral evil characters that didn't have allegiance to any side, they were out for themselves.

Since 2001, chaotic evil has gotten the most screen time. That may be why of all the villains in this century, the one that really struck a nerve with a lot of people was a classic villain that just felt right for our time.

CLIP: JOKER

AR: Because Joker said an agent of chaos and the Joker is archetypical version of nihilist, it's like the Big Lebowski, say what you will about National Socialism dude at least it's an ethos. The nihilists are terrifying because they will go to any limits, all they want to destroy and confuse, and he has no rules, how could you possibility defeat someone with no rules.

Typically villains something that they think will make their lives better --- and the end justifies the means. But Spencer says the Joker is the real evil genius because he doesn't have an endgame. He cares more about how his evil plan changes the people who are trying to stop him.

SG: He's one of the best villains for a reason because he straddles that line between he does want to bring about chaos because motivated out of his character and he needs to prove a point to Batman he's not better than him. *That's true if plan fails that's okay he enjoys the chaos he'll improvise and find new route towards destruction.*
SG: Oh yeah, even if the Joker loses he wins. He just loves it.

It's easy to make fun of the evil plan. Many of them are riddled with clichés, propped up by grandiose speeches, and tropes we've seen a million times before. But they keep showing up for a reason. I think on some level, they give us a sense of purpose. If we're feeling cynical, they can remind us why we believe in our principles, and why they're worth fighting for.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Spencer Gilbert, and Abraham Riesman.

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