

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

**I've always been fascinated by stories where the line between what's real and what's imaginary gets blurred. And I recently learned about a high-tech version of this phenomenon called Vtubing, which is a form of content creation online.**

**VTuber stands for virtual YouTuber. But instead of appearing as themselves on YouTube, VTubers use avatars which track their movements using motion capture. So if you're Vtubing, you're talking directly to viewers in a video or a live stream, but you're doing it as an animated character.**

**It's kind of like if Andy Serkis, after he played Gollum in Lord of the Rings, decided to play Gollum as a talk show host on the Internet. Except most VTubers don't look like creepy monsters. They look like anime characters or The Sims with virtual backgrounds.**

**Vtubing began in Japan over a decade ago. And it became huge in the West during the pandemic when a lot of people were stuck at home. Also motion capture technology got a lot cheaper and more accessible.**

**I've enjoyed discovering this world of VTubers, but it makes me feel very old! It's a much younger generation with their own language of media with rapid-fire editing, over-the-top reaction shots, cutaways, and memes. And if the videos are done well, they're really funny.**

**For instance, one of the most famous VTubers is Ironmouse. There's no public information on her real name or what she looks like. We know that she lives in Puerto Rico. And she has an immune deficiency disease that leaves her stuck at home to the point where she needs an oxygen tank.**

**But she has a whole second life as a VTuber. The character that she plays through motion capture animation is basically The Devil. Except the design of her character looks like an anime girl with pink hair, a goth gown, horns, a tail, and sometimes pink flames coming out.**

*Welcome! It is !! Satan!*

**Ironmouse does a lot of the same things that a lot of content creators do on the Internet -- except she's doing it as an animated character. So, you can watch her character interact with fans by answering questions.**

*Today we're supposed to do Q&A and random games. <gasp> Do we have questions loaded? We do! Question one, have you considered doing another VTuber deep dive?*

**She often appears as a guest on Internet talk shows, even if the host is human, she's still in character.**

*It's okay.*

*Speaking from experience, how do you know so much?*

*Uuuh. I'm an anime girl, of course I'm a degenerate that likes feet.*

*<laugh> All right, okay, what happens if I lose this?*

**And she plays video games on Twitch.**

*SFX: VIDEO GAME*

*Oh f\*\*\*! There's two of them!*

**If you're not familiar with Twitch, it's a website where people watch other people play games, and there's a live chat function and other customizable tools that allows the gamers to interact with their viewers.**

**And if you're watching Twitch, the gamer will appear in a little box in the corner. The rest of the screen is the game they're playing. But a VTuber will appear to be an animated character playing this video game.**

**Ironmouse has over 800,000 subscribers on YouTube and she's one of the top VTubers on Twitch. The money she's made through ad sales and donations have actually helped to pay for her medical care.**

**A lot of famous VTubers like Ironmouse are not doing this alone. They have the support of talent agencies like HoloLive or VShojo which do behind-the-scenes work helping VTubers design their characters, produce their content, and drum up publicity.**

**After the break, I will talk with independent, up-in-coming VTubers who are trying to break into this field. We explore the benefits and struggles of turning yourself into a fictional animated character. And we discuss what it's like to navigate a**

media landscape that is already blurring the line between what's real and what's imaginary.

## **BREAK**

I first learned about Vtubing through a listener, who goes by the name Xinebi Ven. She is a VTuber herself.

Now, when I interview people, I use a site where I'm on one side of the screen. They're on the other side of the screen, and I record the audio from our conversation.

And when I went on this site to interview Xinebi, I saw a 3D animated character waiting to talk to me.

The design of her character is loosely based on the Andorian aliens from Star Trek – she's a big Star Trek fan -- although her character looks more like a teenage alien with pink hair around her antennas. She's wearing a purple and yellow jacket over a shirt with stars on it. I asked how she came up with this design.

XINEBI: I knew I wanted to be a blue skin alien with antennas. I knew that <laugh> and then beyond that I wasn't sure about color schemes, so I just kind of messed around in the, um, program that I was using to create the avatar. And, you know, I've always been interested in, um, fashion and things, so my own outfits and everything I've designed and yeah, it's like really fun. <laugh>

***I literally feel like I'm talking to an animated character right now, and like, which is, which is for my imagination not that far a stretch, you know, it's amazing how much I'm suspending my own disbelief right now.***

XINEBI: Yeah, it's, it's pretty believable. And you get, you can get immersed pretty quickly. <laugh>

***The rigging is so good. Like I could see your mouth start to move into a smile right before you smile. Like, how is that happening?***

XINEBI: Um, so there's, uh, the software I use, it's a program called VC Face and we all love it. All of us 3D VTubers love it because, um, it's free, first of all, <laugh>, which is nice. It's really accessible, but it lets you record your own facial expressions. And I have programmed certain expressions onto my character. And when I move my face in a certain way, it's tracking certain facial movements I'm making that I had to record so that the program knows what I'm doing. I also have toggles I can press because I, if you rely too much on the facial tracking, what it does is that you end up making a lot of facial

expressions you don't want to make a lot of the time <laugh>. So I used to have it where all of my facial expressions were tracked, but then I would like be looking angry when I'm really just concentrating. So, you know, I can press like, I can press this and look surprised.

**And when she said her alien face looked surprised.**

**One of the first VTubers who inspired her – who made her realize that she could actually do this herself – is a VTuber called Mori Calliope. That character is supposed to be The Grim Reaper if The Grim Reaper looked like a pink-haired anime girl wearing a goth dress.**

**Now, Mori Calliope is represented by one of the big production companies that I mentioned earlier. So, they put a lot of publicity into her first live stream, and when she went on, a lot of people were already waiting to watch her.**

XINEBI: Her debut was very charming because it was the first time, she had ever streamed anything, and she was just thrust in front of this huge audience and was trying to figure it out as she went.

*CLIP: Heh! Hello! <cough> Messing up already!*

XINEBI: And there were so many technological errors and mishaps, but everyone in the chat was so supportive and people just didn't seem to care. It's like they just really wanted to cheer this person on and seeing this person in front of such a huge audience, just completely <laugh> failing in certain degrees, um, you know, not being perfect, not having that polish or perfection, but still being received sympathetically. I thought there was something really powerful about that.

**Xinebi said it was also inspiring to watch how hard Mori Calliope worked to improve her craft over time, to become this character, the friendly Grim Reaper.**

*CLIP: Live music show from my house in the Underworld, I do a show.*

**And Mori Calliope is a rapper. Her music videos have millions of views.**

*CLIP: SONG*

**When Vtubing started in Japan, a lot of the Japanese VTubers were virtual pop singers. But a lot of independent VTubers who can't sing, or rap can still try to use Vtubing as a way to become content creators and social media influences.**

**Although I talked with a VTuber called GloopQueen who started doing this for a completely different reason.**

**Now when we talked, Gloop was supposed to have her motion capture set up so I could meet her in character, but there was a construction emergency at her house, so we had to talk human to human.**

**She says she discovered Vtubing in 2020.**

GLOOP: At the very, very start of the pandemic, I started to change gender and I was like working with a voice coach and she was like, Well, when you're out and about, you know, make sure that you practice your voice. And I was like, this was November of 2020. Nobody was going anywhere. So, I started a Twitch channel and at first it didn't really go anywhere, but I saw that the Vtubing thing was a fad that was ticking up. And honestly completely to my surprise, I totally fell in love with it.

***Well, how has Vtubing helped your journey, you know, in transitioning?***

GLOOP: When I first started with Vtubing, and transitioning was so scary, and it takes forever to meds to kick in and I didn't look like how I wanted to look like. It was very, very nice to have this venue, especially in a plague where we're all stuck at home. I had this venue where I could step on and with almost no effort, be perceived completely differently. My words, my thoughts, my opinion, the way that I want to speak to people are suddenly coming out of a completely different body, which is so cool. And in those early days was absolutely a lifeline.

***Well, what was it like designing that body?***

GLOOP: Really powerful and also kind of intimidating in a way because there's a lot of like little fashion design elements, but when you have total control over an outfit, everything that's on there is kind of an advertisement for who I am. So, anything from like how you know, sexual is the costume shows cleavage because a lot of VTubers are very sexual and a lot are very not. People are making a lot of judgements when they first see you. And I don't think that's necessarily as bad of a thing as it is in real life because you have total control over this character that you've created. So, I had a lot of agita about like, do I really want to commit to all these design elements? Ultimately, I was very, very happy that I did, but it took some experimentation, and it took some reinvention and going back to the drawing board quite a few times.

**The design of Gloop's character looks like a buxom anime witch with elf ears and green slime hanging off her hat. At first, the character was supposed to be dark and spooky, but she became goofier once she started going on Twitch and playing games in real time in front of an audience.**

GLOOP: That's one of the elements that really only Vtubing can do right now is where you have this, you have this fantasy character who is completely unrealistic does, you know, is animated, does not have to conform to any human real world standards and yet you can interact with them, you can interact with them very easily, you can pop up in their chat and address them one on one. They can read what you're saying, they can comment back on it. Lots of them, including myself for example, will have redeems and ways to mess with them. And even that becomes part of the act. And one of the things that they can do is they can use Twitch's functionality to make a jet of slime hit me in the virtual face and they think that's very funny. So it is, that is not something, you know, if you are a human performer who wants to do that, you get one slime jet and then you gotta close the show to go mop that up  
<laugh>.

**This is what it sounds like when Gloop gets slimed.**

*SFX: SLIME*

*Why am I amongst the, why am I being? You people act like I'm not nice to you!  
Unbelievable!*

**Now I've mentioned that the design of these characters looks like anime. For the most part, VTubers outside Japan have not been criticized for cultural appropriation because anime is a style that was designed to be universally appealing. But there's a difference between cultural appreciation - using styles and design elements from anime -- and cultural appropriation.**

GLOOP: There are creators and I've seen new things like that who are not just copying the look, but they're doing a lot more mimicking. They're doing exactly what creators over there are doing without any thought of the audience or things like that. And I, there's even been a couple, like it's only happened like a couple like obscure times where somebody tried to like claim that they were actually from Japan when they weren't. And it feels like every couple years as for as long as anime's been a thing, there's somebody who tries that claim <laugh>.

**Beyond the design of your character, there are a lot of questions VTubers have to ask themselves, which will define what kind of character they're creating, and what kind of audience they want to attract.**

**One question is whether you need to build up a lot of lore and backstory, and how much you want to commit to that. Xinebi says there can be practical reasons for sticking with the premise that she's a blue-skinned alien.**

XINEBI: When I order food. I'm a huge fan of Chipotle. Um, so if I order Chipotle, when I say it's like, oh yeah, I, uh, you know, I ordered Chipotle, beamed it up to my ship and then, you know, here it is <laugh>. So, you know, I don't say like, ah, I got Door Dash delivered to my, to my ship because that that can't happen, you know, putting a limit out there, especially things like, um, location related things. Uh, there's a lot of danger to being anonymous on the Internet in that it entices people to want to figure out who you are. And so you have to be really careful about when you're eating at a restaurant, what you're doing. If you go to a concert, don't mention the band, um, <laugh>, you know, because it's real easy to figure out a tour schedule and where that, where you are. There's varying degrees. I feel like I'm pretty authentic to my real self. Um, actually to the point I actually have said my real name on stream accidentally twice <laugh>. I covered it up pretty well! The vlogs are gone so there's no evidence of it, but I can say that now!

**I talked with a VTuber who goes in the opposite direction. His character name is D-36-5908 Ω -- written out as the omega letter from the Greek alphabet. Omega is so committed to this persona that he is a robot with a red and black faceless head – he used a voice changer when I interviewed him so he could stay in character.**

*OMEGA: My full designation is D36598 Omega. I am a mercenary for hire who has been taking him upon himself to stream and entertain the audiences on Twitch TV.*

***And where did you originally come from?***

*OMEGA: Well, there is a galaxy approximately 700 or so year, like years away. That is controlled by a government known as the galactic conclave of free planets. That is the galaxy that I am from. I was originally designed and manufactured as a mining robot, but over the course of several months and years, eventually the ability to become sentient and free willed came to be known for all of my kind.*

**I asked Omega if he would talk to me outside of his character, without the filter. And he agreed, and this is one of the few interviews he's given with his real voice. But he doesn't think that everyone needs to be as committed to being in character as he is.**

OMEGA: That's been a big contention point in a lot of Vtubing is, oh, you got to have lore. No, no, you can just, you can just be you. It's fine.

***Well, what's definitely not you? Like what's the kind of liberating part where you get to be Omega and not you?***

OMEGA: Uh, probably just being able to actually unleash that, uh, that unhinged nature for myself, like in my day-to-day life, I'm a much more reserved, much more like withdrawn person. Omega is one of those characters where something can happen in a game and I can actually just fully let loose, just kind of scream at the top of my lungs about something, actually make a whole scene about it. Be much more emotive and expressive. That's, that's something that, that's not normally me.

**Xinebi has found the same sense of liberation. By playing this alien character, she actually feels like she can be more authentic and less self-conscious online.**

XINEBI: I don't have to worry about the judgment piece of it. You know, someone has a thing to say about my model. I mean, I can just say, well, that's personal taste <laugh>, it's a little harder to hear someone had, you know, those personal judgments about my own body that I must, you know, live with every single day and look in the mirror and see and you know, <laugh>, you know, that kind of thing. Just gives a nice little shield from criticism I would say.

**The last VTuber that interviewed is called Pandora Arktos. And when we did the interview, she had her motion capture set up, so I found myself interviewing an anime character with black and white hair sitting in a virtual panda-themed chair. And her character is supposed to be a human training to be a panda.**

PANDORA: Well, so far, I'm just trying to become very panda-like in my day to day interactions. Uh, I'm very lazy. Uh, I like to lie around a lot. I fall off of things constantly. <laugh> I have yet to develop a taste for bamboo

**Pandora says that question about whether to pull back the curtain and reveal more of yourself is a hotly debated topic among fans and creators. Because when Vtubing started in Japan, the Japanese VTubers would never break character.**

PANDORA: Some fans who come from that side expect it from the indie and then get upset when an indie VTubers like, Here's my face <laugh> because they're like, No, you're doing it wrong. That's not how a, that's not how a YouTuber is supposed to be. Look at Japan <laugh>. And that gets a lot of pushback from the VTuber community.



**Pandora never drops her avatar. In fact, she's become friends with other VTubers, and even if they're having a private chat, they keep their avatars on.**

PANDORA: No, they've never seen me <laugh>. If I have my druthers, they never will.

**But she says those friendships are just as real as any face-to-face interactions online or in real life.**

PANDORA: Like they have been there for me during hard times. I've been there for them during hard times. Stuff we wouldn't show the world at large stuff we wouldn't post in our communities or on Twitter we've talked about privately and in a safe environment.

**In fact, having these avatars and character names has helped them open up to each other.**

PANDORA: I think a lot of them are introverted <laugh>. There's some exceptions obviously. Um, but most of the ones I've met have been very introverted people.

**But that brings up another issue -- parasocial relationships, which is a term for when a fan feels like they have a personal relationship with someone in the media. The term was originally created to explore how we think about celebrities or fictional characters, but there's less distance between a VTuber and their fans.**

**For instance, a few people that I talked with mentioned the term "the girlfriend experience" where female VTubers are seen as imaginary girlfriends in the minds of some of the fans. It's something Gloop has had to deal with.**

GLOOP: Where it gets difficult is there are people who want to know more. I think that there's very, very often this fascination, especially when somebody's uh, trans creator and you know, like, okay, what this person looks like in real life is probably completely, completely different to this model. They get curious. And I think also for a lot of people, if you look like a girl and you're nice to them, if you take a few moments when they're talking to you to listen to their problems, they can a little crush and sometimes they decide to want to know more about what's going on about the camera and you have to start to establish some boundaries, which is no fun. Telling people no is my least favorite thing in the universe, but it's a constant in Vtubing unfortunately.

**Omega says a few VTubers have taken advantage of those parasocial relationships.**

OMEGA: We've had a lot of issues in the past in the community where people have become VTuber and have used that kind of, uh, that kind of popularity that they would get from being a VTuber to be a little bit more predatory in nature, bad actors who've come into the community for, uh, malicious intent. And so, we as a community need to hold ourselves to a high standard and call out bad behavior like that. And, you know, work to try and make this community as open and inclusive as it can be to people.

**Inclusivity is a big issue. There have been "hate raids" where trolls will harass queer VTubers or any VTubers who are producing content that they don't like. And if you're an indie VTuber, you have the freedom to say what you want but your livelihood depends on your popularity. Gloop chooses to not engage with any political content at all.**

GLOOP: A lot of my audience is also LGBT, and they feel very scared when they open the news. Virtually anything that I can bring up with them is not news, not news to them. They have already heard it. They're looking, they're looking for a venue to not hear it.

**But the biggest challenge of being an independent VTuber is staying afloat in a media landscape that is dominated by corporations.**

**Because if you're a VTubers and you're represented by one of the big companies like HoloLive, they help produce your content. They manage your public image. Pandora says:**

PANDORA: When you debut as a HoloLive talent, you've got a fan base built in because they are so large at this point. Anybody new coming through the pipeline is going to have all of these other fans who are already part of the HoloLive fan base coming to their stream immediately. Additionally, you get a free model and it's a really high quality, beautiful model that looks great and has all of these different expressions worked into it. But for a good quality model it can be in the thousands of dollars and if you don't have a computer that can run all of this software, that can be something you need to invest in as well. And computers can be quite expensive!

**Again, here's Xinebi.**

XINEBI: You know, there's a little bit of shallowness too where if you don't have, like a cute model, it's harder to get people to watch you because they're attracted to, you know, the avatar that you're using to interface with.

***Right, I mean it's like, you could say shallow, but it's such a visual medium.***

XINEBI: I mean, it is, yeah. Yeah. You don't, you literally don't have anything to go off of other than this, this face and the way that this face can express itself. So if you don't, if you haven't balanced it well, people won't engage with you. So yeah, it's, it's tricky.

***What do you think, like in the future, where do you think Vtubing could go, given that it's growing so fast, where would you love to see it go?***

XINEBI: I would like to see more and more being able to use Vtubing in the real world in more ways. It's been happening a little bit in some rudimentary ways, like at, um, events and conventions where, you know, they'll put a, put like a tablet on a Segway so that people can meet their VTuber like idols in the hallway and take pictures with them and just, the accessibility of being able to like merge those two spaces would be excellent.

**In the near future, VTubers may become even more common than seeing a VTuber on an iPad attached to a Segway at a conference.**

**Meta – formally Facebook – is going all in developing the Metaverse, where they hope we'll all be interacting with each other through avatars. Apple is already going in that direction with their Memojis which can act like little animated versions of our heads.**

**And Gloop says motion capture technology is developing so fast, she thinks in the near future, having a virtual avatar will be an option you can click on Zoom or Microsoft Teams, the same way we use virtual backgrounds.**

GLOOP: It reminds me a little bit of The Incredibles when they say, you know, when everyone's super, no one will be very similar moment there because it's like, well when everyone's v YouTubers, how are those of you who are going to be performers make yourselves distinct? So I think what's going to be interesting is one, one thing that maybe the dividing line between VTuber and just avatar is I've noticed when Metaverse has pushed avatar creation or when it's shown up in teams or when it's shown up in Memoji, it tends to be cute and it tends to be fun, but it also tends to be business casual, they're not flashy. And I think that that's the difference is VTubers wear costumes and they wear at times ostentatious over the top costumes that have huge dragon horns and show cleavage and anything that you would want that is not something that the Metaverse is interesting in interested in bringing into your next VR business meeting.

**It's like how Austin, Texas adopted the phrase Keep Austin Weird as their unofficial slogan. We may come to the point where Keep Vtubing Weird is a rallying cry in a Metaverse that's becoming more and more homogenized.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Gloop, Omega, Pandora and Xinebi. I have links to everyone's YouTube and Twitch streams in the show notes.**

**If you liked this episode, you should check out my episode The Power of The Makeover Mage from 2019 where we talked with trans gamers who started experimenting with gender by customizing their video game avatars. And earlier this year, I did an episode called Snow Crashing into The Metaverse, which explored how the premise of The Metaverse came from a cyberpunk novel called Snow Crash.**

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