

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

If you've ever searched for my podcast, you probably came across another show with a similar name called Imaginary Advice.

Imaginary Advice was created by Ross Sutherland. He's a fiction writer and playwright in the UK. And our shows aren't that far apart in content. We both explore our relationship to stories and how it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between the real world, and the world we imagine it to be.

But Ross's podcast is mostly fiction. He often plays a version of himself who does slightly fantastical things. And I'm constantly amazed by his creativity, and how he keeps reinventing his show with every episode.

Like in one episode, his character trains an artificial intelligence bot to do stand-up comedy.

Hello, front row. What is your name, sir?

Ross Sutherland

What do you do for a living, Ross?

Uh, I'm a writer

You're a writer?

Yeah, that's correct

Ross, does your significant other know that you're a writer?

Yeah.

You don't lie or try to hide it?

No.

I'm only joking, you're all right.

In another episode, his character tells us that he wrote a novelization of Rumble in the Bronx. And he points out that in many action movies in the '80s and '90s, street gangs were dressed as punk rockers, as if punk rock was the cause of urban decay, not a reaction to it. But he fully embraces this idea and incorporates it into the inner thoughts of Jackie's Chan's character.

It seems everything I'd heard was true. Punk rock had corrupted the heart of America. Even as a police officer back in Hong Kong, I'd heard the stories, how this hateful music had turned the youth of this country into amoral flamboyant crime machines. If only the

electric guitar hadn't been invented, I wouldn't be here. In fact, there'd be no need for police officers at all.

In another episode, Ross finds a cassette tape of himself as a kid, making up a story. And this is a real cassette tape of him as a child. But then he re-writes the story as an adult, using all the fiction writing tools that he has now.

You could it was, it was, it was Box Man! Box Man!

The boy has seen in the future, the coming of his destructor. His name is Box Man. He's a robot, Box Man. And he tries to kill people.

Ross is very fond of that episode.

ROSS: I feel quite nostalgic for the freedom with which I wrote stories when I was a kid. And I like actually a lot of overlap my team. I've been trying to remember that. I'm trying to remember like how fun it was when you could write a story when you didn't quite know even what story was meant to feel like. And you could sort of feel like that, that, that extra degree of kind of like experimentation rather than, I don't know how I kind of felt after university where I felt a little bit crushed into feeling that I had to write in a particular like literary voice, which in retrospect, there's the, the really doesn't suit me at all. I much prefer writing stories the way I did when I was five.

How'd you come up with a title, um, Imaginary Advice as, as, uh, as, as a fellow person with the word Imaginary in the title?

ROSS: You know what, it would've been a lot more sense if I'd call it Imaginary Worlds, Eric, that would have been a lot more sense. I would have disappointed, uh, like far fewer people, because I called it Imaginary Advice because for me, and I don't expect anybody else to really get this, but this is sort of what it means personally. Like I kind of think of that was like two different ways to describe fiction storytelling, uh, sorry. I was Imaginary, you know, it's, uh, it's something that comes from the imagination. It's something that simulation, but like also fiction can be traditionally, you can be like a teaching tool is it's something that helps us observe the world. Hence, it's a tool for dispensing advice. However, when you stick those two words, like side by side, they do not go together. And there's a kind of like friction that they kind of like cancel each other out because, you know, if a story is Imaginary, then surely like the moral is also imaginary. That also is kind of fake. Or if fictions are basically just meant to be like thinly veiled, moral lessons, don't we have to attribute everything inside the story to being the actual voice of the author, therefore real, therefore not Imaginary. Anyway, like I just liked that friction of how those two things kind of like cancel each other out. And I think Imaginary Advice it sort of exists a little bit in that twilight worlds, you know, between fiction and nonfiction and in that kind of space, you've got to live with some

contradictions. I've made my podcast sound incredibly pretentious I now realize!
(Laughs)

That's what I like about it. It can be profound and weird and funny at the same time.

One of my favorite episodes takes place in the near future. His character moves to New York and becomes obsessed with an off-Broadway show called "I Couldn't Help but Wonder." This show is a recreation of Sex and The City as a form of interactive immersive theater.

"From now on, there is to be no talking," said the disembodied voice over the channel. "Please do not touch any of the actors unless they touch you first. Keep your flip phone handy, you never know who might call, after anyone can make it in New York if you know who to talk to. Welcome to New York!"

We stepped out into.... Madison Ave? At least it looked like it. I knew in reality we must still be indoors but somehow a sky above us, and a breeze.

Now I did an episode about immersive theater in New York, where instead of sitting in a seat, you're walking around an abandoned warehouse, or an old school. As you go from room to room, the play unfolds around you.

But in his story, the recreation of Sex in the City is so ambitious, it fills up an abandoned skyscraper – which isn't totally unrealistic give how many buildings in Manhattan are vacant because of the pandemic.

The inspiration for the episode came from a trip he and his wife took to New York on their honeymoon. They went to see an immersive show called Sleep No More. That show is loosely based on Macbeth.

ROSS: Actually, at the play itself, we had a sort of like a kind of ambivalent experience. We, we made some mistakes. I was convinced that if I didn't follow the crowds, I would be rewarded for my certainly, you know, from my tenacity or something that like, I was just like, no, no, like, I don't want to go, you know, rushing after, you know, Lady Macbeth as she could of goes off to her next scene, I'm going to go in the other direction into this empty room. And I will, I like maybe something will kind of happen in there. And so I actually didn't see hardly any of the play. That's all I managed to just always be in a space where nothing was happening. And, uh, my wife did the opposite. She was kind of like, she just locked onto one person and kind of like rushed around the

building all night, following that person to sort of make sure she got one clear linear narrative take through the story. So even though we came back from the play, and we didn't have like the greatest of experiences through it, uh, I kind of went online after that. And I just started reading all the blogs, uh, written by, you know, huge fans of the show. And I found those just like utterly fascinating and, you know, people who had been to see the show, you know, like, yeah, like 10, 20 times and had just mapped every single part of this kind of this moving experience. And they even knew like which actors, they preferred playing the parts on different nights. I sort of became interested in those people, those kind of like those archivists.

But then, so that's interesting in itself, but then for you to think, well, how am I going to use that creatively? You take Sex and The City and said, it's set the story in New York. What was the idea behind that?

ROSS: During that same trip we, uh, we bumped into someone who had done like the Sex and The City walking tour of New York who had, uh, gone to the, the Magnolia bakery and what have you. And we also bumped into someone who had done The Sopranos, a walking tour of New York who basically had been shown, oh, like here's the bin where we shoved so-and-so and I like the idea of like how a certain cities kind of like carry these, uh, these kind of like fictions inside them already. And there's something about sex in the city and it's kind of culture of the VIP culture that it sort of like operates within where it's all about are, you know, can you get tables to a particular place? And, you know, there's Sex and The City is full of velvet ropes are which they're trying to navigate their way around, you know? And that does also sort of like tally with some of the more like cynical examples of, of, uh, sort of like immersive theater. Well, there's this, there's a sliding scale. I think at one end, I think there's some immersive theater, which I have like absolutely loved and had some incredible experiences one-to-one experiences, which I, which feel really original and different. And then the other end, there are things which feel kind of much more like an interactive theme parks. And I guess for me, both of those kinds of things, they're about this way, either we take a story and then we can a graft, all this extra stuff around it, you know, like whether that's just like fan culture or like the, the meme-ification of a story, or just the way that we can of regurgitate it and recycle it and, uh, review it in blogs and, you know, like find ways of, uh, reusing the story to, you know, in a way that it wasn't intended to be used.

RETAKE: That's so interesting. I definitely relate to the idea that you can love something so much that you consume all the media around it, and you feel like after a while, the original thing gets lost and you're like, do I still like this thing, or is this just nostalgia? Am I seeing things that aren't there? Is this more about me than the thing itself?

ROSS: I think that was certainly how I felt. Yeah, for sure. And I'm beyond a certain point, you start to kind of think to yourself. Yeah. If you stare long and hard enough at anything, you can change it to mean anything, you know, like, and that stops being a

kind of a, uh, a hypothesis. And it starts to feel like facts that like the just symbols are that mutable that you can go that like it, particularly if you you'll willing to sort of enter into, um, a kind of process of repetition, both in your process and maybe with the audience as well, you can be like, okay, watch, once you recognize this, now, watch it again, think about this. And then you just keep showing it to them again. And again, and again, he says, yeah, soon it's just this kind of weird symbolic wallpaper that you can kind of just like, like, uh, restructure, uh, however you want.

Which brings me to the episode I want to focus on, it was an episode of his podcast called Ten Thousand Years, where he took the plot of a Hollywood comedy and turned it into a work of cosmic horror.

The inspiration for the episode happened when he learned that in the original screenplay of Groundhog Day, Bill Murray's character, Phil Connors, was supposed to be stuck in that loop for 10,000 years. The filmmakers changed it to be more like 20 or 30 years. But that got Ross thinking:

ROSS: When he's only in for 30 years, when Phil comes out the other side, he's still going to be like a human being. But the Phil that comes out the other end of a 10,000-year loop, right. Isn't going to be human anymore, right. That you're going to become something else. And so, I kind of loved that as a, as a sort of writing challenge. And I think the original, I it's heart like the, the beating heart, uh, Groundhog Day is cosmic horror. It's not presented that way, but also like we were talking about like this, this, this kind of memification of stories. We're so familiar with like so many of the scenes in Groundhog Day, it's hard to actually plug into the experience that, um, Phil, Bill Murray's character is, uh, is going through. And, uh, um, once we've seen it through to the end, once we sort of know it's all going to be around for him, eventually he's going to exit the loop. And when I was writing this episode of Imaginary Advice, I think I was at a point where I really want it to, to lock into that message because lots of people have spoken about like lockdown being a lot, like Groundhog Day

And not knowing when it's going to end.

ROSS: Not knowing when it's going to end. Yeah. But at that period of time, I kind of feel like I was making the same kind of mistakes that Phil was making at the star, which is the, I was obsessing over when it was going to return to normal.

RETRAK: Yeah. And also, too, your episode made me think a lot about mental health and how to handle depression, especially during the pandemic, and how isolating that felt.

ROSS: Yeah. Sometimes giving up on the future is like that, that, that, that process of letting go like is incredibly painful. And doesn't automatically come with some kind of like cathartic third act where you actually start to focus on the present.

After the break, we will hear what happens when Groundhog Day turns into Groundhog Infinity.

BREAK

Let's hear part of the episode Ross produced called Ten Thousand Years Part II. Ross often works with collaborators. For this episode, he asked several of his friends to write short stories imagining what would happen if Groundhog Day was stretched over the length of human civilization.

He ended up commissioning five stories. Some of them included characters from the original movie. But I'm just going to play three of the stories because they focused primarily on the character of Phil himself.

The first story was written by Ross. It imagines what if the happy ending we know from Groundhog Day wasn't a game changer that broke the curse? What if it was just another day?

23 years, 11 months, 16 days

The wet patch on the shirt was gone. Phil's arm was no longer numb, he lifted it slowly, moving it through the space where Rita's body once was.

Phil went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth. He had to shit. After that, he went back, sat on the bed, listened to the sound of his heartbeat.

Phil didn't go out to Gobbler's Knob that day. It was the first day he'd not turned up for work in maybe over a hundred days, today though, he couldn't bear to see Rita. Not so soon after she finished from his bed. Instead, Phil, just picked a bench and waited out the day. The one on east Mahoning Street, there was a bare Oak tree across the road. Phil just stared at the tree, trying to block out the rest of the world. His heart felt like a jagged stone, maybe thought Phil, lighting a cigarette, maybe he should never see Rita again. It's easy to avoid one person in a city, even easier. If you knew what Phil knew on a day like today, a day where Phil didn't turn up for his job. Phil knew Rita's movements in a day like this all too.

Right now, Rita will be having a coffee with Larry in the Tip Top. The time was 12:04. So yeah, right now she was just about to order a carrot cake. Rita always ate when she was angry. Rita would have just finished telling Larry that Phil should lose his job. Phil

knew the speak. He'd gotten close enough to hear it before. Rita would call Phil incompetent. She'd call him a creep. She'd be talking about his hair. He hated him on these days.

Phil thought again about last night, he knew that there was no such thing as a perfect day, but still to look into Rita's eyes again and see no recollection of last night. Phil just didn't think he could take it.

Phil tried to empty his mind, lose himself in the tree across the road, its branches black bronchial, bifurcating into the sky. All the things that oak had seen, how long had it taken to get that tall, that strong? 30 years? 40? Phil had been in Punxsutawney almost as long, maybe thought Phil, maybe I'll just sit here for a couple of years and made it say on this tree, I'll sit here and look at this tree until all memory of Rita leaves my brain.

At that point, the boy climbing the tree slipped from his high branch and slammed face first into the hard concrete below.

Oh yeah. Thought Phil, the kid.

In the 11 years, since Phil first learned of Charlie's accident, this was the first day he'd forgotten to catch him.

A passing car screeched to a halt. An elderly couple ran to the young boy's aide feel recognized. The couple was Betty and Chuck from the wool shop down the road. They turned the boy over to make sure he could breathe. A jogger ran to find a payphone.

Phil left to get a drink. He felt terrible, of course, but after a couple of scotches, he began to see things a little clearer. If I can forget the kid once thought, Phil, maybe I can forget him forever. And if so, who knows? Maybe I can forget other things too.

Phil looked at the ice in his tumbler. Each piece looked like a sculpture of Rita's head. Three lit decapitated Rita heads, slowly dissolving in a lake of scotch. Anything is possible, thought Phil. Anything is possible.

2,742 years, 4 months, 12 days.

Written by Lenni Sanders

Sandra is one of several administrative staff at the St. Francis of Assisi school Punxsutawney. She sits at her desk, folding the day's exclusion letters into perfect zed folds. The paper makes a crisp, satisfying line where it is folded, sharp and simple.

Andrew will be excluded for one day for foul language. Maggie will be excluded for a week for poisoning the form room fish. The letters slide sleekly and handsomely into their envelopes.

Earlier this morning, when Sandra first got up, she saw wavering halos around the light bulbs, glowing in every color. She doesn't know why. If she could just get it back. The light was like oil in a puddle, looking so real in the air, impossible to touch, but she knew that it would feel like satin if she could.

It would be nice to be able to tell someone about the colors without feeling dumb. Sandra thinks. She imagines someone coming in and asking what's up, and being able to tell them everything, someone she could trust like that.

Outside now, the strain of birdsong is coming in. Sandra can't place it. Dad is a birder and often showed her when she was little, the bird book, the one with illustrations and written up descriptions of the voices of the birds. The common yellow throat is supposed to sing, whichatee, whichatee, whichatee.

In the gray air, she can see his breath making a little plume of steam. As he sings the man in the tree, in his regular clothes. He has climbed fairly high up, holding brunches in his left and right hands like ski poles. He looks like someone in a trance, like someone who can see something, nobody else can like her ex-girlfriend on acid, amazed by daytime television. His smart brown overcoat flaps in the wind for a man with a face so well shaped for being sardonic. He looks sincere like a good listener. The man singing in the tree makes a series of complicated deft movements with his mouth. He makes a small whistling dot of it. Then he opens it so wide she can almost see his teeth glinting although he is far away.

Hundreds of birds coming down out of the sky at a gentle speed, like a pillow torn open dropping feathers. They are all the birds of the land. Crows, blue jays, geese off the water Eagles, a heavy moody vulture, dove, chickadees, grackles, birds, birds, birds, a flurry of them faster. Now completely covering him from view, completely covering the tree in the soft leaves. The bows drooping under the weight.

Sandra closes her eyes and finds he is like the light containing all the colors. He makes it come back for her as if she had told him exactly what she lost. It is as if he has been practicing for years to show her.

She opens her eyes. There is a movement, a great shaking of wings and the birds lift away together.

The man, his arms raised in song, is being carried away into the air with the springily connected a ball of birds. They go easily as if it is just a matter of catching the air current correctly.

Does he seem to salute her?

9,999 years, 11 months, 30 days.

Written by Ross Sutherland

The entity once known as Phil Connors lies in the structure once known as The Cherry Tree Inn.

The entity has no words to speak. It has no needs or wants, no intentions. Simply by existing, the entity claims it's inalienable right to exist. It does not open what was once its eyes, does not defecate nor urinate from what was once it's schlong. Every 32 minutes, it takes one breath of air into its lungs.

The limbs of the entity, once known as Phil Corners have not moved for 3000 years. And yet there is no atrophy. If the entity wanted, could jump up from its bed, the second it could dance The Charleston smash through this hotel window. It could murder every living thing in a 10-mile radius. And no human could stand in its way.

Every single branching outcome, it would have already faced a thousand times over. It could walk naked towards you through a volley of bullets without some much is a scratch, but these are ancient myths. Now the century of blood has long faded as has the century of learning century of self-annihilation the brief beekeeping phase. After a millennia of searching, the entity has chosen a final single path. It has chosen to do nothing, to be nothing to remove its influence on the universe entirely. Perhaps with this decision, this was the moment that the entity once known as four corners finally became God.

The entity once known as Phil Connors can now feel the vibration of every single insect in the law and outside. It can feel the frequency of every light bulb, what its consumption of every electrical device. It can taste the moisture and every forehead I can hear the books in the library decomposing and those that you mess in of every dog penis, the volume of every dying breath. This single day is traced over and over and over again until it became the whole universe like that golden phonograph record, they shot in the

space, four-dimensional sculpture of the universe, or 3.4 square miles of it held gently in the entities mind like a snow globe.

On what used to be called a nightstand for number wheel mechanism of the flip clock rotates the hour page from five to six and the universe is reborn.

10,000 years.

The dead skin cells of what used to be the forehead of Phil Connors reincarnate themselves. As the room fills with music.

They say we're young. And we don't grow. We won't find out. We don't know.

In just under three minutes the radio alarm will automatically turn itself off again. But in this brief musical in emission, the entity is its own creation myth. The waltz time oboe of I Got You Babe swirls around the entity, like a shroud, like a shawl, end and beginning the alpha and the omega existence and non-existence the voice Salvatore Phillip Bono and Cherilyn Lapierre Sarkisian vibrating through everything as if the words were spoken by the planet core itself.

With these words, the entity once known as Phil Connors makes its one and only movement its lips silent, opened and closed around the chorus, the voice of the entity and the voice of the universe, each speaking to the other. And that same general register, like the voice of the smallest kid in class when they pick up a school Guinea pig, hold it to their lips and say, I've got you. I've got you.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening and special thanks to Ross Sutherland. I put a link in the show notes to all the episodes of Imaginary Advice that we talked about.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. If you really like the show, please leave a review wherever you get your podcasts, or a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover Imaginary Worlds.

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. You can learn more at imaginary worlds podcast dot org.