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

We are in the golden age of headcanon, although that may not be a good thing.

Headcanon is a term for when a storyteller is creating a mystery or telling a story that isn't finished yet. And the fans fill that in those gaps with their own ideas of what's going to happen, or what will be revealed. And when their headcanon doesn't turn out to be canon, the fans don't always take it well.

Some people blame the fans for not letting storytellers do their jobs and finish the stories on their own terms. But a lot of people also blame J.J. Abrams. So much headcanon was sparked by work that he produced, like Lost, Alias, Cloverfield, Westworld, and the new Star Trek and Star Wars movies. And his approach has been copied by a lot of storytellers working in sci-fi and fantasy when they want to create a mystery and a lot of social media buzz.

ABRAMS: What are stories but mystery boxes? There's a fundamental question, in TV, the first act is called the teaser, it's literally the teaser, it's the big question....

That is J.J. Abrams giving a famous TED talk about his favorite storytelling device: the mystery box. In the talk, he is standing next to a box with a question mark on it. He bought the box years ago and never opened it because he says, quote "mystery is the catalyst for imagination." In fact, he sometimes sets up mysteries without knowing himself, how he's going to resolve them.

And as a fan, I know what it's like to get caught up in one of these mysteries. It can be frustrating when you get really attached to a headcanon that you read about or one you came up with, but it doesn't go far beyond your own head. So, we asked you, our listeners, to pitch us your favorite headcanon.

And heads up, there will be some spoilers. It's hard to talk about headcanon without mentioning the actual canon. So, I put a list of all the movies and TV shows we'll be discussing in the show notes. Although many of them came out years ago.

All right. Going back to J.J. Abrams. The Force Awakens set up a mystery around the character of Rey and her background. The disappointment that many fans felt around how the mystery got resolved spawned a cottage industry of discourse, and videos explaining why that story didn't work.

Larry Brenner wrote to us with a really interesting idea of how the pieces could have fit together. And this goes back to something he thought about before he ever saw the sequel trilogy.

LARRY: I take issue with the idea, at the end of Return of the Jedi, that Darth Vader has been redeemed, that Anakin has been redeemed. It's a redemption moment. Yes. He's turned away from the dark side. Yes. He saved his son's life, but he murdered many, many people. He, we saw him kill children in Revenge of the Sith. He's responsible in part for the death of an entire planet and untold lives. And I don't know if in the last five seconds you save your son's life, who's only in danger because of you in the first place that, that tallies the scales a little bit.

VADER: Just for once, let me look on you with my own eyes.

LARRY: And so, you know, when I look at the first six movies and we see, you know, very clearly, this is the story of Anakin Skywalker being told over six, and we get part seven, there's a big part of me, that's thinking, oh, is this the continued story of Darth Vader? So that was kind of in my mind, going into this. And even before I saw the movie, I know that the question that people were asking, coming out of it was who is Rey? Where does she come from? For me, the answer to this is Rey, is the reincarnation of Anakin Skywalker. The scales have not been set equal. There is a debt that has been owed from his past life. And so, he's going to need another lifetime in order to accomplish that.

And so, tell me more of the, the, the things that you saw in episode seven, eight and nine, that you felt like, you know, this actually supports my theory.

LARRY: Okay. So, there's a number of things. Some, some obviously are better fits than others. One of the major complaints, some of my friends had about this movie is that Anakin has, sorry. Rey has a number of skills that just inexplicably appear. She is surprised to discover that she can fly a spaceship. She's just this natural prodigy.

HAN: If this hyperdrive blows this is going to be pieces of us in three different systems! What did you do?

REY: I bypassed the compressor!

HAN: Huh.

LARRY: And you know, so many of my friends were like, oh, she's a Mary Sue. She just can do anything. She's just so perfect. But I was sitting there going, no, these are skills that she has from her past life. So, when she's surprised that she can fly a spaceship, I

think that's a genuine surprise. But I think what it really is, is skills from her past life, returning to her, uh, being called up as they're needed.

And then there are the unusually strong visions that Rey has when she picks up the lightsaber that was originally Anakin's before it was given to Luke in Episode IV.

LARRY: For me getting the lightsaber is activating some past life memories for her. And she recoils from it because her past life is filled with so much darkness.

REY: You...you're afraid... that you'll never be as strong as Darth Vader!

LARRY: The single biggest clue that I have on this one is throughout the trilogy, we see Kylo Ren constantly trying to commune with the skull of Darth Vader, but every time he tries to follow the path to Darth Vader, it leads him to Rey. And I don't think this is, oh, he misdialed and keeps getting the wrong number. I think his vision quest is taking him exactly where he wants to be. Kylo wants to be who Rey was in her past life, Rey is hearing the seductive call of her past life, trying to bring her back to the dark side. It's the thing that she has to triumph over to prove that she has defeated the evil that consumed her in, in the previous life.

Were you able to convince any of your friends of this headcanon?

LARRY: Yes.

Yeah?

LARRY: Oh yes. A number of them. And I was like, just wait and see, just wait and see, this is going to happen. I clearly don't get my last laugh on that one. I do say though, the last scene of the movie where she's on Tatooine and she's looking at the spirits of Luke and Leia makes so much more sense if she's the reincarnation of Anakin, her story has gone full circle. We found Anakin on Tatooine, and we leave Anakin on Tatooine. Everything is in a circle. Everything comes back around.

Which is a very Star Wars thing too.

LARRY: Even the title Rise of Skywalker, right? It's not that she decided to take their adopted name. It's that Anakin Skywalker is back. The spirit of Anakin Skywalker is back. This is something I wanted to scream at the end of the movie theater. I was like, here's what we, everybody sit down. Here's what really happened.

Everyone, stay in your seats!

LARRY: It's not over.

It's not over. Okay?! I got a PowerPoint.

LARRY: Um, I've got some action figures. We're going to do it again.

Yes! < laughs>

LARRY: Pull out my script.

Now there is another Star Wars mystery out there which has not been solved yet.

In The Mandalorian, we meet Grogu, or as he's called on the Internet, Baby Yoda. Although we don't know if he's Yoda's baby, I mean, we don't know where he came from. We do know he was training at the Jedi Temple before the younglings were killed by Anakin, right after he turned to the Dark Side. But we don't know who saved Grogu.

Mark White may have figured it out. His headcanon centers around a character named Jocasta Nu. She was the chief librarian at the Jedi Temple, and we first saw her in the movie Episode II: Attack of the Clones.

JOCASTA: I hate to say it, but it looks like the system you're searching for doesn't exist OBI-WAN: Impossible. Perhaps the archives are incomplete.

She only appears briefly in that movie, but her backstory was fleshed out in the comics where we learned that she escaped Order 66 – the assassination of the Jedi. Here's Mark:

MARK: She's she ends up being this like bad-ass librarian in the comics, uh, which is, which is kind of cool. Um, so then I'm watching season two, episode five of the Mandalorian, and Ahsoka says when the Empire rose to power, he was hidden. Somebody took him from the temple. It was like that. I don't know if it was immediately, but it was that day. I was like, oh, Jocasta Nu, totally. It totally falls in line with the timeline. It totally falls in line with her character motivations and interests and things like that. That's when I sort of developed the idea in my head of like, oh, this is my headcanon. And like, she saved him, and you know, it's still a mystery what, you know, Grogu and Yoda's species is. So, it makes sense that she would know something special about this kid. And as she was fleeing an order 66, like take them along with her.

So, if it turns out to be not canon, if they reveal the big, the big reveal and it turns out not to be her, how do you think you're going to feel about that?

MARK: Yeah. I think this is something that's important for me as like a fan where I go to imaginary worlds, like Star Wars to get like joy from it. It's also like I respect creators who want to tell their own original story and have something in mind. You know, I think it's sort of intellectually, uh, what's the right way to put it, like intellectually vain of me to be like, no, it has to be this way. And if it doesn't go this way, I'm going to be super angry. So for me, if, you know, season three of the Mandalorian or a book or something like that, you know, comes out and he escaped the temple, somehow else I'll be fine

with it. That is to say, if it actually ends up being the case, that she's the one who saved him, I will be like, yes, I called it.

Oh, no, I will tweet it out and be like, as you remember in the February 2022 episode of Imaginary Worlds! <laughs>

MARK: Yeah.

We heard from another listener named Doug Tricarico. He told us about a headcanon that he found online, which helps to explain a moment that always bothered him in a movie that he otherwise loved – the first Matrix.

DOUG: I was watching it. I was like, this is awesome. This is all the cyberpunk stuff that we've been reading about for the last, you know, 15 years or whatever. Then at the end, Trinity kisses Neo, and brings him back to life. And suddenly it's no longer science fiction. It's fantasy. I'm like, that's just goofy. Kind of dropped me out of the movie.

TRINITY: You hear me? I love you.

DOUG: And I went on to UseNet, which was the social media at the time. And we were talking about this, and somebody said, well, what if they're both in the Matrix? Both, uh, versions are in the Matrix of not just the part that they think is in the Matrix, but also the part where they think they're in the real world. That's also the Matrix. And I was like, now it makes total sense now it's still science fiction, which is cool.

Yeah. It's also, it, it feels like such a Matrixy headcanon because you could almost imagine Morpheus saying, have you ever woken up in a dream and thought you had stopped dreaming, but you're still dreaming?

DOUG: Yeah. Exactly.

You can almost imagine them explaining that.

DOUG: Exactly.

Are there other moments too, that you feel like makes sense, make much more sense now with that headcanon?

DOUG: Yeah. Like there's that moment where Morpheus explains that they use human beings as batteries and it's like, that doesn't really make sense. Like you use it as like distributing processors maybe, but as energy that doesn't really track. But if it's all the Matrix that makes it make more sense.

Not to mention the next few sequels.

Doug actually told me about a few interesting headcanons. Like here is another one he found online, which relates to Iron Man 2.

DOUG: There's a little boy that Iron Man saves, and somebody pointed out that the kid is the right age to be Peter Parker as a little boy. And so, I believe it was Kevin Feige himself said, yeah, that tracks. So, he's now, canonically he is now Peter Parker.

DOUG: It's the scene after Vanko has set all the drones and it's the drones are attacking everyone and there's a little kid with an Iron Man mask and he sort of holds up his hand and says, yeah. Or I don't think he says anything actually.

IRON MAN: Nice work, kid. (BLAST OFF)

Really? What scene was that?

That's right! I do remember that. And they're in Queens.

DOUG: Yeah. So everything that, all it all connects.

It would explain why Peter Parker is so enamored with Tony Stark. And we even see the silver globe from the World's Fair at the beginning of Spider-Man Homecoming.

DOUG: Yeah, I think they did that on purpose. I think they did that to specifically hook back to Iron Man 2.

And right before we talked, Doug had come up with his own headcanon about the Hawkeye TV series. At the beginning of the first episode, Clint Barton and his family are on vacation in New York, and they're watching a Broadway musical about Captain America. And as the original Avengers assemble on stage, Clint is cringing in the audience. One of his kids asks him why he's not into this show.

CLINT: I know what happens. I was there. You know who wasn't there? That guy. Ant-Man.

We cut back to the stage and see a guy in a cheap Ant-Man costume in the lineup of the original Avengers. It seems like a throwaway joke about how inaccurate and silly this musical is.

But Doug pointed out in the film Avengers Endgame, Captain America, Iron Man and the Hulk traveled back in time with Ant-Man to the first Avengers movie. They tried to stay inconspicuous, so nobody in 2012 knew they were there.

DOUG: But I've been thinking as I, as I was watching it it's like, but Ant-Man kind of was there because they time traveled. So, I'm kind of thinking that people probably like went back and scoured security cam footage and all that kind of stuff. And they probably got

a glimpse of Scott, as Ant-Man running around. So now people think that Ant-Man's been secretly working with the Avengers all along.

I love that headcanon. Kevin Feige, if you're listening.

Josh Sawyer is a big Star Trek fan. And he came up with a headcanon about a storyline which has always bothered him. The movie Star Trek Into Darkness is part of the reboot series where the original characters are played by young actors.

KIRK: Who the hell are you?

They built a big mystery around who Benedict Cumberbatch was playing, and halfway through the movie, he reveals that he is Khan, even though he looks and sounds nothing like Ricardo Montalban.

KHAN: My name is Khan!

So, Josh came up with this theory.

JOSH: I just sort of pretend that Benedict Cumberbatch is not playing Khan because it just comes completely out of nowhere about halfway through the movie, it's like what he's playing Khan, like from Khan?

And so what's your headcanon?

JOSH: Uh, well, I just, I just sort of pretend because Khan had this whole sort of cadre of other super soldiers that he was the boss of, I just kind of pretend they unfroze one of those guys and that guy is saying he's Khan and that maybe Khan is more of like a ceremonial title than it is a. a name.

So have you been able to convince other people of your headcanon? Have they been like, oh my God, now that you've said that to me, the movie now makes so much more sense?

JOSH: I say it to my wife every time we watch it and she, she either pretends to be convinced or, or has bought into it. So, so I think I've got one convert.

Make that two converts, no pun intended.

Now one of my favorite headcanons we heard about was not from a franchise that's very current, but it was a childhood favorite of mine: Inspector Gadget.

If this cartoon was a little before your time, Inspector Gadget was a wacky secret agent who wore a trench coat and a hat. And all these robotic gadgets could come out of his body.

GADGET: Go, go, gadget legs! Whoa! PENNY: Uncle Gadget, are you all right?

Chris Landon was always bothered by how hapless and bumbling Inspector Gadget was compared to his niece Penny and their very smart dog, Brain. And then Chris began to wonder, given how many contraptions come out of Gadget's head, does this man even have a brain?

CHRIS: I'm thinking maybe, uh, Inspector Gadget used to be a live, a real live secret agent. And, uh, he was investigating corruption in his own agency, and he doesn't know who to trust. So, he, uh, there's another agency that he, he calls and he's like, I need some help with this. And so, they sent Penny over and he's like, she's a little young, but she's like a really good secret agent. And she's like, I'll pretend to be your niece. Right. And then Inspector Gadget gets caught and they destroy him. He's like, has these massive injuries, and I'm thinking maybe Penny rescues him and takes him back to her agency. And they put him back together as best they can, but they can't save his brain. They take his brain out and put it into the dog. And that's why the dog's name is Brain. And so, uh, basically they fill gadget up with robot parts and he becomes like this kind of a decoy. So, Dr. Claw is always going after Inspector Gadget while Brain and Penny are behind the scenes doing the real work. Right. And Dr. Claw is, you know, Chief Quimby. Of course

I haven't, I haven't seen the show in since I was a kid. So Chief Quimby is Inspector Gadget's boss?

CHRIS: Yeah. Yeah. He's his boss and he is a real bad guy. I think that's cuz I mean, who else would Dr. Claw be? You know?

Because we never see Dr. Claw's face. If he's really Chief Quimby, he is setting up Gadget up to fail. Which he often does, but Penny and Brain save him.

CHRIS: It makes the show watch watching the show much nicer. Cause we're like, oh, there's actually really some stuff going on here. It's not just like silliness slugh>.

After the break, a fan comes up with an original headcanon idea but he's able to do something with it.

BREAK

All right, we have one more listener headcanon to explore.

So, tell me your name.

JUDD: My name is Judd.

And, uh, what's your headcanon about?

JUDD: Uh, my headcanon is that, uh, about 10 years ago, I was reading the DC comics Batman series. I was reading, you know, the main monthly series and I'm reading the storyline Hush, which is amazing. And this was like a blockbuster.

I remember I was going to my comic bookstore regularly to pick up the latest issues of Hush.

JUDD: Yeah. All of us were, this was, this was, this felt different. It was, it was hot. It was big. And at the center of it, there was this new villain aptly named Hush. We didn't know who this was. Hush was new. Hush seemed to have some insight into Batman slash Bruce Wayne that others should not have. And his, uh, his costume was kind of topped off by a disguise of, he had a bandaged face, which was, which is, was deeply interesting and mysterious. And it culminated to finally Batman is facing off with Hush and they're in a cemetery of all places and Hush reveals himself finally his identity and it turns out he is Jason Todd, uh, who was the second Robin as in Batman and Robin and Jason Todd died for those playing at home who didn't know it. So, this is Jason Todd had returned from the dead and was now a villain, not any villain, like a big, big shot villain who was making all kinds of trouble. And for me, I just, my top of my head blew off. I loved this because I could just see the whole story of like a hundred miles of broken road.

And what was the story in your mind that you started to imagine?

JUDD: Well, because Jason Todd represented Batman's greatest failure. The mistakes he had made both as, uh, raising Jason and Jason had become this rebellious Robin. And then these mistakes led to him being killed. He was murdered by Joker, uh, in Batman's bat cave, there was still an actual tomb to Jason. Uh, as a constant reminder, uh, Jason's costume was sort of basically floating in this glass tube and Batman was constantly reminding himself of his greatest failure. So, for Jason to return from the dead. Oh my gosh. So it was, it, it hung onto this lesson of his greatest failure, but it would now go further, he was going to be a villain, taking all the tools that Batman ever gave him and using them for wrong. For me. I just, I could see it so much of it was like an opera.

And then?

JUDD: Well then, a month later, uh, they reveal that, uh, that it wasn't Jason Todd, it was Clayface in disguise. So, and I thought like, oh, okay, well that's another way to go, I guess.

But then he realized, wait a second. I'm not just a comic book fan named Judd; I am Judd Winick. Today he's the creator of the children's series Hilo, but at the time, he was a writer at DC Comics.

But you don't just walk into the head office and say, I'd like to take a shot at writing our most popular character and well I'm at it, I'm going to change Batman canon. He had to wait a year before he finally got that meeting. They asked him, what do you have in mind?

JUDD: I laid it out for him as you know, as I saw it in my head, this a hundred miles of broken road that I saw when I read this story initially the first, my first instinct of like, oh, what a great story this is going to be. Well, I'm one of those very, very lucky few who gets to make this, the great story that I wanted it to be. And so I started doing it. So yeah, I actually did bring Jason Todd back to from the dead. So there!

Ha! It was a groundbreaking moment. in modern Batman comics. Um, and, and so

Ha! It was a groundbreaking moment. in modern Batman comics. Um, and, and so many people have run with that storyline too. I mean, given that you've you have the rare experience of somebody who has had a headcanon and gets to make it canon. Does that give you new insight, understanding or sympathy for people who, who have what they feel like is a great headcanon that was so much better than canon, but they don't have the access to make it happen?

JUDD: Always, always. I, I, I'm a deep appreciator of fan fiction. I totally understand that inclination. I mean, dirty secret us storytellers are constantly write rewriting things that we watch and read, constantly. I mean, even like moments after we see it, <laugh>, you know, noodling around on with it and what they should have done. And I thought this was would've been better and we could do it this way. So I, I get it. Hey, even stories I've done, and that people are disappointed with and wish I would've gone another way with I get it. Trust me. And to be honest with you, there is an excellent chance that I actually went the other way on that story for a little while too.

Yeah. Has that happened where somebody's come to you and said I was disappointed or you read about somebody said, I was disappointed with the way you went with this, I have my own headcanon as to what should have happened, as a storyteller, what's your reaction to that?

JUDD: Sometimes it's absolute, you know, just irritation and disgust. Like what, what, what do you know? What do you know? Oh, just so easy! Yeah. After, you know, like, uh, you know, we sit, we set up, this is this whole, you know, we set this whole thing up and then you look in there and noodle around with it and decide to zig when you zag, other times I have to admit like, yeah, no, I thought about that too. Well, why didn't you do it? It's like, well, I didn't do it because of X, Y, Z. I thought this would be a better direction. Or, you know, like, or actually I have to tell you, I think, I think the route that I

went was going to wind up better than, than what you were thinking of or what we were thinking of.

Yeah. I mean, what do you think is the difference between headcanon and fanfiction?

JUDD: For me, headcanon is when you specifically look at a direction, a story was going to make, and then it spirals down into a different direction, and it's gone. Fanfiction is just like you're pulling characters out and making a known story that goes with them instead of creating like an alternate reality.

Yeah. It's kind of a sense of like, I'm going to tell the story of Rey Skywalker and Harry Potter joining, you know, forces and um, against Thanos, and you know, it's uh <laugh>

JUDD: Yeah!

Uh, I know this will never happen. Therefore, I'm having fun as opposed to uh, if you had only let me in the room, I could have...

JUDD: That is exactly it. Yes, no. If I just had the opportunity to call the shots, aw man! Does social media make this kind of the headcanon thing? Does it exacerbate it? And certainly, everyone cannot just present their stuff with, um, on Twitter, but you can have a whole 20-minute YouTube video dissertation?

JUDD: Oh God. Yeah. I think, uh, social media has completely changed how we view everything. How genres changed, how people comment on stuff. Uh, I mean they're doing they're commenting and making changes practically in real time. I mean just, you know, the, the, the show will air and suddenly we're, we're rewriting it. It's like slow down. Let us actually see where the story goes before. We're commenting on where the story goes because the story might go exactly where you think it's going or a little bit different or almost there. Yeah. To say it's thrown like a match on a gas fire, please it's, you know, it's, it's, you know, throwing more gas on a gas fire, making the fire into it's just, it's an inferno social media's completely changed it.

Yeah. Well, you know, Mephisto, is a villain I never cared about. And then halfway through WandaVision, my Twitter feed had completely convinced me that Mephisto was going to show up, and the whole series was actually a vehicle to bring Mephisto into the MCU, and if he doesn't show up, then I should be bitterly disappointed because the clues were all there! JUDD: <laugh> look, there's an M look, there's another M if you turn this upside down and tilt it a little bit, it's an M and they said, magic is Mephisto clearly. So yeah, no, I'm with you about that. You know, an excellent example of how things went sideways and listening too much to what was going on out there, I think would be the TV show Lost, Lost from my understanding, Lost – spoilers if you haven't seen Lost tune out now -- Lost was supposed to have this simple idea that when the folks crashed landed on this, this island, they were dead, and this is purgatory and that was it. <laugh> and then people immediately start guessing, oh, they're dead. And it's purgatory. And I think the creators ran away from that. And I,

no, no, no, no. They're already guessing that. So, let's do something different. Well, in the end they went back to it because it's a pretty good idea. <laugh> and this was even before social media was, I think even present in any kind of significant way. And I think when storytellers actually get nervous about like, listen, it's okay if like, they're going to guess everything, they're going to guess everything. Sometimes you just have to take the hit and realize that this many of us actually trying to guess and, and working on our headcanon you're going to guess it. You're going to have the story come out there and that's okay. You just need to tell it well, that's all we want.

Yeah. I'm trying to imagine, like I start thinking about what if, what if Citizen Kane had been an HBO miniseries and Twitter was obsessed with fighting out who was Rosebud? What was Rosebud? How would they feel at the end? You know? Cause I feel like a great mystery should reveal character and theme and story and not a like, aha. I didn't see that coming.

JUDD: <laugh> How true is that? How people, this point, the sled seriously, the stupid sled. Well, you know, and, and first like how are we supposed to guess that? Well, you weren't supposed to guess that that's not a story's about like, oh, but still they barely gave us a hint the sled doesn't show up except in the beginning. And then the very end, how are we to know that? Like I know, but it's representative of who he was in his childhood loss and, and a path of the only time when he had like true happiness of the last time, he could remember that in his life when he was like, yeah, but so what, how are we supposed to guess that? Okay. You're back to the guessing that that's not really your problem. It's like, yeah, it would've been a mess for sure

<laughs> Oh my God. You just like, I could just see my Twitter feed JUDD: <laugh> You're welcome.

One of the reasons why I'm really interested in headcanon is because I tried to be a screenwriter for years. I took screenwriting classes outside my regular job. I read screenwriting books. I submitted my scripts for feedback in Los Angeles and New York. So many times, I thought I had written something which sounded great in my head and then I put it out in the world. It was a very humbling experience, and I learned it's a lot easier to figure out why someone else's story doesn't work than to create one yourself.

So, I'm always impressed when a story has an ending that's satisfying to me not just in terms of the puzzle pieces coming together, but it's an emotionally satisfying ending. If storytellers can make me feel something – really feel something by the end – how they managed to do it, for me, is what's inside the mystery box.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Larry Brenner, Mark White, Josh Sawyer, Doug Tricarico, Christ Landon, and Judd Winick. And also thanks to everyone who wrote in with their headcanon. Even if we didn't get to talk to you, it was really fun to read them all.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook and Instagram. I also tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

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