

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

Whenever a new sci-fi movie or show comes out, I always like to look at the concept art. Typically a concept artist will come in before the sets are designed or the costumes, and the concept artist will illustrate what the show or movie is going to look like. But when I look at those making-of books, I'm often amazed that the concept art doesn't look anything like the final product. You never know what happened. There could have been budget issues, creative differences, or maybe the concept art was just supposed to be a jumping off point.

Except with Marvel. For Marvel, the concept art looks almost exactly like what ends up on screen. They seem to know what they want.

Kasra Farahani has been one of Marvel's go-to concept artists for a while. He worked on Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 2, Black Panther, Captain Marvel and Thor. He's also worked on other big sci-fi fantasy films like Star Trek: Into Darkness, Spider-Man 3, and Alice in Wonderland.

Over time, he moved up from a concept artist to an art director, and eventually a production designer. This year, he took on his biggest job yet as a production designer on The Disney+ series Loki.

LOKI: The timekeepers have built quite the circus, and I see the clowns are playing their parts to perfection.

The production design on Loki got a lot of praise from fans and critics. I was curious to talk with him about it because it's not just a great example of how to build a fantasy world based on places in the real world, and the design on the show actually made me think differently about the places in the real world that he used for creative inspiration.

But first I was wondering, how do you even get started in a career like this?

Kasra says the hardest part was just breaking in. His parents had emigrated from Iran when he was a kid.

KASRA: I didn't have any connections despite growing up in LA, you know, at the time the business has changed a lot since I've started. But certainly, when I began, it was a very centralized business concentrated in Southern California. And to a great extent,

people who worked in the business, you know, had connections to the generation of people that worked in the business before them. And there's a lot of like nepotism and families working in a generational kind of lineages in the business and, you know, my family immigrated to this country in the late seventies and my parents, you know, they don't work in the business, so I didn't have any of that.

For a while, he bounced around between freelance design jobs.

KASRA: And then I got a call from a friend who was, um, a concept artist. They call them a concept illustrator. They were looking for some, some help, uh, on a project that ended up being *Corpse Bride*, Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride*. But unfortunately the type of help they were looking for was they wanted an intern. So, I, uh, I was an intern on that movie, but it was still a foot in the door and an excellent way to get exposed to what a concept artist was, what the art department did, what the different roles are, how you interface with the script, how you interface with director, all that stuff was a kind of revelation to me.

And he eventually found a mentor -- Bo Welch. Bo Welch is one of few production designers I've actually heard of because he worked on *Men in Black* and several Tim Burton movies including *Batman Returns*, *Beetlejuice*, and *Edward Scissorhands*.

PEG: I'm sorry to barge in like this but you have no reason to be afraid! Woo, this is some huge house! Thank goodness for those aerobics' classes.

When I first saw those movies -- well before IMDB existed -- I had to look up who this production designer was because those sets were so memorable.

Kasra first met Bo Welch in 2009. They did a string of projects together including *Men in Black 3*, and the Netflix show, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

KASRA: I learned everything, working with him. Bo has a singular view of design where he can collide humor with, uh, elegance in design very easily. He has proportional sense. I mean, so much of design is, is about proportions, how big something is relative to something else. And how much of this versus how much of that, which is that. I mean, that's the most essential language of aesthetics, whether you're cooking pasta or making a painting or designing a building or designing a set, it's all about proportions and Bo's proportional sense is amazing.

It's interesting you're saying proportions, because I was thinking about Tim Burton, because you know, that fits, that's a good fit with Bo Welch, because Tim Burton has got also a very playful sense of proportion and his designs.

KASRA: Absolutely. I mean, I think that's what you get and that's how you get amazing things like Beetlejuice and, uh, Edward Scissorhands, as you get Tim Burton and Bo Welch together, and you get something that like the world's never seen since. They have a complimentary, uh, aesthetic because there's, they share a whimsy. Tim Burton, obviously it has, uh, a macabre take on whimsy and Bo has a more kind of designing or elegant, beautiful take on it or whatever, and that the two of them meld together so amazingly well.

Well, you mentioned whimsy and humor a bunch of times. It's funny. Those are words. I think people would not associate with set design or production design. Why do you think that's important as opposed to - - what? Being too grand, too heavy handed, too humorless?

KASRA: Well, I think that whimsy is, um, is really important because like, if you look at, um, the cartoons, there's an austerity to the visual complexity of the image, I'm sure you can find complex images in cartoon animation, but generally if you think back to what you think of cartoons, it's about embracing the two dimensional look, even Pixar films rely so heavily on two dimensional image making ideas like layout artists, all those folks still have a big role in the way those things look. And I think that the reason why those images are so impactful is because they have a really rigorous sense of, uh, I'm going to use a technical term sequential design. So sequential design is like, is basically creating sequence or a hierarchy within an image. You know where to look first, you know, so you try to create this using different kind of triadic elements, like a small object, a medium object, a big object, a circular object, a square object, a triangular object, a white object, a gray object, a black object, using these things, you create a really impactful and quick to read an image that tells the viewer where to look first, where to look second, and where to look third. And I think that if you're doing this well, there's a degree of simplification in the image that you have done. I think that that becomes associated with whimsical forms. Part of whimsy, I think on our central part of whimsy is simplification. And I think a part of elegance is also simplification. So, I think there's a bridge there between those ideas.

After the break, we'll learn how Kasra used whimsy and simplification to bring to life something that doesn't sound whimsical, the sprawling intergalactic bureaucracy of the timekeepers in Loki.

BREAK

If you haven't seen Loki, I do need to give away some spoilers so I can describe where the production design fits into the show.

The premise is that everyone's favorite god of mischief – brother of Thor, antagonist to The Avengers -- ends up in the wrong timeline because of complicated plot reasons having to do with previous movies.

Anyway, Loki is scooped up by an agency called the Time Variance Authority, or TVA. The main job of the TVA is to prune timelines, making sure any variant versions of Loki or other important people in the universe don't stray from their destiny in life. The agent assigned to his case is Mobius, played by Owen Wilson.

LOKI: So, you're part of the TVA's courageous and dedicated workforce?

MOBIUS: Yes.

LOKI: You were created by the Timekeepers.

MOBIUS: Yep.

LOKI: To protect the Sacred Timeline.

MOBIUS: Correct.

LOKI: (Laughs)

MOBIUS: Is that funny?

LOKI: The idea that your little club decides the fate of trillions of people across all of existence at the behest of three space lizards, yes, it's funny. It's absurd.

But Loki learns the TVA is not a joke. And at one point, he breaks away from the TVA and finds himself a planet where all the other versions of him from different timelines are hiding out. Only one of his doppelgangers is played by Tom Hiddleston, the rest are played by other actors like Richard E. Grant.

CLASSIC LOKI: In my timeline, everything proceeded correctly, my entire life, until Thanos attacked our ship.

LOKI: So, you didn't try to stab him?

CLASSIC LOKI: Certainly not. Take no offense, my friends, but blades are worthless in the face of a Loki sorcery.

This planet is also littered with discarded objects from other universes. That inspired Kasra to design one of his favorite sets in the show – the underground headquarters of the Lokis, which he decided would be an old-fashioned bowling alley.

KASRA: That was not written in the script, it was just written as a, as an underground temple. It was pretty much all it said. So, it was wide open for us to propose something. So the idea that I proposed was that this bowling alley had been, uh, deleted from time and it's just been so compacted by other realities that you can see alien vines growing through it from another, you know, remnants of another reality that were happened to be adjacent to it. And there's like, uh, a vignette of a freeway or with a few chunks of a car and road signs on one other side. And the goal of this place was to feel like a throne room, but that they had scavenged a mall Santa's seat from a deleted mall somewhere. And so, if you look at the throne, it's got all these reindeer Christmas affectations on it because it's a, it's a mall Santa throne. And so, we've got to build that, and it ended up being, I think my favorite set and a lot of people have written me kind emails suggesting that it may be a lot of people's favorites sets.

But from what I've seen online, the biggest fan favorite set was the headquarters of TVA.

KASRA: When I first met on the project, we, uh, there was only two scripts of the six and there was a little, a brief outline for the rest of it. One helpful bit of direction that was written from, from the, uh, show's creator and head writer. Michael Waldron was, they imagined the world, uh, as Blade Runner meets Mad Men. So that was a starting point. And then meeting with the director, Kate Herron, she and I hit it off right away and had a lot of, had a lot of the same references in mind. In addition to that, Gilliam's Brazil, and Brutalist architecture.

If you don't know the term Brutalist architecture, you've probably seen the buildings. They're massive, blocky, concrete structures, usually built in the '50s or '60s for governments, universities, or parking garages. For instance the FBI headquarters in Washington DC, which is always shown in an establishing shot on The X-Files, The Blacklist, or any other show or movie about the FBI.

*OFFICIAL: I hereby inform you under powers entrusted to me under Section 47 ...
(FADE DOWN)*

And when he says Brazil, he's referring to Terry Gilliam's classic 1985 movie Brazil, which is a surreal dark comedy about a bureaucratic state that justifies anything so long as the paperwork is approved.

OFFICIAL: That is your receipt for your husband. Thank you, and this is my receipt for your receipt.

So, there's definitely a lot of Brazil in the TVA.

KASRA: The other thing that we tried very hard to do on Loki that I think is kind of old fashioned as compared to the way films are made now, large blockbuster films are made now, is that we wanted to build a very tactile in camera world. And many of those sets were built 360 sets with complete ceilings with where the lighting was. And I, and I do believe that the tactile feeling of the place, the, the realness of it is directly an effect of having those kind of more complete sets as opposed to vignettes, one or two or three walls that are relying heavily on set extension.

Typically, Marvel will use a lot of “set extension,” which is where you actually have a minimal set, a green screen, and the rest of the set is filled with CGI. But Kasra says if you CGI most of your sets:

KASRA: It's going to have a significant impact on the lighting that's possible within that set. I think the most important job of production design is helping with lighting design actually. So if your, your ability to do dramatic lighting has been taken away because the lighting is being prescribed by the needs of a visual effects set extension, then one of your very important tools to elicit an emotional response has been taken away from you.

Kasra says the main inspiration for the design TVA came from a real-life place – a place many listeners in the U.S. will know, all too well – the Department of Motor Vehicles, or the DMV, where you have to wait in line, seemingly forever, to get your license renewed.

KASRA: The TVA is the, um, the version of it's the DMV, if you will, you know, it's the, like this metastasized version of this post-war well-funded, but kind of hapless labyrinthian bureaucracy that, you know, I grew up in Southern California, huge amount of the architecture that I, you know, every, my primary school, my middle school, my high school, the post office, the literal DMV, all of these spaces were, uh, mid-century institutional architecture built on the heels of the population or the victory in World War II, which led to a population boom in California. And so, there's this huge influx of this modernist institutional architecture that's here. So that's like one big influence for it. And then you crash land that into Brutalist architecture that was quite common in London where Kate, our director grew up, and you start to get some of this weighty, grimy world contrasted with elegant, streamlined, simple silhouette architecture. I'd say an example of something that I was able to propose that resonated with the group. And we ended up doing it is the processing chambers. So, people may remember from the show, he enters the receiving room, which is this kind of circular room with a big orange desk.

And then he's shoved into the series of very Gilliam-esque metal rooms, one where his clothes, his Asgardian clothes are burned off. And one where he's the sign for everything he's ever said in his life.

TVA AGENT: Please sign to verify this is everything you've ever said.

LOKI: What?

KASRA: And one where a scanner scans him to make sure he's not a robot.

TVA AGENT: Please confirm, to your knowledge, that you are not a fully robotic being, were born an organic creature, and do in fact possess what many cultures would call a soul.

LOKI: What? To my knowledge? Do a lot of people not know if they're robots?

KASRA: Those were not in script. Originally. Those were, it was a more visual effects, intensive imagination of things, not so clear. I think in my opinion, and really expensive for how short the page count was. So, I propose this idea of this Gilliam-esque kind of hamster run idea, which would hopefully get across right away to the audience, the dehumanizing nature of The TVA in that he's literally just being dropped through trapdoors, uh, to save time

Yeah, so the TVA got us thinking a lot about the way that office spaces are portrayed generally in sci-fi. You mentioned Brazil, but there's also The Adjustment Bureau, which is like the TVA in that they monitor time, but they all dress in mid-century modern outfits with fedoras. And there's the Vogons from Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy, which are like a species of bureaucrats that use retro technology integrated into hard sci-fi. Even The Good Place is like an old-fashioned office with just a touch of fantasy. Why do you think that works so well in these worlds where you could have literally anything, but there are stacks of paper, and people are using pens and stamps, and if there's a computer it's a clunky, first-generation computer, or there's a dot matrix printer?

KASRA: I think maybe, maybe it has something to do with relate-ability and offering something of a bridge to the audience. I mean, for us, you know, the way I sort of justified this in my mind is that, like, it's an institution, it's a big institution and institutions get huge infusions of funding at intervals. You know, you might get, you might get a huge chunk of money in this decade, and you might do a bunch of new buildings and you might buy a bunch of computers and furniture, and then you may not get funding again for four or five decades or three decades or something, you know, and certainly the schools and colleges and places that I've spent time have this look, uh, look about them. So that there's a cohesiveness to all the equipment, and yet it's all clearly not brand new either. So, it's been a while.

That's why the other period he wanted to evoke was the 1970s when a lot of buildings were made quickly with infusions of cash. LBJ's Great Society program created a lot of new government agencies that needed offices. And this was the heyday of urban renewal. So, the 1970s office was usually a grid of windows. On the inside, they all seemed to have Herman Miller furniture, which was affordable back then. So, on Loki, the TVA looks like a Herman Miller showroom from the '70s, with those muted colors of orange and brown.

KASRA: And then you, could, you kind of collide into that, this idea of an organization that has the ability to kind of go shopping in all the different timelines in our mind. It's like they found technology in various cultures and various planets and various timelines, and kind of cherry picked the, the ones that were most usable or interesting, and then brought them back and integrated them into their own technological infrastructure. So you have this, you know, super, super sophisticated and elaborate versions of analog technology collided with alien technology or whatever, and none of it's explicit, but like we know from the nature of what The TVA does that they're hopping around and, you know, we know from, I think Kate's talked about this in some interviews that like the charges that they used to prune a timeline or delete a timeline are harvested from the same elemental kind of forces that make up Alioth, which you see the big kind of storm cloud monster in episode five.

That actually makes sense because if they're harvesting the magical energy from this giant storm cloud monster, which is like a trash compactor eating everything that gets deleted from other timelines, why do you need to use a digital interface like Iron Man? All they need are metal rods or hard plastic casing to harness that energy.

KASRA: I think that that's right. And I think it's obviously would be disingenuous, not just to mention that obviously a lot of this is about world-building and characterization and curating what the visual scope of this world is and what it looks like and feels like, because while there's things that you're telling the audience explicitly, in terms of events you're depicting and things, people say there's a lot, you're telling them maybe more so that you're telling them about the world and how it feels implicitly by the images you create. And by these rules that are never kind of explicitly acknowledged, but they can see that all this stuff sort of looks like it's part of the same world and all of it's this, and why is it mid-century modern and not, you know, Art Deco or, you know, whatever from the mid 19th century or something. He's like those, all, all those things have cultural associations that we are trying to harness.

I think the TVA – and other fantasy offices that use retro technology – are tapping into a design issue that's been hotly debated: skeuomorphism.

Skeuomorphism is the term for when something digital looks like the thing it replaced in the real world. So, on the iPhone, the phone icon is a white outline of an old-fashioned phone. On Zoom, the microphone button is a picture of an analog mic. A lot of designers hate skeuomorphism. They feel like we've moved beyond that technology, people don't need a reference point from the past anymore – but it's harder to figure what would take its place.

But with these offices in fantasy worlds, they're kind of doing the opposite -- it's like skeuomorphism in reverse.

So, putting something like a word processor in a fantasy office can evoke a certain kind of feeling because in the real-world, people who remember using that technology are retired or on the verge of retiring.

KASRA: Those associations are nostalgic, but they're powerful because those associations have so much more influence over an audience member's emotional reception of something, I think, than anything you can write or build or design, you know, if you can, you can tap into that well of life experience, however, through the script or the design or whatever, I think you stand a chance of, of making an impact.

I also read you said the themes of Loki and the TVA are about the battle of free will versus determinism. How does that play out in the production design?

KASRA: Sure. Well, I mean, I think institutional architecture is a kind of a very literal representation of -- not free will, let's put it that way, you know, of, uh, of, you know, taking the broad, infinite analog spectrum of one's life decisions and funneling them into a DMV-like queue where you go this way or that way. And you may not even have a choice between the two, you may not be prescribed to you. So I think that that partly, you know, cubicles and repetitiveness, infinite repetition of the offices, when you look through the large arches and you do see the set extension, which is basically taking that quantum monitoring set that we built and replicating it at infinitum to the horizon, you know, uh, or when you're looking at the overlook and you see the expanse of the Mobius, and Loki, you see the expanse of The TVA, which is, you know, some combination of, um, Brasilia and super city futurism from, from Metropolis or something like that.

LOKI: That's not real.

MOBIUS: It is and unfortunately so is the paperwork, good tinder for your fire.

LOKI: This place is a nightmare.

MOBIUS: That's another department. Now that department, I'll help you burn down.

KASRA: So that's what I think is the strongest visual representation of that theme in our show.

Another reason why the design of The TVA fascinates me is because we're at a crossroads in history. During the pandemic, there have been a lot of articles about offices – whether we need to go back to them, and if we don't, what do we do with those buildings? And how come every time we try to reinvent what an office could be, we end up with cubicles again?

KASRA: I know that the cubicles have like, they got a bad rap, and they went away. And I think that they're still sort of, they're still coming back in some ways, because I think some people didn't like being in a bullpen that not having even a modicum of privacy that cubicle offers you. I mean, I think it's unclear, uh, what work environments are going to be like and how much people's appetite to work at home will even what the longevity of that is because I think that could get old and people want to try to find some kind of a middle ground.

That's why sci-fi is a great place to explore these questions of where we want to work, and how we want to work with others. Because for the time being, Loki -- the trickster god who loves chaos, unless the guy in charge – is now working for the TVA. And he's not going anywhere soon. Kasra just began production design on Loki Season 2.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Kasra Farahani.

By the way, classes begin next week for the Fall semester of my class at NYU to create your own podcast. There are still a few spots open and the class is virtual.

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. And we just lowered the pledge for the Dropbox account, you can now access it at \$5 a month. You can learn more at imaginary worlds podcast dot org.