

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about sci-fi and other fantasy genres. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**That's not how I usually start the show, but if I claimed it was – and went back and re-recorded all my intro -- that would be a retcon.**

**Retcon is short for retroactive continuity. Andrew Friedenthal wrote a book about retconning and he says the term started in comic books, but the fan backlash to retcons really began with DC's Crisis on Infinite Earths storyline in the 1980s where they changed the backstory of many of the characters.**

ANDREW: And so that's really, I think where you started to have a lot of, of, uh, kind of fan backlash. Um, and you know, if, who knows what would've happened if the internet had existed in the time of crisis on infinite earths, but, uh, the fan press certainly was, was able to vent their frustrations enough as it was.

**It's harder to retcon in live action because the actors age in real time, and the storylines are more linear. But the amount of retconning in sci-fi fantasy right now is unprecedented. Over the last few years, the retcons have fueled a lot of online angst, pitting fans against each other or turning fans against creators. But some the retcons are revitalizing these old franchises, creating new, exciting storylines.**

**Today we're looking at how retconning is changing four different franchises, and why it's a big deal for the fans who just want to escape to their favorite fantasy worlds. And heads up, retconss are all spoiler-ific.**

**Let's begin with Star Wars. Retconning was already happening in 1980. Darth Vader was not supposed to be Luke's father. That's why they added the scene where Luke says to Obi Wan, or the ghost of Obi Wan, you told me Darth Vader killed my father and Obi Wan says he did, from a certain point of view. That worked so well, as a kid, I didn't realize that was a retcon. But it was obvious to me and everyone else that they didn't plan on making Luke and Leia brother and sister, or they wouldn't have had that steamy kiss in Empire Strikes Back.**

**Then came the special editions, where George Lucas inserted scenes and altered the meaning of scenes from the original trilogy. And he made it so the special editions are the only version Star Wars you can legally watch. Then there were the prequels, where he retconned almost everything. There was actually a sketch**

on the animated show Robot Chicken making fun of that. They actually got Mark Hamill to do the voice of Luke:

*IN: You killed my father!*

*OUT: If you're not going to take this seriously, I'm out.*

But the retconning went into hyper drive with the sequel trilogy. JJ Abrams began to construct a story with The Force Awakens. Then Disney handed the franchise to Ryan Johnson, who disagreed with Abrams, and undid a lot of his story elements. But Johnson's movie The Last Jedi, was so divisive for the fans, Disney brought JJ Abrams back to re-retcon everything in Rise of Skywalker.

For instance, Abrams set up a mystery around Rey's parents. In the next movie, Johnson dismissed the idea. We learn that her parents were nobodies. Then Abrams came back and made it so her lineage is so important, the fate of the entire universe depends on it.

Personally, I'm in the Ryan Johnson camp. I got choked up at the end of Last Jedi. I didn't feel anything watching Rise of Skywalker, except I did laugh out loud at some of the retcons because they were so obvious. But the tug of war between the warring factions of fans got so vicious – it was depressing. And other fans have begun to disengage, declaring that the whole Skywalker storyline is a contradictory, incomprehensible mess.

It's funny because so many fans complained that Lucas was tinkering with Star Wars to death, but we had to admit, he made up this world, he had the right to do with it what he wanted – including selling it to Disney. But the most extreme case of a creator going full Lucas, without any sign of giving up control, is JK Rowling. And that's where things get a bit more complicated.

Okay, retcon number 2: The Potterverse.

Now, I've been deep into Star Wars fandom since 1977, but to take the pulse of Harry Potter fandom, I wanted to talk with some millennials.

The first big retcon JK Rowling did was in 2007. Right after the books were finished, she declared that Dumbledore had been gay all along. Hayley Milliman was one of many Potter fans who was skeptical of this revelation.

HAYLEY: It seemed okay that she was trying to grab headlines is kind of how it came across to me as it didn't seem like a really genuine character choice because if it had been, it should have been in, in the books to begin with.

**Olivia Dolphin is also very active in Harry Potter fandom. And she edits the literary magazine Wizards in Space. At first, she gave Rowling the benefit of the doubt:**

OLIVIA: Because the series is told from Harry's point of view, there's so much that's left out of the series anyways, so I think that does give JK Rowling the option as an author and to like play with some of the holes that were in Harry's vision.

**But for Olivia, the real problem began with the prequel movies. One of the many retcons in the Fantastic Beast movies is just the fact that Professor McGonigal is in them.**

OLIVIA: Originally it said that McConnell was born in 1935. In Fantastic Beasts 2 she's seen in the movies, which takes place in the early 1920s and she's also shown in a flashback which would be like the 1910s so they just totally shifted McGonigal's timeline and it felt like a cheap trick for trying to bring in old characters into this new franchise to make you feel more connected to Harry Potter.

**And then there's Nagini. In the books, she was Voldemort's loyal, evil giant serpent. In the prequels, we learn she was an Asian woman who was fated to turn into a snake. Hayley says if that was an attempt at diversity, it didn't work.**

HAYLEY: I'm an Asian woman. There's one Asian woman in all of Harry Potter and her name is Cho Chang, and so to find that, that the next one was this woman who was under this curse and who is then enslaved to Voldemort and again has been and was seen as a symbol of evil through most of the original canon. It was like, it's insulting frankly. It's like, oh yeah, don't worry. There is a woman of color. But uh, she's been their whole long. Uh, but not only that, like, you know, you probably hated her this whole time.

**The retconning kept going with the play, Harry Potter and The Cursed Child, which is about Harry's son going to Hogwarts. Some of the retcons were logistical, like the time turner can now bring you back years instead of hours. But the biggest change was in the casting. Hermione was played by a black actress. Olivia saw the play, and thought the actress was great.**

OLIVIA: What I didn't care for is that instead of J K Rowling, just like owning the casting choice and saying, well, you know, people of different colors can play white characters and you know, we can, we can blur these lines. And with casting she said, well I never said Hermione was white and you can actually go into the text and see places where she'll say Hermione turned pink or her mind he's white face was sticking out from behind the pillar. So it just feels like she's trying to like put herself in a better light instead of owning up and saying, I didn't do diversity super well you know, in the books.

**And then there are the retcons that JK Rowling revealed over Twitter. The most baffling one came in January 2019 when she tweeted: Hogwarts didn't always have bathroom. Before adopting muggle plumbing methods in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, witches and wizards simply relieved wherever stood, and vanished the evidence.**

OLIVIA: And that was truly when I lost it, I think because it sounds like you want it so badly to be like an April fool's joke and it wasn't.

***There's like, there's so many questions, like is that the first spell you learned? I hope so!***

OLIVIA: I would hope so because who's doing it? Yeah. Like, you know, you're not allowed to do magic until you're 11 and then you're not supposed to do magic when you're not in school. So that means like you have like 14-year-old kids that are going home and they're not allowed to advantage their own business. There's something about it just truly did not add up to me.

**I asked Olivia, what about ignoring JK Rowling and saying, we have the original books. Nothing can change that.**

OLIVIA: JK Rowling first and foremost is a mystery writer. And I've always said this about her books. She loves mysteries and a lot of the books tend to read as a classic who done it. Her clues and her world building and the way that the magic works and the Canon of everything fits really well together. Like it's a really thought out book and there's very, very few plot holes in the whole series. She was very particular about her, her Canon, and she taught her fans to be very particular about the details. So, we learned to comb line by line, symbol by symbol within the books and now that she's going backwards and changing things and changing when McGonigal is alive and changing the background of Nagini or adding these things that don't really make sense. It takes the mystery of Harry Potter and the, the passion that the fans developed of like trying to solve what was gonna happen. It takes the fun out of that because we don't have any rules to play by anymore.

**Hayley agrees.**

HAYLEY: There's a number of reasons why I don't engage with Harry Potter as much as I have or as much as I used to. Um, but I think that the rec, Connie has really played a big role in that. It feels like it's grounded in a lot of like Rowling's desires to stay relevant or to make some kind of commentary and not for the sake of kind of the novels themselves. And it's, it's ironic because her doing that has really eliminated what she did successfully before, you know, so she was, she was creating these worlds before that felt very inclusive and felt like a place that a lot of people wanted to be in. And now that she's kind of trying to like consciously make them inclusive, um, it becomes decidedly less so. I really don't engage with the series very much anymore and I deeply loved it enough that I like hosted Harry Potter fan events across the country. So in the last few years I've just kind of completely fallen off. I mean, I used to read the books at least once a year and I haven't read them in years at this point.

**Harry Potter and Star Wars both began as a limited series. But the market is hungry for content. JK Rowling and George Lucas were not ready to let go – and neither were the fans. When Lucas sold Star Wars to Disney, he knew they would open everything back up again.**

**And as fans, we want the new stuff to feel fresh, and connect with what came before. Also, science fiction and fantasy now are so into mysteries with surprise twists. And when you're telling stories like that, retconning is like the low hanging fruit.**

**But what happens with franchises that are older, where the original creators are long gone, and the series has a momentum that seems to be going indefinitely? That's where I think the most creative retconning is happening. We'll teleport there in just a moment.**

**BREAK**

**Retcon number 3: Doctor Who**

**A few years ago, I did a mini-series on Doctor Who. It's one of the few times I've covered something I didn't know much about but by the end, I had become a full-on fan and continue to be so. This last season of Doctor Who had one of the biggest retcons in the history of the show, and I am really excited about it.**

**The main character, The Doctor, is part of an alien race called Time Lords. They fly around in ships that can go anywhere in space and time. And when a Time**

Lord is dying, they can regenerate into a new human form. That's why we've had 13 actors playing The Doctor since 1963. And the last time The Doctor regenerated, he became a woman for the first time, played by Jodie Whittaker.

Spoiler alert -- in the last season, The Doctor discovered a Doctor we've never seen before, played by the actress Jo Martin. At first, Jodie Whittaker's Doctor thinks this must be a future version of her – but this new Doctor says, no you must be a future version of me.

*I've never been anything like you, trust me I'd remember, especially that shirt.  
So would I, if I'd ever been you, which I haven't.  
What? That's not possible, unless it is, but what would that mean, it doesn't make sense. Stop doing that! Oh! Same brain!*

The Doctor learns this is a previous incarnation of her from before the entire run of 13 Doctors we've seen on television. Somebody erased her memories.

Eventually, she discovers she was the first and only Time Lord. She was an orphan who came through a mysterious portal, and the other Time Lords experimented on her -- stealing her regenerative powers for themselves. And before they wiped her memories, they used her as part of a secret government agency. So, there are countless other versions of her from the past doing things that she'd be mortified by.

The Doctor's arch nemesis The Master thinks this revelation will devastate her. But The Doctor feels invigorated.

*You think that could destroy me, you think that makes me lesser? It makes me more. I contain multitudes more than I thought!*

This didn't come out of nowhere. There was a Doctor Who episode in the 1970s which hinted at the idea that The Doctor had previous incarnations he didn't know about, but that episode was dismissed as an outlier. Now a lot of fans are angry, saying that the show is ruined.

I thought it was brilliant but I'm a new Doctor Who fan, so I checked in with Nick Randall, who is a lifelong fan. He also works at the BBC and hosts the podcast SNS Online.

NICK: I was so, so excited because, uh, I, I just thought, I mean, it was such a mystery, this totally floored me.

**What he loves about this retcon is that it goes to the heart of the show. The title is Doctor Who because the Doctor's real name, and backstory were a mystery to other characters. Now The Doctor is a mystery to herself.**

NICK: It's allowed the mystery to extend. Doctor Who question mark. I mean, there's so much more stories to be told rather than just for standard set of stories, we've got backstory to, to explore now.

**But not all fans feel that way. Mac Rogers is a writer and another lifelong Doctor Who fan. On the plus side, he says discovering other Doctors is a great way to add diversity to a show that's featured one female lead since 1963, and no people of color playing The Doctor until this year. On the other hand.**

MAC: Just out of pure long-term fan habit and numerical association with certain characters that I'm very fond of. I don't like the idea that I can't say The Second Doctor anymore and think of Patrick Trouton. I can't make a substantive defense of that is just that like having a certain numerical label for different incarnations of The Doctor characters that I feel more affection for than almost any other fictional characters that that makes me unhappy in a way that maybe isn't substantive but is still deeply felt.

**He doesn't have a problem with The Doctor having a secret past – although he wishes it wasn't so much like Jason Bourne. His biggest issue is that The Doctor is now the one and only, original Time Lord with regenerative powers are even greater than she realized.**

MAC: I don't like the idea that The Doctor is innately extraordinary in a way that goes beyond their actions. I don't like the idea that The Doctor was almost of the sort of like almost this figure discovered like Moses in the rushes and the river with this a supernatural power that no other being has. What I've always found inspiring was that The Doctor grew up in a stuffy, a very powerful but very stuffy bureaucratic society. They had a lot of power to do good in the universe but chose mostly not to exercise that power unless it was in their own interests. The Doctor was kind of repulsed by that hypocrisy in that behavior and was also quite bored living there. He made a choice that any of them could have made but didn't. The Doctor was the one who left and dedicated their life to helping people, uh, and exploring and making friends. That choice is incredibly inspiring to me.

**I see his point. The Doctor was defined by a choice to be different, to be better. Now the character is A Chosen One, and Chosen Ones are a dime a dozen in fantasy genres.**

MAC: I think that the writer should work very hard to make the retcon a better idea than the thing that was there before

**To get a broader perspective on this, I talked with Andrew Friedenthal, who literally wrote the book on retconning. He even created a yardstick to measure whether retcons are being used well or not.**

ANDREW: There's the ability to use retconning to kind of tell more to tell, to create more stories. And I think there's ability to use retconning to shut down stories. Um, and I am always much more of a fan of, of former.

**And Andrew thinks the debate around retconning is actually similar to the debate happening among constitutional scholars about how closely we should stick to the literal words in The Constitution. Or to use fan-speak, how closely should we stick to the original canon?**

ANDREW: I think that's very similar to with, you know, constitutional scholars that, that there is, uh, a way of looking at it where you're just looking at the original documents and saying that it is inflexible, it doesn't change and it's just exactly what the words on the page are. And then there's others that say, well, no, it was a document written in a time with a context. And that, like, that context has changed. And should we still be governed by, by wording written for a particular context when our own context has changed so radically?

**Which brings me to the retcon number four: Star Trek.**

**Here you had a world created by a founding father, Gene Roddenberry, who had progressive ideas for his time. But the original series was primarily white and male. It went boldly where no "man" had before on a 1960s TV budget.**

**In 2017, the show Star Trek Discovery was launched. It had a diverse cast, with openly gay characters. The technology was much more high tech than the original series, even though it took place before the original series. So first, the show was trolled by racists. And then on the other hand, you had fans being nitpicky -- complaining how could they have technology more advanced than the original series?**



**But the biggest complaint was about the lead character, Michael Burnham, played Sonequa Martin-Green. She is a brand-new character to Star Trek – and she’s Spock’s adopted human sister. The twentysomething Spock is played by Ethan Peck.**

*Your words showed me how damaging my humanity could be.*

*No, your humanity was beautiful as a child.*

*You were a catalyst, an attempt to escape emotion, to escape you, I fully submerged in logic.*

**At first, it did seem weird to introduce this really significant character in Spock’s life we had never seen before. But I thought her storyline added interesting layers to Spock’s character, and his struggle with being half-human. Not everyone saw it that way.**

LAURIE: I mean people were freaking out as I remember. They were, how could Spock have a sister? We would have known you can't retcon, it comes out of nowhere.

**Laurie Ulster worked on the podcast After Trek, and she’s a writer and editor on the site Trek Movie.**

LAURIE: And so we were all talking about it nonstop and that's why I said like, it actually makes perfect sense to me that we wouldn't know. And so I wrote an editorial about it for the site and the comments, I was just looking at the comments on it cause people were mad.

***And what were the comments to your editorial?***

LAURIE: Oh, well people just basically there was a lot of, I mean, and I also, just so you know, I also went into all the other Star Trek characters who had siblings that we found out about in one episode where we'd never heard of them before and there were a lot of them. But like the very first comment on my editorial was, it's still stupid. (laughs)

**In her editorial, she pointed out that Spock in the original series was notorious for not talking about his past unless it was absolutely necessary. In fact, we didn’t learn that he had a half-brother named Sybok until he appeared in the movie Star Trek V.**

LAURIE: He showed up out of nowhere, we never heard of him before, we know that Kirk thinks of Spock has a brother and then Spock is like, oh yeah, I have this brother I never told you about.

**Star Trek Discovery eventually explains why Spock would never mention his sister Michael. Her crew was on a very dangerous top-secret mission, and they were officially redacted from Star Fleet. But Laurie didn't buy it.**

LAURIE: It just doesn't make sense. We'll never speak of it again. It's just a TV thing. But it's not a real-life thing.

***So you think that was unnecessary and less believable than the idea that it's in Spock's character to mention Michael?***

LAURIE: Yeah. I mean the whole, we'll never speak of it again. Thing is, it's not sustainable to me. Like as a writer, I would never use that.

**The new show Picard also has retcons that fans have complained about. As I figured, Laurie didn't have an issue with any of them. What surprised me was that she is upset about the show – but not because of a retcon exactly. Her issue with the show ties into the question of whether to stick to the details of a canon or the spirit of the canon.**

**Laurie is offended by the fact that the show Picard portrays Star Fleet as being a corrupt, inflexible system of government where a legend like Jean-Luc Picard could be tossed aside as a relic.**

LAURIE: Star Trek was created out of this idea of optimism. We humanity has evolved. We're not stupid idiots anymore. We figured out how to stop wasting our time starving each other, killing each other, trying to feel superior to each other. And, and it's a particularly difficult time to do that now because of what's going on across the whole world. So how do you comment on that? And I guess you could choose to comment on that by saying, look, here's another dysfunctional world, but I almost want to comment on that the same way Roddenberry wanted to comment on the '60s which were very, very turbulent time, which is we figured it out. So that to me is the hardest one. And when you have people in charge of the franchise who connect to Star Trek for different things in Star Trek than I connect to, they're going to make different decisions.

**In Andrew Fredendall's book about retconning, he argues that retconning is similar to the way we've been revising history for the last few decades. For a long time, history was told by the winners, you know, the story of kings, emperors and presidents. Now we're taught a more inclusive depiction of history, taking into account many different points of view. In his book, Andrew argued that retconning history or the history of a fantasy world is very positive and not something we should question very much.**

ANDREW: Uh, and then the 2016 election happened. There was a, a lot of talk about fake news and people being sort of unable to, um, interpret kind of the difference. And I think that what my big sort of mistake was if I, you know, could rewrite sections of the book....

***If you could retcon on your book?***

ANDREW: If I could retconning my book. Absolutely. You know, if I could, if I could do a JRR Tolkien and, and make the, the ring something meaningful in the Hobbit when it was just, you know, just an invisibility thing. If I could, if I could go back and do that, um, in my own book, I would say now is that I think that there is certainly the potential, um, in retconning to prepare the way for a better understanding of history, but that there are things that the media can do and can, can certainly create changes. But ultimately there also needs to be, you know, some, some aspect of our formal education system that is, creates a, uh, a stronger understanding of the way that history is written. And the way that history has done that, you know, the things that you, that you learn in school, there may be new information that comes up later that changes that, you know, we can learn bad things about great people in history as well today.

**I get what he's saying. We have to distinguish between alternative facts that claim other points of view is fake news as opposed to learning more about our history and recognizing that multiple things can true at the same time.**

**That's why I still believe retcons can be a great tool to breathe life into old characters and make them feel new again. And if all the pieces don't fit together neatly anymore, well, life is messy. People are complicated, and contradictory. Like The Doctor, we contain multitudes. Our stories can too.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Andrew Friedenthal, Laurie Ulster, Mac Rogers, Nick Randall, Hayley Milliman and Olivia Dolphin.**

**Olivia actually has a lot of questions about Harry Potter she'd like answered but she's afraid to even say them out loud.**

OLIVIA: It's like how, I wonder how Hagrid was conceived quite a bit,

***Don't you want a tweet about that?***

OLIVIA: Yes. JK Rowling, the one thing I truly want to know is how Hagrid was conceived. Like please, of all things. Tell me that one. One fact.

**If you want to check out previous episodes where I covered these different fantasy worlds, I did a Star Wars mini-series in 2015, where I did whole episode about the Han Shot First retcon. I did a Harry Potter mini-series in 2016, and my Doctor Who mini-series was in 2018. And Star Trek is all over this podcast from the beginning.**

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

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