

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

There are two ways to go when extending a franchise – reboots, or revivals. I'm a sucker for the picking up where we left off – even if it doesn't work a lot of the time because after so many years, the actors can't relate to their characters anymore or the zeitgeist has moved on. But I just love the idea that these fictional characters are still going about their lives even while we're not watching them. And so I will tune in with cautious optimism when The X-Files resumes for a limited run this winter.

CLIP: X-FILES

At its height, The X-Files averaged 20 million viewers a week – a huge number even before TV got fractured. I was so obsessed with the show, I had action figures of Mulder and Scully on my windowsill, donning little FBI badges, plastic guns and flashlights.

In case you never watched the show -- Fox Mulder and Dana Scully were FBI agents assigned to paranormal cases. They were also on an epic quest to unravel a conspiracy between aliens and a small group of powerful men that were quietly preparing the human race for colonization. Mulder was believed in every supernatural phenomenon. Scully was the skeptic.

But I wasn't a fan to the end. David Duchovny left after seven seasons, and I thought they should've wrapped it up but they kept going with new actors. I'm surprised by how buzz there is around this new mini-series. Every morsel of new information sparks a dozen tweets and blog posts.

Is it just nostalgia? Or is the concept behind The X-Files speaking to our time again?

Lindsay Ellis is a pop culture critic, and she wrote an interesting piece for the website Tor, where she argued that David Duchovny's character Fox Mulder made it acceptable -- even romantic -- to be a conspiracy theorist.

LINDSAY: Because I think Mulder – he's weird but just weird enough. He was good looking, he was kind of a loner and quirky, he had social problems, he was relatable but he was also kind of a hero, especially by nature of the fact that he gets vindicated so

constantly, and he never feels the need to give Scully the benefit of the doubt and he didn't need to because he was usually right.

Mulder sometimes consulted with a group called The Lone Gunmen. They supposed to be a clear contrast to the tall handsome David Duchovny -- they were the classic dorky, nerdy conspiracy theorist stereotypes. But Lindsay pointed something, which I forgot. There was a short-lived spin-off series starring the Lone Gunmen.

LINDSAY: The pilot for the Lone Gunman involved a government conspiracy to fly airplanes into the Twin Towers. And of course this was shot and aired before 9/11.

CLIP: LONE GUNMEN

That's eerie, right? But Lindsay doesn't think much of conspiracy theories - - for one big reason.

LINDSAY: It's becoming more and more impossible to keep the lid on something, and we know this! And we see it every single day! And yet it persists with certain things like 9/11 or the moon landing, there is no way we could keep a lid on this. We can't even keep a lid on our cell phone surveillance.

Yeah, because as a journalist, you do believe the truth is out there.

LINDSAY: But that should be the objective – the truth. Now decorating your weird belief with selected evidence, half of which isn't true anyway. Mulder.

I know, that's the sad thing, that's what Mulder was not doing.

LINDSAY: You're not doing your job, Agent Mulder of the FBI!

God damn it!

LINDSAY: You have one job! Find evidence for the thing! It's bad police work. Don't you listen to Serial?

I started to wonder, is she right? We certainly are awash with conspiracy theorists today – birthers, vaccers, truthers.

LINDSAY: You know the fact that we have these figureheads with hundreds of thousands of followers, people like Alex Jones and David Ike and Jenny McCarthy to a lesser extent, and the fact that even me saying their names is going to put me on a bunch of Twitter lists! Because of the increasing ubiquity of this culture, I think our fiction needs to explore it a little, I'm just not sure the X-Files is the place to do it. And they were dealing with a different type of conspiracy theory, the show almost completely

ignored the reactionary undercurrent, the racism, the isolationism – I mean that was there in the ‘90s, just not as much as it is now.

When the X-Files first came out, Mulder was a lone wolf. I don’t think he would be today. If anything, it would be hard to cut through the din and let people know that *his* conspiracy is the real one.

But I also talked to Joe Uscinski, a professor of political science at the University of Miami, who wrote a book called *American Conspiracy Theories*. And he says we are not living in an age of rampant conspiracy theories, despite what the Internet says. In fact, American politics has been conspiracy minded for a long time.

JOE: I’ve been running a Google news search for the last 4 years, so I’ve getting everything that comes across the Internet with the words conspiracy theory in it. And then I sit down and I read the articles with my research team and we code them with which treat the conspiracy theory positively, negatively and neutrally. And the vast majority of them – I think about 70% -- tend to treat conspiracy theories incredibly negatively. They say these are not true. The people that believe them are kooks and cranks and paranoid, so I agree with you that yes, we are talking a lot more about conspiracy theories. But we are treating them like zoo animals.

And he says Americans aren’t that conspiracy minded as a whole.

JOE: There are a lot of countries in this world where fraud, corruption, bribery are the way things work, and if you didn’t believe in conspiracy theories, you’d be the dupe. And that’s very different here.

I remember when I was working in animation in the ‘90s, a Russian friend of mine went home to Moscow, and he saw a framed picture of Mulder in his brother’s apartment.

So what was the zeitgeist that made *The X-Files* such a hit?

JOE: The X-Files started in the fall of 1993, which is a really neat time for conspiracy theories, only 2 years prior to that, JFK came out which was a huge movie and broke a lot of ground in terms of conspiracy narratives.

CLIP: JFK MOVIE

JOE: FOX was a fledgling network at that time and they were trying to reach younger viewers at that time, who were Gen Xers. And those people grew up at a time when, they were coming of age in the late '60s, '70s and early '80s, and during that period you had Watergate, you had all sorts of real conspiracies about the CIA, you had Congress looking into JFK and MLK assassinations and hinting those conspiracy theories about them might be real, and then you had Iran Contra. So you had this whole zeitgeist taking place during Gen X's formidable years, and there was a poll that came out of Gen Xers in the early '90s, which is more likely that you will receive a social security check when you retire or that you will see aliens? And the majority said aliens.

I fit that demo. When I was in high school, I bought two sets of trading cards, which had satirical cartoons of all the figures in the Iran Contra scandal and the Kennedy assassination. By the time the Oliver Stone movie JFK came out, I knew those facts by heart. And then the X-Files showed us how Kennedy was really assassinated by a shadowy villain on the show that fans called Cigarette Smoking Man or Cancer Man.

JOE: You know one of the things we do in the book is that we look at who are conspiracy theorists and what kind of behaviors do they have and what do they look like. If you were to imagine your prototypical conspiracy theorist, it's probably a middle aged white guy in his mother's basement with a Ham Radio and maybe a tinfoil hat, but now a days probably something more sophisticated to block the government rays from coming in. And he might be on the right and have some anti-government views and he probably has a few cats. But what we find in the book is that's not really the case.

Gen Xers are still more conspiracy prone than other generations, and for some reason people who work in health care are more prone to believe in conspiracy theories than people who work in finance or government. Other than that, there are no other common factors or politics, race, class or gender.

JOE: And I'll give you a very good example of that. Look at The View. Most of the people who have hosted The View have been conspiracy theorists. Jenny McCarthy with anti-vaccer conspiracy theories. Whoopi Goldberg believes that the moon landing was faked.

CLIP: THE VIEW

But I wanted to know what people who are much more invested in uncovering conspiracies through of the show.

So I went on a website called Want to Know dot info, which aims to expose conspiracies at the highest level. I asked if there was anyone who would do an interview with me. They recommended John Lumiere-Wins.

I was kind of hoping John would meet in a dark alley wearing a trench coat. When I asked why he was talking to me, he'd say, "Trust no one Mr. Molinsky!" and then disappear into a black car, which is how Mulder learned like all the exposition on that show.

But John's office was in sunny Bay Area. He works in alternative medicine – at a place called The Quiet Mind. There was mood lighting, and all sorts of stuff to relax you the moment you step in there. That's why he likes this group, Want to Know. They're not trolls.

JOHN: When I regard somebody as evil, it triggers animosity, hatred, my experience is really negative, and that has no affect whatsoever on them. Research shows those kinds of emotions are not very good for our immune system, they're not very good for our psyche, they're hard on our body, there's a lot of reasons not to indulge them.

But he's still upset about what he sees going on in the world.

JOHN: Since Occupy Wall Street, the 1% has become a meme but it's actually 1% of the 1% that controls most of the decision that are occurring on this planet that affect everybody.

That's why the X-Files spoke to him.

JOHN: I had been exploring what's been going on this planet behind the scenes and behind the corporate media and I had discovered that there were a lot of things that had been happening that people were ignorant of and The X-Files revealed some of that stuff, so that I really liked because it was getting out in the public in, I had no way of getting it out there like that

Like what kind of stuff?

JOHN: Uh boy. Extra terrestrial, UFO stuff -- I've seen craft that were unidentified and it was a very strange experience.

That's what I was wondering if you saw something that made you ---

JOHN: I was working with a spiritual group and we were in Michigan and one night, it was by a lake, it was way out in the country, I said I want to see UFOs and I looked up and I didn't anything. But the next night I looked up and I saw four, five craft, in a V pattern slowly fly in a direction across the sky and a moment later, I saw five more in the same pattern in the same direction, slowly fly over me, no sound. I never seen anything like it before, it was unidentified to me. Beyond that, I don't know! It's inevitable that there are many, many species of intelligent life in this universe, it seems obvious to me that must be so.

The X-Files had two slogans -- I Want to Believe and The Truth is Out There. I want to believe covered all the wondrous stuff – ghosts, extra-terrestrials, ESP – phenomenon that I want to believe because it almost defies death. But there's always the Scully character in my head pulling me back, saying don't be a sucker. Where's the evidence?

The other slogan, "The truth is out there," cover the horrible stuff, the things we wished we didn't know – the Tuskegee Experiments, Abu Grahib or the NSA.

JOHN: There's been enough of the alleged conspiracy theories that have turned out to be pretty obviously true that people suspect, they don't believe the mainstream media anymore. The revelation that there really was no Gulf of Tonkin incident, the revelation that they knew that Pearl Harbor was going to be attacked and they were going to utilize it to get into WWII.

That's under debate among historians.

At the end, I asked John what he thought about the term "conspiracy theory," because I am using it throughout this episode.

JOHN: Well that was a well-engineered meme to create the term conspiracy theory as a derogatory term. Certainly there are conspiracies, and just because it is a conspiracy theory doesn't mean the person espousing it is crazy or it's not true.

You would think that Joe Uscinski would disagree – as a guy that teaches and studies conspiracy theories. But he thinks the real life Fox Mulders can be heroic in their own way.

JOE: You know, as a scientist you have to question everything so when a new finding comes out, you have to retest it and put scrutiny to it. In that sense, conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorists do us a service. You could argue they're actually good for democracy. I mean we can all pick out negative things they have because conspiracy theorists can drive people to not negotiate, believe things that aren't true and make decisions based on false information, there are negatives out there and we tend to focus on those but there are positives too. We have a media out there that doesn't always question authority figures, that doesn't always question big powerful institutions. That role gets passed on to conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists that push those questions, who demand more information. The 9/11 Commission would not have been out there in 2003, 2004, 2005 unless it was really driven by conspiracy theorists saying, hey what really happened and why haven't we been told everything? So that was a good thing. And Nixon would never have been caught if it weren't for two cheeky theorists working at the Washington Post who said; hey I have a conspiracy theory, we think that the president may have been covering up some stuff.

It's funny, a lot of fans lost interest in the X-Files when Mulder and Scully broke the romantic tension and hooked up. But I lost interest when they broke the conspiracy and we learned the truth. And this is it – spoiler alert - this was the big conspiracy they unraveled over 11 seasons:

Aliens are mass-producing a black goo which turns human into slaves when we're infected. The only way to infect the entire population is to load the virus onto genetically enhanced bees which can find us because small pox vaccines are tracking devices. To make sure the evil cabal of humans who are assisting them stays quiet, the aliens took one of their kids as collateral – including Mulder's sister, because Mulder's father was a conspirator. In the mean time, the aliens are fighting a rebellion in their own ranks against "good" aliens who think Earthlings should be left alone.

It kills the mystery, doesn't it? That's why I loved early episodes, when the truth was still out there.

JOE: There's an episode called Jose Chung's From Outer Space, where you see an alien abduction from several different points of view, and at the end of the show, the questions comes up for everyone involved so what really happened? The answer is how the hell should I know? What they're getting at is truth is so subjective. Even when we experience things, we don't know what they truly are.

That's my favorite episode too -- and it's told from the point of view of a journalist. The last line is a killer.

CLIP: We may not be alone in the universe, but some of us are very alone on this planet.

When I imagine a world without conspiracies, I actually feel more alone. Because in that world, people with great ambitions are undone by petty flaws – arrogance, jealousy, unresolved personal issues -- which lead to unexpected catastrophes, which they can't clean up, and have to live with. To me, the scariest story is one where the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Then again – that's just the kind of thing Scully would say before Mulder proves her wrong.

That's it for this week's show, thanks for listening.

Next week, I'm going to keep looking at the alien invasion genre, but from a very, very different perspective.

Special thanks this week to Peter Knight, Lindsay Ellis, John Lumeire-Wins, Fred Burks and Joe Uscinski.

You can like Imaginary Worlds on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.

Where did you grow up by the way?

JOE: I grew up in New Hampshire.

Okay. I grew up in Massachusetts and I can hear a hint of a New England accent in there.

JOE: It's getting wiped out. If I have a beer or two, all the sudden, "I used to shop at Jordan Marsh and go to Papa Gino's"

Oh my God! Sure of course!