

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

I was talking with my assistant producer Stephanie about time travel because it's one of my favorite genres. I was surprised to learn she really dislikes most time travel stories. She doesn't have usual pet peeves that people have about time travel where the logic of the plot is confusing or contradictory. That does bother her, but her bigger issue is the emotional logic behind those stories.

And she dug into some of my favorite time travel movies, like Peggy Sue Got Married. In fact, throughout my 20s and even in my 30s, I kept having Peggy Sue-type fantasies where I would be magically transported back into my teenage body, but with an adult perspective so I could do everything over again.

STEPHANIE: But if you're in you like who you are now, think about how you were perceived or who you were when you were in high school or middle school or even like, you know, your early twenties and now you're getting teased again for these things that you're getting teased about 20 years ago. How do, what does that, what does that cognitive dissonance do to you as a person? Wouldn't that depress you? I mean while you're there, wouldn't you be like frustrated with the fact that you can't really express yourself how you used to or even have this future knowledge that you can't share because you don't want to screw up the timeline. I would be frustrated because I don't have a cell phone so I'm like, Oh, what? I have to listen to my music on a Walkman and I have to take a tape in and out and I've got like if the batteries go out then I'm screwed. And they don't really address that in any kind of time travel that I've seen. Like they don't really like, to some extent they do with Peggy Sue but not I think enough, they don't really explore it enough cause they're going for something else here. They're going for this, you learn your lesson all over again, blah, blah, blah. But even in that story, she still fell in love with it. Even though she knew that that marriage was going to be a disaster in the future, she still went back. She still ended up doing the same things whether she wanted to or not because she still fell in love with him because she was reminded of who she fell in love with.

Hmm. Well, you made an interesting point too. We were talking earlier about that you think time travel is like a cheap form of therapy and not a good form of therapy.

STEPHANIE: Exactly, exactly. Again, you're, you're romanticizing your past. If you're in a bad place in your future and you're like, ah, you know, back then it was so much simpler. I was so much happier. If I could go back in time and change everything, I would feel so much better about myself.

Or a choice that you made that you really wish you'd made a different choice. I still have those.

STEPHANIE: Exactly. Exactly. But you're basically circumnavigating your problem and actually addressing your problem by trying to go back in time and quote unquote fix it. I think what it ends up doing is it gives you more time to actually avoid the problem. Like of the reasons why I like Doctor Who because it's like time isn't linear, it's like a big bowl of spaghetti and we can do whatever we want with time and space. And they even do adhere to some rules.

There are fixed points in time

STEPHANIE: Yeah, exactly, there are fixed points in time where he's like I can't change them no matter how much I want to.

So are there other really well-known time, time travel movies or TV shows or any or storylines that everybody loves that you're just like, no, no. People like, think about this.

STEPHANIE: Back to The Future. To me Back to The Future is the ultimate like wish fulfillment. I'm going to like therapy thing, you know, cause you know, Marty's life currently, his parents aren't happy and even though he goes back in time and like his, his mom suddenly sees her, the, the father is like a hero or whatever and they get together. Why does that lead to them still being happy in the future? I'm pretty sure that they're still going to they still have the same personality. They would still have the same problem.

Yeah but what about the fact that Marty helps his father stand up for himself and got in touch with his creativity and his Dad become a better version of himself that makes the marriage happier?

STEPHANIE: Yeah. That again, I just think that's putting way too much stock in what one person does, I mean who's to say that those, those, those effects actually last maybe when Marty leaves his confidence leaves with Marty. You know, Marty kind of helped build up his self-esteem, but when Marty leaves, he's still going to be in the same circumstances that he was before. But you know, Biff can still kick his ass. So, it might be Marty's here for a while, he feels better for a while, then two weeks later Biff kicks his ass and his self-esteem is down again. I don't think interacting with Marty at one specific point in time completely changes your personality. It puts way too much stock in that. And it's a lot of time travel does that. They make these assumptions that when the person leaves from that timeline, everything that they've done is going to have a lasting effect. That's not how it works people.

That conversation with Stephanie made me think, is time travel just an unhealthy way of escaping your present reality? I love time travel stories, especially when they go to the past. Are they really just junk food fantasies?

I wanted to talk with Charles Yu because he wrote the novel called *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, where he satirizes the Hollywood approach to time, as if time is something you can fix mechanically. In fact, the main character in his novel is a mechanic who repairs time machines that were invented by his father.

CHARLIE: There was something intrinsic about telling a family story through the lens of time travel because I'd felt like our kitchen table, you know where I, I now go as like a father now I go back and you know, take my kids back to see my parents and we eat at the same table that I used to eat at when I was my kid's age. When I'm having a conversation with my parents sitting at that table, there's an overlapping of time, you know, it's sort of folding in on itself at that point.

And Charles was drawn to time travel because it's not just a sci-fi trope. It's one of the most common daydreams we can have.

CHARLIE: People ultimately do a lot of mental time travel and emotional time travel in that thinking about the future is, you know, as I say in my book, basically anxiety, thinking about the past, it's usually regret. I mean those are negative ways of thinking about, think about the future can also be hope or just you know, uncertainty and thinking about the past doesn't have to be regret. It can be fond memories. But in this book, you know, in the book the, the, the character, um, is a time machine repairman. And really what he's doing is he's going around to people whose time machines have broken. Ostensibly he's there to fix the time machine. But really what he ends up telling them is that they've broken the machine themselves or you can't use the machine the way you want to. You can't use it to change the past because if you did, you would no longer be in your own universe, you'd be in a different universe. So really what the time machine repairmen is doing is just sort of acting as like a counselor for people to explain that they sort of have to accept what has happened and move on.

Here is the actor Woody Fu reading an excerpt from the book.

The reason I have job security is that people have no idea how to make themselves happy. Even with a time machine. I have job security because what the customer wants, when you get right down to it, is to relive his very worst moment, over and over and over again. Willing to pay a lot of money to do it, too.

I mean, look, my father built a sort of semi working proto-time machine years before pretty much anyone else had even thought of it. He was one of the first people to work out the basic math and parameters and the limitation of life in the various canonical time

travel scenarios; he was gifted or cursed, depending on how you look at it, with deep intuition for time, an ability to feel it, inside, viscerally, and he still spent his whole life trying to figure out how to minimize loss and entropy and logical impossibility, how to tease out the calculus underlying cause and effect; he still spent the better part of four decades trying to come to terms with just how screwed up and unfair it is that we only get to do this all once, with the intractability and the general awfulness of trying to parse the idea of once, trying to get any kind of handle on it, trying to put it into the equations, isolate into a variable the slippery concept of once-ness.

One of the most common themes in time travel stories is undoing a loss. There are huge apocalyptic losses like Avengers Endgame, or X-Men Days of Future. And there are minor losses like Marty McFly wishing he had a less dysfunctional family.

Vandana Singh is a writer and physicist who likes to explore time travel in her fiction. She understands why loss would be such a common theme in these fantasies.

VANDANA: Loss is such a very, very hard thing to deal with and part of that denial is to want to go back in time and find that person again or find that place again. Therefore, memory and story are really the only time machines we have or revisiting something we've loved and lost or someone we've loved and lost a lot of. And sometimes that impulse can be pathological in the sense that if we can't work through grief, and if we deny loss, then we are in trouble because we can't be real, fully rarely present in the world anymore.

Vandana and Charles Yu both wrote stories for The Time Traveler's Almanac, which is an anthology co-edited by Ann VanderMeer. Ann sees the time travel genre a little differently. She thinks they're all basically love stories because love is the flipside of loss.

ANN: And it's not just love stories in the sense of romantic love, but it's also love stories in, um, friendships, love stories and parents and children, grandparents, you know, reaching across generations. I felt like the whole idea behind people's yearning to time travel was to make these connections with other people in their lives, whether they were good relationships that they wanted to revisit, or maybe there was a problem in the relationship that they wanted to fix.

In fact, one of her favorite stories from the anthology is a love letter to San Francisco called 3 RMS, Good View, by the writer Karen Haber. It's about a

woman who can't afford to live there anymore. So, she goes back to the 1960s so she can pay less rent and essentially grandfather herself into the lease while trying to juggle living in two different time periods.

ANN: And of course when she's going back into the past and living in this apartment, she has these neighbors. But when she goes back into the future, she no longer has those neighbors. So, it's all those relationships between where she is here and where she is there and it's just a fabulous story and it's not your usual time travel story.

"Two-year lease," he said. "Sing here." Then he brandished an additional piece of paper. "This too."

"If this is a pet restriction clause, I'm going to protest. Your ad didn't say about thing about it. I've got a cat."

"Sure, sure," Raskin said. "You can keep your kitty as long as you pay a deposit. This is just your standard noninterference contract."

"Noninterference contract?" He looked at me like I was stupid. It rarely happens. When it does, I don't like it.

"You know," he said, and recited in a song-song voice: "Don't change the past or the past will change you. The time laws. You lawyers understand this kind of thing. You, and you alone, are responsible for any dislocation of past events, persons or things, et cetera, et cetera. Read the small print and sign."

Time travel is a fairly recent fantasy because for most of human history, people's lives didn't feel that different from their grandparents or grandchildren. In fact, Vandana thinks time travel stores are a symptom of modernity (mo-DERN-ity.)

VANDANA: Because it's trying to make sense, but rapidly changing, present and where our future is uncertain. And increasingly so and I think that's partly modernity that does that and our own, no, our lives are so frantic being pushed to the next deadline and the next thing to do and the next thing to do that time becomes, you know we all suffer from, as a friend of mine likes to put it, time poverty. Most of us who live in modernity.

Although Charles thinks Americans have a particularly strong sense of time moving fast because our country is so young – especially the city of Hollywood itself.

CHARLIE: I mean, I live in Southern California where if a house is a hundred years old, it's considered historic, right? But as the, you know, son of immigrants who came from, uh, Taiwan, it's, um, I have this kind of mix of things where I understand that there's a perspective on things that can stretch much longer than my sort of very American brain.

If you don't have a sense, uh, and I'm talking about myself of larger timescales, it can kind of warp your perceptions of how much you can actually affect the course of things either in your own life or in a larger sense.

Vandana splits her time between the U.S and India, and she's very aware that her own sense of time changes depending on where she's living. She actually compares it to the difference between classical Indian music and Western music.

VANDANA: In Indian classical music, um, you always end at the, what would be, you know, if you think about doh ray fah so rah la tee, you always come back to the door at the end. So it's kind of what the circular structure to it. You wonder in all kinds of places, there's a lot of improvisation, uh, with some constraints. What you kind of come back to the end, the note that is the doh, the original doh. What I've noticed in Western music is often the end note is not where you began. And you know, I know that Western cultures, uh, I'm sure this isn't oversimplification, but that the idea of linear time is a big deal, at least in modern Western cultures, which are now globalized. Whereas we find in other cultures simultaneously, the notion of linear time coexisting with a circularity.

She explored those ideas in a short story called Delhi. Her main character is a young man in New Delhi with the ability to see past and present layered on top of each other. There are brief windows where he can talk with these people from the past or future, but he's not sure if he's making a difference, or if his attempt to interfere are actually making things worse. And he feels disturbed when he learns that that the caste system doesn't go away in the future, it just goes high tech.

READING: The train snakes its way under the city through the still-new tunnels, past brightly lit stations where crowds surge in and out and small boys peddle chai and soft drinks. At one of these stops, he sees the apparitions of people, their faces clammy and pale, clad in rags; he smells the stench of unwashed bodies too long out of the sun. They are coming out of the cement floor of the platform, as though from the bowels of the earth. He's seen them many times before; he knows they are from some future he'd rather not think about. But now it occurs to him with the suddenness of a blow that they are from the blind girl's future. Lower Delhi—Neechi Dilli—that is what this must be: a city of the poor, the outcast, the criminal, in the still-to-be-carved tunnels underneath the Delhi that he knows. He thinks of the Metro, fallen into disuse in that distant future, its tunnels abandoned to the dispossessed, and the city above a delight of gardens and gracious buildings, and tall spires reaching through the clouds.

After the break, we'll keep moving further from the Hollywood version of time travel as we explore a European time travel show that became almost like a form of national therapy.

BREAK

Early this year, a listener suggested that I might like a Spanish sci-fi show called **The Ministry of Time** or **El Ministerio del Tiempo**. I binged through the first three seasons on Netflix. I loved the concept and the characters. And it's one of the ingenious shows I've ever seen about time travel.

Unfortunately, Netflix lost the rights to stream the show in the U.S. The fourth season is already airing in Spain, but I can't find any version of the show streaming with English subtitles. Once someone has the rights to stream it in the U.S., I will let everyone know. Also, in describing the show, I have to give away a few minor spoilers.

The Ministry of Time does not rely on a time machine. Instead, they use a series of underground doors that lead to different periods in Spanish history. In each episode, a trio of time agents are sent to the past to stop whoever is trying to change events, even if those people have good intentions, thinking they're going to change history for the better. Or time might be in flux. People in the past make different choices and the time agents need to stop the butterfly effect because there are too many unknown variables. Also, the time agents are recruited from across different eras of Spanish history, so they can help each other blend in.

As much as I liked the show, I knew I was missing a lot of the cultural context. So I talked with **Concepcion (con-sep-see-un) Carmen Cascajosa (cas-ka-josa) Virino**, who goes by **Conchi**, for short. Conchi is a professor at The University of Madrid. She also wrote a book about **The Ministry of Time**, and she got a lot of access to the showrunner **Javier Olivares**.

She says the first thing that is uniquely Spanish about the show is that it's about a government agency. It may be a top-secret government agency but they're also a small bureaucracy, with limited money. And they're very cautious about making sure history doesn't change, no matter how bad it was.

CONCHI: The setting over the series is to be very Spanish and there is not, it's nothing more, you know, more Spanish that they say is about the, you know, having things to work in the same way always it's very representative of what Spain is.

I also talked with Antonio Cordoba. He teaches Spanish science fiction at Manhattan College. Both he and Conchi told me something about the show that never occurred to me. When the show first launched, three main characters, who are part of a team of time agents, were intended to be symbolic characters.

ANTONIO: The three members represent in a way all of Spain using Spanish stereotypes. On the one hand we have the everyman, the man of the people. The man of the present.

That's Julian. He's an EMT in Madrid with a dry sense of humor. The second member of the team is Amelia from Barcelona. She was the first woman to attend college in the 19th century.

ANTONIO: And even if he is a character from the 19th century, the smart character, the character that is looking forward, the one that is like the embodiment of modernity.

Finally, there is Alfonso, a soldier from the height of the Spanish Empire.

ANTONIO: He is like this embodiment of all these 16th and 17th century, old Spanish gentleman behavior. He's brave. Uh, it's emphasized over again that he's sexist, but he has had a heart of gold and he believes the King, but he's still willing to adapt. And that's also a very stereotypic representation of Southern Spain. And see in which people are kind of naive but have their heart in the right place.

Antonio is from Southern Spain, so that stereotype jumped out at him. I wouldn't have recognized it, but I did feel that tension in their dialogue, like when Julian from our time period makes self-deprecating jokes about modern Spain, Alfonso gets offended because he took so much pride in the Spanish Empire.

Conchi thinks those exchanges are important because Spain is fractured along the political and social lines that each of the characters represents – especially the tension between Amelia, the 19th century liberal reformer, and Alfonso, the 16th century macho warrior.

CONCHI: And it's very difficult, very difficult for those two Spain's to work together. And we are seeing that, or the time we now in a very complicated, a crisis in Spain, it's the same. It's impossible to have to Spain to get together.

Eventually the three characters become very close. What helps them bond is that every character in the show is dealing with a personal loss. For instance, Amelia accidentally learns the date of her death, which sends her into existential crisis. Julian lost his wife in a car crash. He's haunted by whether he can use time travel to save her. But their boss, Salvador, is a widow whose wife could've been saved by modern medicine, but he refused to break the rules.

Conchi says the feeling of loss and mourning goes beyond the characters themselves because the series originally had two showrunners. They were brothers named Pablo and Javier Olivares. Pablo died when the show was in development.

CONCHI: So I think if you compare the first season of the department of time with the later seasons, the, the, the first season is it's very sad because all the main characters are facing the, say they're facing, you know, the, the loss of a, of a person, of a situation, of a life or for life project.

That sense of mourning tapped into the national zeitgeist when the show debuted in 2015. Spain was still reeling from 2008 recession which came after an economic boom. And that crisis tapped into a deep history of national losses going back 400 years.

CONCHI: The mystery of time is also dealing with the disaster of the Spanish Armada, but with other, you know, moments in where we were like up top of the world and we lost power and we were behind in the stream of the history.

Antonio says it's no coincidence that several of the male characters are mourning the loss of their wives because in the Spanish language:

ANTONIO: Everything always has a gender, and the fact that Spain – Espana -- is feminine always, always, always activates some kind of gender, national allegory in which the male character missing his wife or his mother that's always present there. That sense of a national of a national loss that goes beyond the individual loss of the, of the character.

When the show first came out, there were complaints that it was too nationalistic. The Ministry was often protecting Spain from foreigners trying to meddle with history. The writers were open to that criticism, and the second season was more introspective.

My favorite episode from that season dealt directly with the loss of the Spanish Armada – which was the tipping point when England overtook Spain as a global power. In the episode, King Philip II commits the ultimate taboo and uses the ministry to rewrite time, so he not only wins that battle, but every battle after that until Spain becomes a 21st century superpower that’s also a religious dictatorship.

For Alfonso, who is from the old Spanish Empire, this would’ve been a dream come true. But he eventually realizes it’s a nightmare.

Conchi says season 2 also shifted focus from the theme of loss to disappointment. And they dealt with the biggest disappointment in recent history – the difficult transition from dictatorship to democracy. They even added a new character from the 1980s who could see firsthand whether their hopes for reform actually panned out.

CONCHI: You know, we don't have a good, eh, opinion about the politicians in Spain. I think it's impossible in Spain to produce a television series such as *The West Wing*, eh, drama. Because he seemed possible that the we had a very good, eh, comedy in Spain. Now this is a, it's about a politician. This politician is like an idiot. But we have at least more in Nobel prizes coming from literature.

Antonio says, that’s why the time agents are often risking their lives to save writers, poets, musicians and artists – but rarely kings or politicians.

ANTONIO: And that's why the show put so much emphasis on the great things about Spain, on the, on the arts, on the literature, on all that great opportunities in which the Spanish people showed that they're made of the right stuff, but that unfortunately the authorities have not been up to the task.

The characters do alter history when they can, but it’s a power they use sparingly. As their boss Salvador often explains, without that history of loss, disappointment and tragedy, they wouldn’t have the great works of Spanish art and literature, and the arts have help to define their national character.

ANTONIO: Too much intervention is not good for you. Too much agency's not good for you. Too much playing the hero as you would have in a, in a Hollywood movie. It's not good for you. So they have like these really fascinating paradoxes and really fascinating ways to use time travel and what is preserved and what is not preserved as a way to

provide therapy to do a nation that by in 2015, it's still like reeling and recovering from the trauma of the great recession.

What I like about The Ministry of Time is that these questions can be applied to a country or a person. If you could undo the worst things that ever happened to you, or the worst things you ever did -- you wouldn't be you anymore. And sometimes you need time travel to realize that.

Although lately with the COVID-19 crisis, I've felt jealous of time traveling characters because I feel like the future can't come quickly enough. At the same time, I haven't been dwelling on the past much because it's painful to remember how easily I used to go out and enjoy being in the world. But the future is so unknown and so unpredictable, I haven't allowed myself to fantasize about the future, which is really usual for me. I have never felt so stuck in time -- so stuck in the present moment as I do right now. I know that's supposed to be a good thing, but I wish I had a time machine more than ever.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Charles Yu, Vandana Singh, Ann VanderMeer, Concepcion Carmen Cascajosa Virino, Antonio Cordoba and my assistant producer Stephanie Billman. Also, thanks to Woody Fu who did the readings.

By the way, I mostly talked about going to the past because I've always thought that going to the future would be disorienting, and people would treat you like a relic. And if you want a sense of what that could be like, check out to my episode Brain Chemistry from 2018. It's an audio drama about a guy who gets to live in the future, but it is not what he bargained for.

Registration is open for the summer session of my class on how to make a podcast. Usually, the course is taught at NYU, but for now NYU has gone virtual so you can take it from anywhere. The class is called Creating a Narrative Podcast and you can sign up at the NYU website.

Obviously, there are a bazillion time travel stories out there that I didn't mention. What are some of your favorites? I'm sure the Rick and Morty episode on time travel is up there, although I have a soft spot for the Simpsons parody of the Ray Bradbury story A Sound of Thunder. Let me know on the Imaginary Worlds Facebook page. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

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