

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

Star Wars is probably the most mainstream sci-fi fantasy franchise. It's a right of passage to watch the original trilogy for many kids. But many Star Wars fans don't know much beyond the movies. The comics, the novels, the animated TV shows – that's considered for hardcore fans. And if Baby Yoda hadn't taken the Internet by storm, I suspect The Mandalorian would have fallen into that camp as well.

But today we're going to hear from some people who may convince you to give that other material a chance – like Amy Richau, who writes for Star Wars dot com.

AMY: The more and more people I talk to, a lot of people who are heavily involved, who are writing about it both professionally and who are doing podcasts and going to server celebration and are kind of, you know, the people who I think likely are going to, you know, grow into positions where they are creators themselves of like official Star Wars things. A lot of them don't hold the original trilogy on the pedestal that so many of us do still the original trilogy is still probably, always going to be my favorite Star Wars, but it really, really makes me happy that it's not everyone's favorite Star Wars. I think as long as Star Wars can continue to create content that stands on its own and can be a different entry point, then we'll just get more and more Star Wars.

And if you only know Star Wars from the movies, you might not know that Ahsoka Tano is probably the most popular character among hard core Star Wars fans right now. She was Anakin Skywalker's Jedi apprentice in the animated series Clone Wars, which took places between Episode II: Attack of The Clones and Episode III: Revenge of The Sith.

To give you a visual image, Ahsoka is a humanoid alien. She has orange skin with white markings. Her real stand out feature is an alien appendage on her head that branches up into horns and hangs down like tails over her shoulders. She also uses two light sabers -- one long, one short. She is a total badass.

AMY: If you had only watched the movies, she was the first female Jedi who, you know, had dialogue. Like there were some female Jedi in the prequels, but none of them actually even said anything. She wasn't in the story because she was romantically involved with anyone. She wasn't in the story because she was related to anyone. She just was a strong and powerful leader who then didn't let being a Jedi define who she was.

And today's episode will be full of spoilers because to explain why Ahsoka is important to the story of Star Wars, I need to go over her entire character arc because if the internet rumors are true, we will see Ahsoka in live action for the first time when Rosario Dawson plays her in season 2 of The Mandalorian.

For such a beloved character, Ahsoka's debut was not well received. At first, the Clone Wars animated series was clearly aimed at kids. A lot of fans over the age of 10 were mostly disappointed. Lauren Davis has written about Ahsoka for the site iO9, and she says the fans were particularly harsh on this new character.

LAUREN: I remember seeing a letter earlier views that called her like a totally killable character because you know, people are like, well, if she's a Jedi and you know, we know that all Jedi die. So clearly this, this character is expendable.

Even Anakin Skywalker didn't want her around.

ANAKIN: There's been a mix up the youngling isn't with me.

AHSOKA: Stop calling me that! You're stuck with me, Sky Guy.

ANAKIN: What did you just call me? Don't get snippy with me little one, you know, I don't think you're old enough to be a padawan.... (FADE DOWN)

LAUREN: I think that for a lot of people there was this sense that like, even though the prequel movies were sort of terrible, that Anakin Skywalker was still this very like, kind of like sacred character and having this kind of like little sister character, people didn't like that. They thought it was like somehow disrespectful to Anakin Skywalker, which to me smacks a bit of sexism.

Amy agrees.

AMY: When I first heard why people didn't like her, they talked about how, you know, she was, you know, this bratty, younger character who was stubborn and didn't have a lot of patients didn't respond to authority. And my reaction to that was like, Oh, you mean just like Luke and Anakin when they were the same age, you know, she's, you know, she's a young teenage character and you know, who, who among us, isn't kind of annoying, you know, when we're, when we're that age

George Lucas was heavily involved in launching The Clone Wars TV show. He wanted to put Ahsoka in the movies, but he couldn't find the room. Under the guidance of the show runner he chose, Dave Filoni, The Clone Wars evolved from

a kids' show into something much darker and more cinematic. And over seven seasons, the storyline jumped several times. We saw Ahsoka grow from a 14-year old padawan to eventually being a 17-year old Jedi warrior.

Now, Ahsoka was originally created to help the audience have a better understanding of Anakin. If you only know Anakin from the movies – get that version out of your head. I know that Hayden Christensen has his fans, but I think the voice actor who played Anakin in the show, Matt Lanter, elevated the character, and he had great chemistry with the voice actress who played Ahsoka, Ashley Eckstein.

ANAKIN: Ahsoka I am so sorry.

AHSOKA: For what?

ANAKIN: For letting you go! For letting you get taken! It was my fault.

AHSOKA: No Master, it was not your fault.

ANAKIN: I should've paid more attention. I should've tried harder.

AHSOKA: You already did everything you could. Everything you had to do. When I was out there, alone, all I had was your training, and the lessons you taught me and because of you, I did survive and not only that, I was able to lead others to survive as well.

The first six movies are ultimately about Darth Vader but his character development in the prequels was severely lacking. Lauren thinks the character of Ahsoka helps fill in those gaps.

LAUREN: You have to love Anakin Skywalker before you can really feel sad about everything that happens with him. The real great Ahsoka Anakin moments are the ones where we understand why Anakin eventually turns to the dark side and where we really get to explore his doubts about his destiny and the Jedi because Ahsoka is one of the few people that he can really be honest with. She gives us the opportunity to sit with Anakin in a way that we just don't get to in the movies.

Ahsoka and Anakin have a deep love for each other that is purely platonic. There aren't a lot of female characters in Star Wars who have those types of relationships.

Also, in the animated series, Ahsoka, Anakin, and Obi Wan are a trio of heroes, just like Luke, Han and Leia in the original trilogy – which is so much fun to watch. After after watching the animated series, it's weird to think Ahsoka wasn't in the movies.

She also becomes a surrogate for the fans who had been wondering how come none of the Jedi realized they were becoming tools of a fascist empire until it was too late. And it takes her a while to realize that.

LAUREN: At the beginning, she's a child, she sees the Jedi in the way that a lot of us saw the Jedi when we were kids, you know? Yes, they are stiff and rigid, but they're like, awesome. And they're the knights that are defending the galaxy and they got cool laser swords, what she sees as so much more complicated. She sees people who do sort of want to do what's right. But they're so willing to just fall back on their institutions.

AHSOKA: So that's it? You're going to abandon Bo Katan and their people?

OBI WAN: Ahsoka, surely you understand, this is a pivotal moment in the Clone Wars, the heart of the republic is under attack

AHSOKA: I understand that as usual you're playing politics. This is why the people have faith in the Jedi. I had too, until I was reminded of what the order means to people who truly needs us.

The big storyline that altered her destiny was a terrorist attack on the Jedi temple. Ahsoka was framed for the bombing. She's hunted by the Jedi and put on trial. Anakin is the only one who believes in her. He helps prove her innocence. But the Jedi Masters don't wonder why they were easily fooled. They think the Force must have been testing Ahsoka.

ANAKIN: They're asking you back, Ahsoka. I'm asking you back.

LAUREN: And it's actually a horrifying moment because she sees that they just want to trust in the force, and they don't want to fix any of the problems.

AHSOKA: I'm sorry, Master. But I'm not coming back.

LAUREN: And it's just, it's stunning. It's a really stunning moment. And the fact that she turns away and the fact that she leaves is just kind of solidifies her position is just an incredible character and a really strong character in the universe, because how tempting is that. She knows that she's got to find another way.

ANAKIN: Why are you doing this?

AHSOKA: The Council didn't trust me. So, how can I trust myself?

ANAKIN: What about me? I believed in you! I stood by you!

AHSOKA: I know you believe in me, Anakin. And I'm grateful for that, but this isn't about you.

Again, Amy Richau:

AMY: Usually when you hear people talk about Ahsoka, you very rarely, and this pleases me, you don't hear that like, oh, Ahsoka she quit the giant order, like as if like she's a quitter, like it's never really, like, I don't think anyone ever feels that way because that's not the way it was presented. And that's certainly not the point. And it's okay to leave a situation that that's, you know, not good. I mean, that's, that is really important for young girls to see that it's not a weakness to leave situations. It's, you know, it's a powerful move for yourself.

Leaving the Jedi Order also puts Ahsoka out of the main storyline of Episode III, which gives a canonical reason why she's not in that movie. But she does see the Republic fall and flees into hiding.

But that's not the end of her story. Ahsoka appears again in another animated series called Rebels, which took place right before Episode IV: A New Hope. At that point, Ahsoka is in her 30s, and she helping to guide this young Rebellion against The Empire. The show mostly features new characters, but the big bad early on is Darth Vader. And they got James Earl Jones to do the voice.

Ahsoka suspects Anakin has become Vader – but she just can't believe it. She also feels guilty because if she had stayed with the Jedi Order, it's possible she might have been able to stop what happened to him.

AHSOKA: I was beginning to believe I knew who you were behind that mask. But it's impossible. My Master could never be as vile as you!

VADER: Anakin Skywalker was weak. I destroyed him.

AHSOKA: Then I will avenge his death

VADER: Revenge is not the Jedi way

AHSOKA: I am no Jedi.

AMY: And to me, that that reunion in a Star Wars Rebels is one of the most heartbreaking and really just amazing storylines in all of Star Wars.

It's also a great light saber battle because they're almost evenly matched. As Anakin, he taught her everything he knew. At one point, she slashes away part of

his mask, revealing Anakin's yellow bloodshot eye with the burnt flesh around it. And the split personalities of Anakin and Vader struggle with each other.

ANAKIN: Ahsoka.

AHSOKA: Anakin! I won't leave you! Not this time.

VADER: Then you will die.

One of the reasons Lauren loves that scene is because she likes to imagine long before Darth Vader scarified himself to save his son, Ahsoka was able to put a crack in his armor, literally and figuratively. And that helped to set up his redemption.

LAUREN: A lot of new Star Wars can be very much, Hey kids, you like Star Wars, right? This is Star Wars. This is Star Wars, Star Wars, Star Wars, Star Wars. Uh, I have a bad feeling about this. Never tell me the odds.

You're talking about the fan servicey stuff,

LAUREN: The fan servicey stuff. And I think that when new stuff rewards long-term viewers, it's not about those call outs. It's about giving you moments that helped shift the way that you feel about the things that came before.

AMY: People always say, Star, Wars, it's about hope, but really, it's like, to me, it's like, it's about hope in the face of extreme tragedy. But I think that what makes Darth Vader more tragic is when you realize that in his life, he did have these people, like Obi Wan and Ahsoka who were his family, but the power of the Dark Side, it was too much for him to like, you know, for him to see that.

By the end of that series, Ahsoka has become a Gandalf-like figure, wearing a white robe and hood, carrying a wooden staff -- nothing like the teenage sidekick that we saw at the beginning of Clone Wars.

LAUREN: It's interesting. I think a lot of, other characters in Star Wars are very inward facing, who were like, what is my destiny? What is my place? And for Ahsoka, it's, it's much more about like, how, how do I make society better?

And as I mentioned, Ahsoka is probably going to be in season 2 of The Mandalorian. The fans had been lobbying for Rosario Dawson to play Ahsoka because her facial features already look like Ahsoka's. She's also the same age Ahsoka would be during The Mandalorian, which takes place after Return of The Jedi.

The showrunner of *The Clone Wars* and *Rebels*, Dave Filoni, is one of the writers and directors on *The Mandalorian*, so fans are hopeful this could be a good transition to live action right. Also, in the animated shows, Ahsoka was very involved in Mandalorian politics, so there's a lot of potential for her to be a major player in *The Mandalorian*.

But turning her into a live action character has already been done, to some extent, in cosplay. After the break, we'll go good deep into Ahsoka fandom, and hear from people who have been trying to re-create her in real life for years.

> BREAK

McKenna Fellows is a lifelong *Star Wars* fan. As a kid, she used to imagine Luke Skywalker was her imaginary friend. And she imagined herself as a Jedi. And McKenna is now one of the most prominent Ahsoka cosplayers.

MCKENNA: Well, I think people can find a lot of different parts of her story to relate to. I know when I found her, I had graduated college was about to look for a job. It felt like everything I had known up until that point was kind of coming to an end. And now it's kind of like, well, now what I have to kind of go out on my own and figure this out. And then that really hit me hard when she decided to leave the order at the end of season five, because it's kind of the same feeling where everything I knew, which was comfortable and great, I can't stay there for whatever reason anymore. So now I have to go out on my own kind of figure out who I am when I want to be doing all that kind of stuff at the same time.

That's interesting the way you put it that you look for characters that you connect with and then you found Ahsoka, what is that like as a cosplayer? Is this something that you feel like I really like, this is a really good fit. I want Ahsoka to be one of my signature characters, or I want to seek out this sort of community of Ahsoka cosplayers?

MCKENNA: Yeah. It's, it's interesting. I feel like I fall into the character and don't even realize it a lot. An example of one time where I really didn't feel connected is I had a bunch of friends telling me I should do Elsa at the peak of *Frozen* hype. And so I made the dress and it was a fun project, but whenever I was in costume, I felt very awkward. Like, I didn't really know what to like for posing or interacting with little kids who want you to be quote unquote in character. But it's like with Ahsoka, I feel like I don't really have to put on an act at all. I already am like sarcastic and like spunky, I would love two lightsabers two is better than one. Like it so much already just clicked.

So, what are the challenges of designing her costume?

MCKENNA: There's a lot. One thing I've learned is taking things from animation to live action in the form of costume is not easy. Um, animators don't have to care about seams or how is she getting her giant head through the tiny little turtleneck with no zipper. So, it's a lot of studying of what they do give you, and then trying to figure out ways to, uh, make it actually wearable.

Ahsoka has a couple different outfits, but for most of the Clone Wars, she wears a dark red tunic. Her arms and legs are mostly free of clothing, so she can spring into action. The hardest part is making the alien appendage on her head. As I mentioned earlier it's mostly white with greyish blue stripes that come up like horns on the top of her head and hang down like tails over her shoulders. The tails are called lekku, and lekku is the word that you'll hear a lot of cosplayers use as a shorthand to describe the entire headpiece.

MCKENNA: My first one was made out of link green upholstery foam, and it just turned into like this rock-hard mess, but I kept hearing people talk about latex. So, I tried making a full latex one. Um, I used way too much. It was super thick and very heavy and didn't move at all. So finally, um, I came to silicone, which was kind of my ideal product in the first place, but I was like, I'll never be that advanced to get to that point. It scared me; it was more expensive, very finicky to use. So, it's been kind of fun to learn all these different things, but there's definitely been a lot of failures. I feel like people, especially on social media, I never talk about what part of their costumes, were their failures and learning experiences. Um, I have a whole closet basically stacked full of failed silicone lekku.

Now she's become an expert at making lekku. In fact, she sells them to other cosplayers. And she does Ahsoka at different ages, because Ahsoka's lekku grows bigger and longer as she gets older. But the hardest part is figuring out how to make a headpiece that's light enough to wear.

MCKENNA: Because I've met so many Ahsoka cosplayers who say they're getting neck problems or back problems because they can't move their head side to side or up or down. There was one girl I met at a celebration who said her headpiece weighed 20 pounds. That can't be good for you to wear. And I want people to have fun and not be in pain when they wear a costume.

As McKenna was figuring out how to make a lekku, she was furloughed from her job because of the pandemic. Luckily, the demand from Ahsoka cosplayers is keeping her fully employed. There aren't any fan conventions happening now, but cosplayers still want to show their costumes on social media. It's also

appropriate that Ahsoka is helping McKenna pay her rent because the character is so good to the core, she'd want to help McKenna any way she could.

MCKENNA: She's kind of saved my butt right now, especially with COVID, like I'm working so much more than I was before, but I told my fiancé it's like before I was stuck at a desk all day, I didn't have a lot of work coming in. So, I was often bored and now I'm like, I'm never bored and I'm working in there all day all night, but it's worth it. Especially when people get their head pieces. They're just so ecstatic, it's really cool. Like I never thought people would want my work in that way.

Ahsoka has also created opportunities for Rachel Roth. Rachel is a cosplayer, and she's also a fashion designer who specializes in putting sci-fi fantasy references into her couture clothing.

RACHEL: I, when I do try to design stuff, I try to hide the geeky elements. So, when you're kind of, I guess I quote unquote, a normie, you look at it and you're like, Hey, that's a really cool dress, but if you know the fandom, you're like, Oh, I see that. Oh, I see that. It's so cool. It's like kind of hidden geeky and incognito.

Like a lot of Ahsoka fans, Rachel was not crazy about the character at first, she thought Ahsoka was annoying, but gradually she became really impressed with Ahsoka to the point where she wanted to pay tribute to Ahsoka by designing a couture dress based on Ahsoka's main costume during The Clone Wars.

RACHEL: Because honestly, I don't really see her herself wearing a dress. So it's not something that was necessarily like I'm designing as like something that she would wear. It was more, I guess, to represent her personality and her strength. And then, um, I took elements of like her actual tunic and just little designs here and there. And then I also tried to stick to, I guess, more natural fiber fabrics because the, uh, the Jedi, they tend to stick to natural fibers as well, like leathers linens swayed. So that those are the fabrics I used for her dress as well.

I never thought about that, that they, that the Jedi's clothes are usually natural fabrics.

RACHEL: Yeah. Because they want to be like more in tuned with like earth and nature and like the Force around them. So, they try to like stay away from, I guess, more synthetic plastics type, a polyester fabrics.

Of course, the big challenge is Ahsoka's lekku headpiece. Rachel needed to figure out something subtle, or as she likes to put it, something that was geek incognito. Eventually, she started looking at hijabs. (Huh-JOBS)

RACHEL: I always like, like incorporating like, uh, different cultures into my designs without being like cultural appropriation. So I wanted you to make sure I was very respectful and I didn't do anything too out of the norm. And I took something and kind of just like, I know it was disrespectful in any way. And I thought it was a really good way to show the lekku headpiece because I've also seen like a lot of cosplayers, like who incorporate hijabs into their cosplays because they're like, Oh, this is part of my religion, but I still want to be part of the nerd culture. And I really love seeing that and they get so creative with the different shapes. So, I actually remember just sitting there, like in front of the mirror, like practicing for hours, trying to like do different folds different wraps to try to like do the little horn pieces on her lekku and then have it hang down. So, it wasn't like always like all wrapped around her head, but it would just kind of like hang down and kind of like her tentacle pieces would.

There is another important person in the world of Ahsoka fandom: Ashley Eckstein (eck-STINE.) Of course, she was the voice of Ahsoka in the animated show, but she's also become Ahsoka's caretaker in the real world, managing the relationship between the character and the fans. McKenna had a great encounter with Eckstein at a convention. Now there are a lot of Ahsoka cosplayers at any convention, but McKenna was dressed as a version of Ahsoka when the character was temporarily possessed by the Dark Side in The Clone Wars. And Ashley Eckstein has said that was her favorite episode to record.

MCKENNA: And as she was being almost carried away by her team, um, she stopped them and said, wait, I've seen this Ahsoka all weekend. She's my favorite. And I have to get a picture with her. And I was just standing there like what, excuse me, really?!

She got more than a picture. Ashley Eckstein invited McKenna to come on her YouTube interview show, Tea Party Tuesdays.

MCKENNA: I'm still kind of geeking out that I'm sitting here.

ASHLEY: Well I'm geeking out to be talking to you, because any fan of Ahsoka is a friend of mine and McKenna I can't thank you enough for your time today, and shaking your story (FADE OUT)

Ashley Eckstein also runs an online store of fangirl clothes called Her Universe, and she created the Her Universe fashion show at San Diego Comic Con, where a panel of judges picks about two dozen designs among hundreds of applicants to take to the runway. In 2017, Rachel Roth's Ahsoka couture dress was accepted into the show.

RACHEL: I showed my friends after I got accepted. And they were like, oh, Rachel, that was really smart that you did that. And I'm like, what do you mean? I love Ahsoka. And they're like, Ashley, she's the owner of Her Universe. I was like, yeah, what about it? And I'm like, Rachel, she's the voice actor of Ahsoka. And I'm like, wait, what? I never put two and two together. But when I actually did meet her, when I like made the whole piece, I put my friend Emma in it and we were like backstage, Ashley came up to me and we were talking for a bit, she was actually telling me that every year, every year for the fashion show is she gets so many as Ahsoka designs. But she's like the most pickiest with that because Ahsoka is her character, she absolutely loves it. And when she saw mine, she was like, okay, this is the one, this is the one getting in. I don't care. What all you judges say, I'm fighting for this to be in the show. And that totally made my day. They actually like made my year, actually.

I find it encouraging that Ahsoka has such a passionate fanbase because the future of Star Wars is still a question mark. There's been a lot of debate at Disney about how to move forward with the franchise if they're not telling the story of the Skywalker family. And if they introduce Ahsoka in The Mandalorian, if they see the potential in this character and not give her just an extended cameo, she could be a great example of how to move forward.

I remember in 1980, the marketing campaign for The Empire Strikes Back just said "the Star Wars saga continues." Those words were thrilling back then, but over the years "the saga continues" started to feel like code for, "we're going to squeeze every last dollar out of this thing." It's nice to think the saga will continue because there are still a lot of good stories left to tell.

That's it for this week, special thanks to Lauren Davis, Amy Richau, McKenna Fellows and Rachel Roth.

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 do a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover the show. I also put a slideshow of some of Ahsoka at different points in her storyline, McKenna's cosplay and Rachel's Ahsoka dress on the Imaginary Worlds Instagram page.

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