

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

**In case you haven't heard, Patrick Stewart is going to revising his role as Jean Luc Picard in a new series called Picard, on CBS All Access.**

## **CLIP**

**I am very excited. As I've mentioned many times before, The Next Generation is my favorite Star Trek series, although most of the actors from The Next Generations will not be in Picard. But the show will feature Picard's arch nemesis The Borg. And the writers have promised this is going to be a Borg storyline we have not seen before.**

**The Borg was the closest thing Star Trek had to pure villains. They want to assimilate every species into the Borg collective. And you don't want to be a Borg. They're like Frankenstein monsters stitched together with robotic eyes and limbs. They fly through the galaxy in giant cube ships and inform everyone, you will be assimilated. Resistance is futile.**

*PICARD: I have nothing to say to you and I will resist you with my last ounce of strength!*

*BORG: Strength is irrelevant. Resistance is futile. We wish to improve ourselves, we will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service ours.*

**So with The Borg returning to pop culture, I wanted to explore why they're so memorable, and so haunting. I decided to assemble a round table discussion with three academics that use science fiction to teach philosophy.**

**Christina Valeo – who goes by Chris -- and Kevin Decker both teach at Eastern Washington University. I asked Chris if she thought The Borg were scary when she first saw them on TV.**

*CHRIS: I think they're still terrifying. Um, I was, you know, I was using our, our meeting today as a chance to, to brush up and there's something about that. Um, especially this, the shape of the ship and the fact that it shouldn't fly based on physics that we understand.*

*KEVIN: Did you re-watch First Contact, Chris?*

CHRIS: I did

KEVIN: That's where they're super scary. That's where they're played for scares.

CHRIS: They're um, they're really sort of inscrutable and, and canny and um, yeah. Yeah. I think they're still super unsettling. Yeah.

SHAWN: Yeah. I always thought that they were, um, like malignant and not malicious.

**And that is Shawn Taylor. He teaches at San Francisco State.**

SHAWN: And it was just like this, this is cancer.

KEVIN: Mm hmm. Yeah.

SHAWN: Like there's nothing you can, I mean there's nothing you can really do about this. I'm thinking like if it were a real world situation, you would just have to like, alright, what do you want to assimilate first? My neck and my face, like I just have to give in is not more that I can do. And there's something about that, just something that is relentless.

KEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. They're like a force, they're like cancer or a force of nature. And of course they, they turned the, the power of the Federation, uh, on its head by basically saying, look, you know, you guys sometimes assimilate cultures as well and now we're going to do that to you and you have no choice about it.

SHAWN: Yeah. And it really forced me to think about the Federation as colonizers.

***You know, it's interesting because the word assimilation, you know, used to have a very positive connotation in American culture. It was, you know, this part of the immigrant experience. Um, and now there's a lot of anxiety obviously on the right with xenophobia but also in the left in terms of losing cultural identity and what do you as losing, what are you assimilating to exactly do, do you think the Borg taps into those anxieties?***

CHRIS: I think especially in terms of the power differential, um, the notion that you have no control over what's taken, how it's taken, how it's going to be deployed, um, and re-watching that really poignant episode of family where Jean Luc goes back to earth, um, after his, um, his trauma after he's been attacked and, um, violated and used. And he's so aware that he's been weaponized. Um, it's heartbreaking.

**She's referring to the series of episodes where Picard is assimilated by the Borg and The Borg use him to try and destroy the Federation.**

*LOCUTUS: I am Locutus, a Borg. Resistance is futile. Your life as it has been is over. From this time forward you will service us.*

**Eventually the crew of the Enterprise is able to capture and restore Picard. But he never gets over the trauma of having been assimilated into the Borg.**

**Again, Kevin Decker.**

KEVIN: Yeah. I just wanted to throw that, I think at base, uh, one of the things that taps into that we haven't talked about is kind of Western cultures attitude toward the natural and the unnatural and the kind of arbitrary line that's drawn between augmentation and what is natural. And of course it taps into, I think the earliest Borg episodes make it very clear that it taps into a kind of body anxiety, right, of taking over somebody else's body. Uh, they introduced the nanites, the Borg nanites that do the work from the inside. So I think apart from the cultural dimension, which we should talk about, which is really important, there is also this kind of visceral dimension of the board using bodies, uh, for their own purposes regardless of the, the owners, if you will, uh, intentions.

SHAWN: And this is that like the homogeneity of it. It's just you are these ones vibrant, beautiful things and now you're just this, you know, and as a son of immigrants, it's, I mean, you know, assimilation was always like this battle in our household, you know, change the accent, don't use certain words, be under the radar.

KEVIN: Change your last name.

SHAWN: Absolutely. And just the erasure of autonomy, you are part of this one, collect a single mission, which on the surface looks pretty interesting. Like, okay, we're all geared towards this one thing, this one go one, that one goal or just just basically accumulation. Yeah. Yeah. That seems to be, that is something that really to this day, I mean, when I teach us a couple episodes to my students and they're just like this, I mean, just because we have students now who are so hyper individualized with email, social media profiles and the rest to even like consider what does it mean to lose what you think is special? Is just horrifying to a lot of people? And especially to, I think people who pride themselves in individuality.

***Well, you're talking about the body and merging technology with the body. With the philosophy of transhumanism, Silicon Valley moguls like to present that as the most wonderful thing. Our bodies are already merging with technology with bionic limbs, and eventually we'll have implants in our brains where you can search Google with our minds, and hyper link to each other, and that will be great, and I'm surprised more people don't say, you mean like the Borg?***

(Group laughs)

CHRIS: Well, maybe they will after your program, maybe they will. Or maybe the Borg --

KEVIN: Yeah, maybe they've been too normalized. I don't know, The Borg.

***But does that try to tap into transhumanism as well, those, because that philosophy was certainly very much around in the '90s?***

KEVIN: Yeah, sure. Sean, you've done stuff on Afrofuturism. What's the, what's the overlap there?

SHAWN: I mean, just for me, it's what's, what's interesting with Afrofuturism in this discussion, it's that it's never about the merging of technology and the body. It's a lot of the times it's about how to make technology more like the natural world.

KEVIN: Hmm.

SHAWN: So, so there's more of a sows as more of a, a unison there as opposed to here's this giant hunk of machinery. Let's get to this words. Actually there, there's some type of, you know, technological and biological parody. And I think transhumanism is also really interesting and it makes me wonder why these Silicon Valley people, you know, purport that cause it seems like if you don't, it seems like they're trying to build a culture that may be missing now because they seem very, that seems like a very disconnected type of like, yeah, but what's missing that you'd want that happen because with Afrofuturism, because black people had so many things stripped from the language and culture and, and everything else, so it's not about merging with, but it's about using technology as a reparative not as a substitute.

**Our conversation will continue just after the break.**

## **BREAK**

**The most famous storyline around the Borg was Picard's assimilation, but the second most popular storyline in The Next Generation came from just a single episode, called I Borg where the Enterprise finds a wounded Borg and decides to take him on board for humanitarian reasons – which is a very controversial decision among the crew. And being in contact with humans begins to change this single Borg.**

*HUGH: What is your designation?*

*GEORDI: Designation?*

*HUGH: Third of Five*

*BEVERLY: You mean our names. We don't have designations, we have names. I'm Beverly. This is Geordi.*

*HUGH: Do I have a name?*

*GEORDI: Do you want one?*

*HUGH: A name?*

*BEVERLY: I'm Beverly, he's Geordi, and you...*

*HUGH: You?*

*GEORDI: Wait, that's it. Hugh. What do you think?*

**Not everyone is won over by Hugh the Borg. Guinan, played by Whoopi Goldberg, is still traumatized by the Borg's assimilation of her planet. But once she meets Hugh, she realizes the Borg are capable of change. But Picard isn't convinced. In fact, he wants to implant a deadly virus in Hugh and send him back to the Borg collective like a Trojan Horse.**

*GUINAN: When you talk to him face to face, can you honestly say you don't have any doubt?*

*PICARD: I haven't talked to it. I saw no need.*

*GUINAN: If you're going to use this person.*

*PICARD: It's not a person it's a Borg!*

*GUINAN: If you're going to use this person to destroy his person, you should at least look him in the eye before you do it because I'm not sure he is still a Borg.*

**Hugh is going to be in the new Picard series. Although we don't know what he's been up to since The Next Generation.**

**I asked Shawn, Kevin and Chris why the character of Hugh resonated so deeply with the fans.**

SHAWN: The Hugh thing was remind me almost like how when someone's being deprogrammed from a cult, while they're in the cult, you may have certain ideas about it, but once they're there, they get removed and having to reassemble it into, there's the word again into the, their regular society. It's kind of like, Oh wow. You realize just what was done to them and how it was done. And then you, I think that's where in the sympathy arises the post assimilation as opposed to while they're part of the giant body of things.

***Yeah. And Picard comes up with the idea of using Hugh to infect the rest of the Borg with a deadly virus. Would you say this plan is genocide -- or is it a justifiable act of self-defense or a pre-emptive strike?***

KEVIN: I don't know that I would have been able to stop myself from enacting the plan

CHRIS: I'm shifting my chair away. (laughs) if I were Picard...

KEVIN: Yes, she's moving away. I mean, I know, I know my limitations and you know, being a pragmatist there is a problem to be solved in that circumstance. And the actual status as individuals or as personalities of the Borg that would be effected or killed if you like, is, is in dispute. Um, that's part of what makes the dramatic tension in I Borg, uh, happen with Hugh, he's clearly a person. He's been rehabilitated or re assimilated at least temporarily. Uh, but with the rest of the Borg, I don't know. I mean, it depends on how expansively we want to, uh, define genocide. Obviously. Um, we don't want to define a way the possibility of genocide. It's important to keep that concept

SHAWN: Or how much do you want to bring into account a Starfleet zone principles?

KEVIN: Yeah.

SHAWN: Certain people, you have to be Admiral who's ready to go for it, but then you wonder what, you know, what are the Vulcan think about it, right? What do Andorians, I mean, whoever else is part of the Federation, how are they gonna think that? I mean, yeah, I mean, I mean, are any genocides necessary? I mean then you might have been a necessary action, but it's still, I mean, you're taking out entire species of people or maybe former people now I guess then you have to ask the question. You know, I guess since you know, Federation, all life is, I'll send you in life is life to be, whether it's organic or whether it's mechanical, but then you have to probably weigh the bill. Interesting moral costs. Like, if we get rid of these, you know, I don't think we ever have an idea of how many Borg there actually are, but if we get rid of them, like how much better will the rest of us be is it's kind of, it's like a, almost like a, a triage issue.

KEVIN: I think the, the other complication, and here's where the true fans are going to hopefully light up, is that it turns out that if they had decided to use that solution based on the evidence that I think Voyager gives us later, they probably would not have been successful right. At wiping out all of the Borg because there's so dispersed, especially through, what is it, the Delta, the Delta quadrant that the Voyager, yeah. It goes through. So I find it, you know, I would really have to suspend my disbelief to, to think that a solution like that would do anything more than take out, you know, Borg within receiving, uh, uh, vicinity of that, that having been said, I still don't know how I would respond to the ethical dilemma.

**The biggest change to the Borg mythology was the introduction of the Borg Queen in the 1996 film Star Trek: First Contact.**

**First Contact was the first film to focus exclusively on the Next Generation cast. Until that point, the Borg had been presented as a collective hive. But in pushing the insect-metaphor further, we learn that the Borg drones are controlled by a Borg Queen, played by Alice Krige (KREE-ger)**

*PICARD: I remember you, you were there all the time, but that ship, and all the Borg on it were destroyed.*

*BORG QUEEN: You think in such three-dimensional terms, how small you've become.*

**She was a more traditional villain for the Enterprise to fight – an evildoer they could focus all of their attention on. But Chris and Shawn felt like the Borg Queen actually made them less scary.**

CHRIS: She is almost an anti Borg. She's not just like a prime Borg. She's an anti Borg. Um, she's so sensual. She's so individual. She has so much interiority. She manipulates Data's interiority beautifully, almost successfully, at one point 1 or 2 three seconds or three, three, seven seconds. Um, she actually makes him question himself. And then when you reread the Borg, in retrospect, everything you've known about them since, you know, before 1996, does she explain things or just totally undermine things?

SHAWN: It does seem like there was, it was like for me, it was just like, I get it. It was interesting, but part of me was wondering, you know, like the seduction of data and that entire thing. I think it was cool to have him question himself, but also it felt really kind of male gaze-y guys are like, ah, let's make something sexy right now for Star Trek because Star Trek hasn't been sexy for a little bit and then they just made this where I think it kind of like took away the integrity of the Borg for that reason alone is because it seems more of a, a, a sci-fi nerds fantasy of a sexy super villain than it did just seem like it to advance the story any real way for me.

**First Contact is my favorite Star Trek movie, and it's the culmination of Picard's angst over being abducted, and violated by The Borg.**

**The plot of the movie is that The Borg has gone back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century to stop humanity when we were at an earlier stage of development. And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Picard meets a character named Lily Sloane, played by Alfie Woodward. Lily sees more clearly than anyone else that Picard still hasn't processed his trauma. But she's not sympathetic at first. She worries that he's reckless -- obsessed to the point of self-destruction.**

*Picard: Get out!*

*Lily: Or what? You'll kill me? Like you killed Ensign Lynch?*

*Picard: There was no way to save him.*

*Lily: You didn't even try. Where was your "evolved sensibility" then?*

*Picard: I don't have time for this.*

*Lily: Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your little quest. Captain Ahab has to go hunt his whale!*

**Her reference to Moby-Dick eventually brings Picard to his senses, although she admits, she never read the book. But she can recognize a Captain Ahab when she sees one.**

**Again, Chris Valeo**

CHRIS: So it's six years since that. Um, since Picard was taken by the time, this is in the show time, cause I was just, I was just revisiting that scene this morning. Um, and it, and that movie starts the enterprise being dispatched to patrol the neutral zone because the Admiral's pretty sure that Picard's a liability. Once the Borg are in Federation space, he's not allowed to engage. He's not allowed to bring the Enterprise into the battle. And so that, that notion that he's, that people are right about the fact that Picard is still vulnerable. And then I can't help but think Shawn, that Lily's the opposite of the queen, right? Like as much as I hear you say like, Oh, here we go, sexy Enterprise, you know, one, she's still so mechanistic, the queen, the way she can look at the drones and they can do what she says in the way that her body is pieced together that way. Um, it's really, it's sort of disgusting and like the opposite of sexy. Um, and Lilly is so much the opposite of the queen. She is almost the anti queen, right? And clearly she's been managing difficult captains for a long time. She's on afraid. She swears like a sailor. Um, she's Alfie Woodard, which of course helps. She's, she's someone who can hold the screen with Patrick Stewart and she hasn't even read the book, right? Like her authority comes from someplace entirely different than the queen then Picard, then, I mean, it's in some kind of really experiential wisdom. And, and that, that intimacy and then, and so like, you know, how are we influential?

**There is going to be another ex-Borg character who will be influencing Picard in his new show: the character Seven of Nine, played by Jeri Ryan.**

**Interestingly, she never interacted with Picard before. She was introduced in a different TV show called Voyager, where Captain Janeway was much more open to the idea of rehabilitating a Borg.**

*JANEWAY: Your designation, 7 of 9, is a little cumbersome. Wouldn't you prefer to be called by your given name, Anaka?*

*SEVEN: I have been 7 of 9 since as long as I can remember*

*JANEWAY: All right, but maybe we can streamline a little. How would you feel about 7?*

*SEVEN: Imprecise, but acceptable.*

**I asked the group what Seven added to mythology of the Borg, but Chris responded with a different question I hadn't thought about.**

CHRIS: Did we see other Borg who were female besides the queen?

**None of us could remember. I looked it up and Seven of Nine was introduced a year after the Borg Queen. Either way, that seemed significant to Chris.**

CHRIS: There's some interesting constellations around our early reactions to the Borg and, and one is Guinan who, um, has experienced the same thing. Seven of nine has experienced right here. People have been annihilated. Um, she tries to warn Picard. Um, and then you have Beverly's sort of seeing they're insisting on their, if not humanity, at least being-ness. Um, so I've been interested to sort of see what the relation is between femaleness and the Borg. Um, and then, you know, the queen is individual or collective, so.

KEVIN: I think you're, I think the most fascinating thing about what you said is that the range of reactions to the Borg is, is more strongly represented by females in the various series than, than males.

***Huh, that's interesting, and true, the men are all ready to fight them, except Geordi. But is there anything we could compare the Borg to? I mean the Cybermen on Doctor Who are the most similar villains. Are there others? Or are they completely unique?***

SHAWN: Maybe a slight parallel could be the Body Snatchers, the pod people from the Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

***Oh yeah.***

KEVIN: Yeah. That could be because one of the things don't they like to do this, I think they did it in first contact and maybe in a couple of other episodes is one of the most horrific things about the Borg is to find somebody who had been serving

on your ship who has been assimilated and has been fighting on the other side now. And that's always a very poignant scene. So yeah, that's a Body Snatchers sort of moment there. I have to say that as a big Doctor Who fan, the Cyber men are a great comparison, but they're relatively underdeveloped I think in relationship to the Borg. And more recently they've just been played up for the kind of body horror of knowing that if you're cyberized or whatever they call it, your brain is taken out of your body and put into a metal skeleton and they'd been riding on that since like the mid eighties basically. That's the most horrifying thing about the Cybermen. But they haven't developed any personalities or any politics around the Cyber man. It's kind of unfortunate.

SHAWN: Most sci-fi really has a villain problem where most of the villains aren't like scary. They're maniacal, but a lot of the times they aren't really scary. The Borg is, it's scary. I mean, when we think about like, yes, you know, as as Kevin was saying, that was Ensign Johnson a week ago and now I'd probably have to kill him so I can stay. I mean those types of like those type of the, you know, the moral questions the board brings up that are just malignant, you know, you can't even touch them. I mean in the thing is, you know what's even scarier is your fight or flight response is directly linked to how you react to the Borg. And if you fight, they're gonna get ya. There's something about that that is, I mean scarier than most villains.

CHRIS: I guess I would wonder, I, I'm a little stuck in our, in our, I'm Moby Dick world right now, but there's something about their inscrutability both as a block and as individuals who, who just look like machines, who, whose interiors you can no longer detect. That I think invites us to project our fears and onto them. And anytime we're doing that, that's a chance for human error and missteps. So the immensity, the inscrutability, that's why, that's why they're like the whale, right? That Picard can heap upon them everything that he's been not dealing with for six years. And, and at some point it's, it's past what, what the actual, any kind of actual reckoning or weighing of insults, right? Like it's, he's become something through this experience and through his inability to process the experience that has, has changed him in dangerous ways. What do we make of ourselves when we're faced with that? It's a little bit of like the Kobayashi Maru, right? Like what do we do with an unbeatable threat and what do we become in in our interactions with them? Because the unbeatable threats always going to be out there in the human experience and in some ways we are more dangerous to ourselves and what we become confronting it than, than the threat is to us.

**Last month I did a two-part episode on villains. And I think The Borg are the perfect villains for Star Trek because they directly challenge the ethos of the show. The heroes in Star Trek often try to see the humanity, or what we**

**humans would call humanity, in every species. But how do you deal with a species like The Borg? Do you tolerate their existence, even though they are intolerant of everything that you value? And if you fight them, where do you draw the line? The Borg have the power to turn you into a monster, but if you resort to extreme tactics to destroy them, then they will have turned you into a different kind of monster if you lose your sense of humanity.**

**That's why Kevin Decker loves Star Trek. At its core, he says, Star Trek always engages with our moral imagination.**

KEVIN: If, it's, what do we do if we don't want or what are we willing to do? If we do, then moral imagination, I think is really required to figure out where the middle ground is between those two points.

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Kevin Decker, Shawn Taylor and Christina Valeo.**

**My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org.**