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

We’re heading towards an election in the U.S, which always a time where political rhetoric gets heated, but this is not a typical election. Many of the actions Donald Trump has taken, and statements he made, have been denounced as fascist, which sparked a debate over the definition of fascism.

By the way, dictionary defines fascism as a political philosophy, movement, or regime that glorifies the nation and often a particular race while trampling on individual rights and uses severe government and social control to suppress the political opposition.

Lately, I’ve been thinking about how sci-fi and fantasy have depicted fascism – not the totalitarian regimes where good guys and bad guys are clearly defined. I’ve been thinking about how fantasy worlds have depicted encroaching fascism. What makes fascism so pernicious is that it corrupts your national symbols and the iconography that you cherish. How do you recognize the signs before it’s too late? How do you convince others on your side without being accused of being as a betrayer, which leaves you isolated and powerless?

We’re going to look at how those questions were explored in three fantasy worlds, where sometimes I found myself on the defensive, arguing in favor of characters other people have accused of being fascist.

Let’s start with everyone’s favorite Evil Empire: Star Wars. In my last episode, I talked with the journalist Lauren Davis about The Clone Wars animated series. One of the interesting things about that show is that we see the art direction gradually change into the Empire as we know it, and the Jedi look increasingly out of place. I asked Lauren how could The Jedi allow themselves to become the proverbial frog the boiling water that didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late? She thinks it was their obsession with purity.

LAUREN: You know, there's the purity and there's also the, the, um, reluctance to change, um, and to grow. They believe that if they, uh, if they hold to their, if they hold to their, uh, their rules, their laws, if they never get angry, um, if they never have like intimate relationships, that they will somehow be pure and great enough to protect everybody and the forceful provide. Let's be real. The Jedi are super unhealthy people.
In fact, the Jedi allowed two fascist regimes to rise from within their own ranks, in the prequels and the sequel trilogy.

LAUREN: You know, when Luke Skywalker tries to restart a new Jedi order, he’s trying to copy the things that came before. That’s what leads him to that horrible moment where, you know, he sees the darkness in Ben Solo and then like, has this moment where he thinks he’s going to murder him?!

Fans were divided whether that moment was out of character for Luke, but you could argue it was not out of character for the Jedi, if he was trying to recreate them. There’s a line in Revenge of the Sith where Obi Wan says only the Sith deal in absolutes, but in the prequels, the Jedi deal absolutes just as much.

Stefan Sasse (sa-se) teaches history in Germany, with a focus on fascism. And he thinks the corruption of the Jedi began when they were moved from an elite force of peacekeepers to battle commanders with their own armies of clones.

STEFAN: Many planets are basically backwater or have undesirable laws and all that kind of stuff. You know, think of a planet like Tatooine. If I was a jet and I would bring an army of clone troopers to tattooing just to curate from the separatists, would I be able to resist the temptation to abolish slavery and to depose the Hutts? You know, this would make Tatooine an obviously and objectively better place, but at the same time, I would be abusing my power because this is not in my mandate, this breaks every, a constitutional whatever agreement Tatooine has. And at one point I'm, I'm still doing good, right? I'm fighting here for the Republic. I'm fighting for democracy in every world. I leave, uh, with my Clone Trooper forces, it's more democratic and more egalitarian and more socially just, but at the same time, I'm also corrupting what I initially believed in. And I'm getting an own inflated sense of myself in my capabilities.

Those questions were explored a bit in the Clone Wars series, but the Jedi Council was always worried about abusing their power – or the perception that they might be abusing their power. But if they had been more proactive at home, they could’ve become another branch of government and put a check on Palpatine. And in the end, Palpatine still accused them of a power grab, and the Jedi were powerless to convince the Senate otherwise until:

PALPATINE: The Republic will be reorganized into the first Galactic Empire!
PADME: So this is how liberty dies, with thunderous applause.
STEFAN: And this is one of the more astute observations that George Lucas as a screenwriter has ever put in his, um, in his screenplays. This is a, uh, a dynamic that we can also see in history over and over again, but it works, because the majority, uh, does not believe that it will be that bad. They are presented with two alternatives. And one of those alternatives is to fight a war that they could lose, or that at the very least we'll drag on longer and with higher costs in wealth and lives, or, uh, they could, uh, grant all these powers. If it is your wages that are being cut in half by the war or your livelihood that just blows up in the battle of Coruscant, suddenly talk of saving democracy becomes very even trite compared to the idea that we could end the war then and there.

Speaking of rulers with unrestrained power, that brings me to the second fantasy world I want to explore: Game of Thrones.

Even if you’ve never watched the show, you probably know it’s got dragons in it. You may have seen images of Emilia Clarke as Daenerys Targaryen, with her golden hair majestically flying on top of a dragon. And you probably heard the ending was very controversial. So, spoilers ahead if you haven’t watched the ending.

For a while, Daenerys seemed to be on the classic hero’s journey. Like many characters in that world, she wanted to take the Iron Throne and rule all the kingdoms. But she also wanted to work her way up. She became the queen of a smaller, far away kingdom as a trial run, so she could learn leadership qualities -- and this is a brutal world where no one else was thinking that way. She also fought to end slavery – which was also noble in that world, but unfortunately it tapped into a tired trope of the white savior character.

By the end of the series, Daenerys was on the verge of taking the Iron Throne. But the evil queen she was trying to overthrow, Cersei Lannister, used civilians as human shields in the capital city -- daring Daenerys to slaughter them or back down. Other characters tried to find peaceful resolutions, but for various reason Daenerys used her last remaining dragon to burn the city and its inhabitants to ashes. It was horrifying to watch. And when she addresses her conquering army, the imagery was copied directly from the Nazi propaganda films, if Hitler was a blonde woman speaking Dothraki.

CLIP OF DANY’S SPEECH IN DOTHRAKI
I did not realize how much I had come to root for Daenerys until her turn to darkness in the final episodes. My suspension of disbelief which had sustained me through years of Game of Thrones fandom, was completely burnt to ashes.

But then I became interested in the backlash to the backlash – the fans who said, they saw this coming a long time ago, and we Daenerys stans were dupes for not seeing the warning signs. I got defensive at first, but then I was curious to hear their point of view. Also, one of those fans was my wife so I didn’t have a choice.

Damien Walter is a journalist who’s written about sci-fi fantasy worlds, specially Game of Thrones. He didn’t have an issue with Daenerys’s turn to fascism, but he understands the backlash because for most of the series, she was the literal embodiment of a social justice warrior.

DAMIEN: She had been set up as someone who mirrored like many of the values, I'd like contemporary protest movements when that went bad and bad things came from it. I think that was actually kind of morally offensive to some people. I think it could have been really great storytelling, but because they didn't set it up properly, uh, it's very unclear how people should have felt.

But for a while he was on her side.

DAMIEN: Because I think what she was trying to achieve, like, there's this great scene, maybe it's like season six or so. And she's talking about breaking the wheel, you know, and we're not going to continue with these like cycles of injustice in our society. So I really wanted her to achieve that. And I was absolutely there and rooting for her to do that.

DAENERYS: They're all just spokes on a wheel. This one's on top, then that one's on top, and on and on it spins, crushing those on the ground. TYRION: It's a beautiful dream, stopping the wheel. You're not the first person who's ever dreamt it. DAENERYS: I'm not going to stop the wheel. I'm going to break the wheel.

DAMIEN: We had this very strong principle in social justice movements of nonviolence. It's dead. Not because violence doesn't necessarily have a use and it would be really nice to be able to solve your problems in that immediate way. And it's not just physical violence, you know, it could be emotional violence or political violence, but it's because once you cross line into violence, you've got the perennial question of art. How do you know that you're acting really in the good and that you're not acting out of all of these
things that drive or driven humans throughout history to violence? You know, the world of game of Thrones is very violent, so she had no option, but to employ ordinance, but as she became more and more violent, you could see that she was going in kind of pretty worrying directions.

TYRION When she murdered the slavers of Astapor, no one but the slavers complained, surely, they were evil men.

I remember when Tyrion gave that speech to Jon Snow about, Oh, when she killed the slavers, you know, we didn't, we, we cheered her on because there were bad men and then she killed these people and they were bad men. Should we be so surprised that she killed all these innocent women and children and citizens that I was thinking, yes, that's we shouldn't be surprised. That was not an obvious next step. What do you think of that?

DAMIEN: Well, I think that was the issue with not managing set this up properly in the writing. I think this was probably the end that George RR Martin was going for. And if I can give you a following story for the books, Dany has just a slightly different character. She’s a bit more like Amazonian and she's a bit more of a match early on for like the Dothraki that she's placed with. And I think if she had been given a bit more of that shadow to her character from the very beginning, then this transformation later would have been more believable.

Now Stefan Sasse (sa-se) also hosts a Game of Thrones podcast called The Boiled Leather Audio Hour. He thinks the writers probably focused too much on the proverb that when a Targaryen was born – that’s Daenerys’ family – the gods throw a coin and it lands on madness or greatness, as if she never had a choice in her destiny.

STEFAN: This coin is not just thrown at birth. It is thrown with every decision that we make as people. And it can go either way, people can do good things and people can do bad things when they have power and their previous positions and the previous decisions do not, preordain what they will do in future. And I think the same is true with Daenerys. She wants to conquer the world to free it, and we know how this goes, but if you, if you are in a mindset and you really believe it, if you drank your own Kool-Aid, basically this is very believable that this happens.

He says in earlier seasons, there was an interesting contrast between Daenerys’s rise to power and the young king Joffrey. Joffrey was a brat to begin with. When he took the Iron Throne, he became a tyrant instantly. Everyone in the court
thought he was an idiot – including his uncle Tyrion, who was forced to be the king's advisor. But Joffrey's grip on power was hard to shake.

STEFAN: Through every tyrant that you have through history. There are people who support him or else he wouldn't be in the position that he is in and why are they? It is not because they are too stupid to see what this person is at bat, that they are to, uh, to equal wrench, uh, to realize that this person is doing bad things. It usually is that these persons realize that their interests at least partially align with that kind of person. And this is true of many people who support Joffrey, uh, they know that he's bad, uh, but as long as they are on his side, they win in some capacity, they have positions, they have wealth and they have status. And all of that goes down the window. If the other, maybe better candidate wins, and this is also where we get our sympathies in the story of a Game of Thrones, our sympathies are with the people like Tyrion, uh, who are in the service of a bad regime. And then you need to ask yourself, can you cheer these people on, can you actually forgive them basically for being in the employ of a bad person? And do you buy the usual excuse that you get from these people, which is I'm trying to limit the damage. You know, I'm trying to immediately rate the bad traits of that ruler. That's always the line that you get, and you can either believe it, or you don't.

Stefan says one of the tropes that bothers him in fantasy worlds is when the characters who resist tyrants are rewarded with power and a happy ending. He appreciated the fact that at the end of Game of Thrones, the person who takes Daenerys down is the man she loved, Jon Snow. And Jon Snow pays a deep, personal price for his actions.

STEFAN: Resistance is never without cost. And more often than not, it costs your whole existence, either your freedom and your economic security and, uh, and all of that. If you're lucky, it could cost you your life most often than not. And even all those persons that you love, because fascists are very good at threatening your family, because that is efficient. And it keeps resistance down. We have this in Germany where everyone thinks they would have been a resistance fighter, uh, during national socialism, but most people were not, I mean, it's like 0.5% who actively oppose the regime and the other 99.5% would have been either supporters or simply ducked. And I guess I would have been one of those who ducked their head and hope to get through, you know, if our, this cliched question that our children ask, what did you do, daddy? You know, or mommy, in that case, I must be willing enough to say I didn't do a thing because I was afraid or whatever the reason was, maybe I was enthralled. Maybe I was stupid or whatever I was in love. Uh, there are so many reasons, but I need to be able to live up to them.
And Damien says that fantasy is the tool that fascists use to make their supporters afraid or enthralled.

DAMIEN: Because if you really want to impose your authority over people, you're fighting for the narrative. So, there's something always a little bit edgy in the act of fantasy, obviously, you know, it's fun and entertaining and that's totally fine and cool. But there's the issue of maybe getting lost in those fancies as well, confusing them with reality and because fantasy is so appealing, it can definitely play into these authoritarian tendencies.

After the break, we'll look at another fantasy world that's become obsessed with the question of absolute power corrupting absolutely, which is appropriate when you're dealing with the Nietzschean Superman.

BREAK

There's been a debate going on for years about whether superheroes are inherently fascist. Some of these criticisms were in direct response to the films, others were about superhero culture at large.

I was one of the fanboys who got defensive about that accusation, partly because the genre has been self-aware on this issue. The comics have been wrestling with fascism since the Watchmen comics came out in 1986. Marvel imagined government supervision of superheroes in the Civil War storylines.

But DC has explored fascism the mos in their animated TV shows, movies and video games. They've done several different alternate universes where The Justice League took over the world. In most of these storylines, the road to fascism began with Superman -- like in the video game series Injustice, where Superman became a global dictator after The Joker killed Lois Lane.

SUPERMAN: That's the problem with fighting for truth and justice, the battle never ends.
BATMAN: And executing them will end it? First Joker, now this? When does it stop?
SUPERMAN: When there's no more crime, when people can live without fear. We want the same thing, Bruce!

But Damien Walter says even if these movies, shows and games are self-aware, the problems are baked into the genre itself.
DAMIEN: And heroes like belong to an older period of culture, you know, maybe like classical Greece and all of its stories are about arrows here. I was going on adventures, killing their enemies, dominating the world around them. And one of the things that happens when a modern nation falls into fascism is the, all of the values of this heroic society kind of rush back to the surface.

**What is fascist about heroic culture?** It’s entirely focused on threats from enemies or outsiders. It promotes justice through violence. It doesn’t trust the citizens or police or politicians to solve those problems. And it elevates the leader to a heroic status, who can dole out “justice” with fists or weapons, while fetishizing the male body.

DAMIEN: And this is the part of fascism. Maybe we don't, we don't think about so much. Cause it's, it's difficult to think about is the way that it's, um, you know, applying a kind of fantasy to the world. So, Hitler didn't just want to conquer other nations and extend the power Germany. You wanted to force like every individual into this fascist fantasy. And there's something in the nature of, of fantasy that easily strays over to these, uh, authoritarian tendencies. Because if you really want to impose your authority over people, you're fighting for the narrative. If I'm having a dark night of the soul about like geek culture and sci-fi, that's what, what kind of worries me about it that it's being used for this, this slightly fascist view of the body, which is then linked to quite controlling advertising and marketing paradigms to sell stuff to people.

**Jason Dittmer is the author of “Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero.”** He thinks it’s not a coincidence that superheroes were invented when fascism was rising, and a lot of people in the U.S. were saying our government could be stronger if it emulated what was happening overseas.

JASON: And so, when you see Superman and characters of, uh, his timeframe kind of coming out in 1938, 1939, 1940, they kind of embody a lot of the attractive elements of fascism attractive to some. You know, you have, for instance, Captain America himself, a blonde haired, blue eyed. Steve Rogers, I mean, with his perfect physique, you know, a product of science and government collaboration, but he goes off and fights for individual Liberty and fights the Nazis and so on. You know, I don't think you have to look too hard to see where this kind of the cult of the body, the importance of masculinity and physical violence as a way of overcoming problems, so there’s a lot in there that’s fascist, I think.

**Yeah but what about the fact that Captain America, or Superman for that matter, were invented by young Jewish guys when anti-Semitism was at its height in the**
**U.S. let alone what was happening in Europe. So how could you say there’s anything fascist about Steve Rogers if he was invented by Simon and Kirby?**

JASON: Well, I mean, I think, um, one of the things we’ve learned about, uh, race, ethnicity and politics is that they don't map onto thing onto each other very easily, right? So just like you can have, um, uh, an African American policeman who, who reinforces systematic racism, um, you could have Jewish creators, you know, creating characters that reproduce elements of fascism, right? I mean, if you think of the underlying resentments and sense of weakness than animates fascism, both in the 1930s, uh, and also today, right? The sense of being on the defensive that we have to strike or else our enemies will, you know, you can see where the, the, the sense of vulnerability that underpins fascism could easily be existed within, uh, a kind of ethnic minority context where you have real vulnerabilities, right? The difference is that the fascists, their sense of grievance is a false sense of grievance, whereas of course the ethnic minorities actually do get oppressed.

All right, here’s another counter argument a lot of fans have brought up. **Superheroes can’t be fascist because they have secret identities. At the end of the day, Superman doesn’t want to take over the world except in alternate universes. He just wants to go back to being a regular schmo, Clark Kent. And many of the other superheroes are variations on that formula.**

JASON: You know, the fact that Superman is so powerful and yet still doesn't oppress everyone sounds like the best possible argument for an authoritarian leader, right. As opposed to a kind of a separation of powers argument that we might see as kind of more inherent to the creation of the Constitution and so on. Right. You know, it's like, well, if you can trust Superman why can't you trust any American president, you know, with unlimited authority, right? They're, they're good people, otherwise they wouldn't be there.

It's true the secret identity doesn’t allow Superman to be accountable for his actions. Don’t bother complaining to the Daily Planet, their reporters are totally in the tank for Superman. But Jason thinks these dystopian stories about Superman becoming a dictator in an alternative universe miss the larger point.

JASON: Superhero renditions of fascism tend to be about a single leader who installs himself. Right. You know, they've taken over as it were, but what you don't see as the way in which people are kind of brought around to fascism. And I think, I think there's something to be said for a kind of more nuanced understanding of fascism as it actually works rather than a kind of fantasy fascism, which is about Superman at the top, as it were, you know, enforcing something on everybody. Cause actually nobody can do that. Even Superman can't, you know, control everyone in the world. What you can do is create a system in which everyone's incentives are bent towards what you want.
In the movies, The Justice League and The Avengers are motley crews that are hard to assemble unless the planet is threatened. But in comics, they’re institutions. If one hero is disillusioned and thinks the team lost their way, there are plenty of other heroes who would love to take their spot on the roster. Jason says that harkens back to the era when superhero teams were invented in the comics.

JASON: I mean, one of the best things I read a while ago is that the kind of, it was a long time ago now, but the 1960s, the silver age, you know, that superheroes become essentially good corporate workers, you know? And that's when you get the Justice League, that's when you get the Avengers, you get the idea of the kind of perpetual team with its building, with its icon, you know, the kind of the logo of the team and so on, you know, they want to be the kind of ideal company, men and company women.

One of the most subversive takes on the superhero team is The Boys, a show on Amazon, which is based on a comic book that imagines an organization similar to the Justice League that’s become a violent fascist oligarchy through celebrity worship and media manipulation. When a new Supergirl-type character joins the League, she is quickly disillusioned.

ANNIE: A crime itinerary?
CORPORATE: Where and when to find crime. That’s what my department does. We vet leads, crunch satellite data, comp stat, better intel than the police.
ANNIE: Thanks, but I’m good. I like to do my own investigating
ASHLEY: And that is why we love you, but it’s not coming from us, it’s corporate – to protect you! What if you nab the wrong person? There’s liability to consider.

Again, Damien Walter.

DAMIEN: The thing The Boys does, that's very clever is it looks at all of this in the context of a corporate society. So it's very interested in the marketing of superheroes, which is very much the way, you know, that contemporary celebrities behind the scenes are all kind of shepherded is taking on a lot of hypocrisy because in that culprit culture, you have a real culture of you claiming to be heroic. Like if there is a cause and corporations think that they can back that cause without any real cost, then they'll always do so. But it's a very kind of hypocritical thing for corporations to do. And I think The Boys is really smartly plays on that.
I have to admit, I find The Boys hard to watch because I love The Justice League – they've been my superhero team since I was a kid. And the show does such an effective job making you feel icky for buying into that fantasy. Although Stefan thinks The Boys is a bit hypocritical in the way it satirizes the violence of superheroes while using gory violence as a selling point of the show.

DAMIEN: So, you know, The Boys is quite happy to be like sadistically violent and not everyone is tuning into critique. That violence is part of the enjoyment of it as well. But I actually think I was going to defend superheroes, which I am actually a totally happy to do. It would be from like a psychological perspective and that really storytelling isn't really about politics. You can make lots of political readings of stories and that's cool to do, but it's really about like healing the soul of the audience. And on that level, we really fucking need heroes. We need really good heroes as well because we live in a world that's tremendously difficult and we need to have that part of us awakened that can fight for good things in that world. We really, really need that.

Stefan Sasse.

STEFAN: This is why in so many superhero stories, um, the powers are falling on exceptionally virtuous beings, things, Steve Rogers, or Peter Parker, or Bruce Wayne, or a, of a, of course Clark Kent. Uh, they are all incredibly pure, you know, this whole Spider-Man thing about with great power comes, great responsibility is absolutely true. And most people fail in that. And not because they don't accept the responsibility, but, uh, as I talked about it earlier, it's because this responsibility kind of warps you.

Yeah. It's just sort of having your, the ultimate fantasy of the genre is having your cake and eating it too. But what about the, what about people who say, uh, okay, I see all your points about the inherent fascism that can exist within superhero genre, but, it's a fantasy. Why can't I just enjoy the silly, uh, ridiculous fantasy in the end. It's about a guy who flies around and shoots things out of his hands or his eyes, and it can never happen. Why can't I, why can't I just enjoy my fantasy and then just go back to be a good citizen of my country?

STEFAN: You absolutely can. The thing is you just need to be conscious about it, and this is where the value of conversations such as ours comes in, because I can absolutely enjoy you all, all, all that I told you. Now I can still enjoy those stories. It is just that I need to be clear that this is not something I should aspire to. I shouldn't to wish for superheroes to rule me. I should not wish for, um, for some God or sorcerer or whatever to take control. I should not hold out the hope that the next presidential candidate this time around will be that perfect arbiter, uh, that will, uh, just solve the need for partisan bickering and dirty compromise and all of that because dirty compromise and partisan bickering are what keeps deciding afloat. And it is a fantasy to
cut through all the bullshit and to have one person who is wise and just, and unassuming and responsible and all of that to basically stand above the fray and handout divine judgements without fail, but we will not have that. And if we wish ourselves into a position where we elect leaders on that promise where we basically act out politically on our escapist fantasies in that moment, it becomes dangerous. On the other hand, power is there to be wielded, you need it to be exorcised in some way because there are too many problems that need in some way to be solved. This is a problem in fiction that it is usually all the best king as to, as to one person who doesn't want to be king no, he's a horrible king, he would be absolutely horrible. We need people who actually want power, but we also need people who are good and who knew the limits of power and who limit themselves and who are able to, uh, to have all this self-restraint. And while I'm listing all of this, do you see that practically, no person will ever fulfill all of this. And in democracy, we have failed safes for there's like term limits, and you are dependent on a majority, and we have regular elections, yada, yada, yada, to it, to basically ameliorate, uh, so many of these factors, but still, that's not enough. Obviously, we can choose wrong and have done so over and over again, and hope is that the world will survive our mistakes and thrive on our good choices.

I see his point. We need to hold our leaders accountable but if we hold them up to a fantasy – we run the risk of becoming cynical and disengaged from the democratic process. And that leaves an opening for leaders who only believe the fantasy version of themselves.

That’s it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Lauren Davis, Stefan Sasse, Damien Walter and Jason Dittmer. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. In the show notes, I included links to Jason’s book, and Stefan co-hosts a Game of Thrones podcast called the Boiled Leather Audio Hour.

Superheroes are also considered “super cops,” especially the street-level vigilantes. But that brings up another set of issues, and as we’re reimagining law enforcement, we might start to re-evaluate how superheroes practice their own version of justice. We’ll explore that in the next episode.

There are countless examples of fascism in fantasy worlds that I didn't have time to talk about – like The Hunger Games, where Katniss realizes that she’s being duped by multiple fascists. What are some of the storylines you find most interesting? You can leave a comment on the show’s Facebook page. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. You might also like to check out my 2016
episode about the show Man in the High Castle, which imagines what if the Axis powers won World War II and occupied North America.

If you really like the show, please do a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover the show.

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