

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

If you know anything about anime, you probably know about Ghost in the Shell or Akira or the films by Miyazaki like Spirited Away and My Neighbor Totoro. But one of the biggest anime franchises in Japan was not widely available in the West until this summer, when Netflix started streaming Neon Genesis Evangelion.

The show was broadcast in Japan for just one year, from 1995 to 1996. The episodes were only half an hour. And the following year, there was a 90-minute movie that wrapped up the story. But more than 20 years later, Evangelion is still having an impact on pop culture around the world.

Heather Anne Campbell is a TV writer in Los Angeles. She discovered the show as a teenager, and she re-watches the whole thing every year. And she likes to watch it with new people to gauge their reactions.

HEATHER: I've shown it to people who cry. I've shown it to people who, um, like one of the last times I, uh, I watched it with some friends, uh, one of my friends, his name is, uh, Alex Berg. He like went out on the deck and had a whiskey and like had his eyes narrow and like sipped at the whiskey for a while and was like, that's the craziest thing I've ever seen. That felt satisfying to me.

The fandom for Evangelion is intense. There is a lot of disagreement among the fans. Lately it's been about Netflix because Netflix redubbed and re-subtitled the show. The fans disagreed with the way the Netflix subtitled the Japanese dialogue. And they hired new voice actors for the English language dub, even though the American voice actors from the '90s were well loved by the fans. But I will be playing scenes in English from the Netflix version because that's what's available to me.

Also the most fascinating thing about Evangelion is the story itself with all of its shocking plot twists. So this episode will be full of spoilers. If you want to experience Evangelion without any preconceptions, it's a quick binge. I consumed the whole thing in a few weeks.

But back to the story – because I'm sure you're wondering what is this show about?

When I first started watching it, I did get why it was such a big deal. It seemed to be full of typical anime clichés because it's about people who get inside giant robots to fight giant aliens because those aliens are landing on Earth and stomping on cities. We know why but they clearly need to be stopped. It reminded me of Power Rangers or Pacific Rim – but they were influenced by Evangelion. A lot of pop culture was -- especially in Japan.

And the show deviates from a typical anime series in a lot of ways. There's a lot of Judeo-Christian imagery. It deals with weighty themes like destiny versus free will, or individualism versus collectivism. And those giant robots, which are called Eva units, are not really robots they're bioengineered creatures with primal minds of their own. And for some reason only 14-year olds are able to pilot them from the inside.

I mean on one hand that makes sense. If the show is going to appeal to a younger audience, it needs young heroes. But the main character, Shinji, is a not really a hero. He doesn't want to get into the robot. All he wants is the love of his father, Gendo, who not coincidentally designed the Eva units. But Gendo is cold and distant. Shinji speaks first:

SHINJI: Father why did you send for me

GENDO: We just told you why.

SHINJI: So then I'm supposed to jump inside and fight whatever I saw in there?

GENDO: Correct.

SHINJI: No! I don't want to! After all this time, why now?! You left me because I

GENDO: was no use to you, right?

For the rest of the series, Shinji is beyond reluctant to do his job.

GENDO: Stop wasting time! Either get in the Eva or get out!

In fact the phrase, “get in the fucking robot, Shinji” is such a popular meme, it's on t-shirts. And none of the characters actually says, “Get in the fucking robot.” That's what fans like Gene Park were saying out loud when they first watched the show.

GENE: I was absolutely the kid who was yelling at the screen. Like do something, you know, like just, just get off your ass and do something.

Gene works for the Washington Post, and he wrote two articles about what the series meant to him as a kid, and as an Asian American.

GENE: But now as an adult I realized like how paralyzing myself felt. And as an adult I actually looked back at him. Like I look back at my own, uh, younger self, you know, after having been through therapy and still going through therapy myself, so the way I look at Shinji is like a, like a capsulation of, of how it used to feel and, and it's just empathy and sympathy for him.

But there's more to Gendo than we realize. He is still grieving from the death of Shinji's mother. And we learn he has a crazy apocalyptic plan to merge all of humanity into one formless consciousness. He thinks that's the only way he can see his dead wife again. As fantastical as that sounds, Gene Park still related to the central conflict between Shinji and Gendo.

GENE: I have a complicated, complicated relationship with my parents, definitely my father, where he was so absorbed in his work. Uh, he was, uh, he had expectations of me that I didn't really understand or were never really clearly vocalized. And Gando Ikari definitely does that. You know, Shinji has no idea even until the end what he's doing, you know, there no real mission other than just do this because you have to, you know, uh, so that alienation, that understood that, that misunderstanding, that miscommunication from his father really spoke to me.

Shinji is the personification the show's creator, Hideaki (hid-ee-akee) Anno. At the time, Anno was an up in comer in the anime industry. He was a protégé of Miyazaki. But privately Anno was struggling. While he was making the series, he was given a book on psychology that made him realize he was clinically depressed. It was a huge revelation for him. From that point on, the show delved even deeper into psychology of the characters.

Gene also has clinical depression. That's another reason why he felt a strong connection with Shinji.

GENE: It made me realize maybe I should be a little bit more vocal about how I feel. Maybe I should be a little louder. And what I'm thinking, you know, after I attempted my own, after I attempted my own, uh, after my own attempt at my own life, I changed, you know, I thought I need to stop. Like, uh, forcing this inside me, I need to, I need to let it out. I need to be a little bit more open. I

needed to be a little bit happier and I needed to be a little bit more expressive in how, in, in the disorder of by own mind and that just may be become a little bit more social. Um, and that was absolutely, uh, after I had watched Evangelion.

But Shinji isn't just depressed. He is considered to be a subset of a Japanese men or boys who can't cope with social pressures.

NATE: There's a Japanese word for this, it's Hikikomori and a Hikikomori is someone who, who completely detaches from society and they're, they're basically, I think the best translation is like a shut-in. And Shinji is like that with his emotions.

Nate Ming was as an editor at Crunchyroll, which is a really popular site for watching anime. He also lived in Japan as a kid. And he says if Shinji is a Hikikomori, the way Anno portrays him was groundbreaking. And that's probably because Anno identifies as an otaku -- which is similar to a hikikomori, except otaku find escape through fantasy worlds like anime.

NATE: Usually when an Otaku you see an Otaku in anime or Manga, they're played up as like a comedic character there. There's someone who's just like, ha ha, look at the nerd. Then you move to the other side and you see someone who is withdrawn, who is not very socially capable. Someone who, you know, has, has difficulty relating to the people in their lives and kind of withdraw into media or, or just anything in their life. But a lot of, a lot of fandom and a lot of the Otaku mindset comes from feeling ownership over something without creating or adding to that zeitgeist.

Anno, the show runner, eventually got married. And his wife Moyoco Anno created a manga about the challenges of being married to an otaku.

And the character of Shinji struggles to understand the girls and women in his life.

At the beginning of the series, Shinji is sent to live with an officer at the secret government agency named Misato Katsuragi (caught-soo-raug-ee). She is a badass warrior at work but at home, she's kind of a party girl who screams with joy when she has a first sip of beer.

MISATO: Wooo hoo! After a long day at work this makes it all worthwhile!

He's attracted to her, and repulsed by her slovenliness. And she tries to get him to talk about his feelings, but he never does.

Meanwhile, he has a crush on a girl in the pilot program, named Rei, who is quiet, and mysterious. And there's a third pilot: a German girl named Asuka who is brash, and sexually precocious.

ASUKA: I wonder if my breasts would get bigger if I warmed them up. Do you think thermal expansion would make a difference?

SHINJI: How would I know! Why do you have to be so weird all the time?

ASUKA: How are you so boring?

For a show that was supposed to appeal to kids, I was shocked by how much the show focuses on the characters' bodies. The 14-year old kids are practically naked sometimes.

But Vrai Kaiser doesn't have an issue with that. They're an editor at the site Anime Feminist.

VRAI: You know, I think the series has always had a really good grasp on kind of differentiating when we're in Shinji is POV horny vision. I sometimes call it and you have like, you know, these, these very lurid POV shots of like looking down Oscar or Masato shirt or what have you and then sort of using nudity from a more third person, you know, quote unquote objective camera angle as this very alienating vulnerable thing.

Again Heather Anne Campbell.

HEATHER: Being a teenager is a very sexual time. Uh, and it's overwhelming, but that's because that's what your body is doing. Um, so at the time I was like, yeah, I get this. But then now I think that (sigh) I don't want to say that it's problematic because I don't think it's problematic. I think that people acting on and thinking about kids in a way that I don't think Evangelion intends for adults to think about kids. I think that it was made for kids to consume like teenagers and Shinji aged kids. I think it's only weird when adults enter into that space and feel like they are also participating in that space or that they have authority over that space.

Except adults were participating in that space. In fact, the show inspired a term that you might be familiar with: fan service. In Western pop culture,

fan service usually means a filmmaker has added obscure references that only hardcore fans would get like a comic book reference in Marvel films, or the filmmakers know that the fans want certain characters to get together, so they'll give them what they want.

But in Japan, fan service is specifically about sexy images of female anime characters. And Vrai says that really kicked off with Evangelion.

VRAI: You don't get it watching the Netflix version because they cut the next episode, previews. But the next episode previous were usually read by Masato and she'd always close with promising more fan service and the next episode.

Again Nate Ming.

NATE: Because what she says in Japanese is Sabi Su, and that is, that is a lone word. It literally means service. And it could be like, oh, at a, at a maid cafe or a soap land or something, they're giving you something extra. They're giving you the good stuff.

In fact, the studio behind the show, Gainax, became so synonymous with fan service; fans started referring to quote the Gainax bounce.

AARON: The Gainax bounce, you know, the boob bounce in almost every Gainax works.

Aaron Clark runs the fan site Eva Monkey.

AARON: But I start to notice like in the past couple of years, I think the fan base has, has aged and to some degree like matured, um, and there's been more, not necessarily backlash but push back on, uh, fan art and things like that, that sexualize the female characters in the show, particularly the younger characters.

But the show subverts our expectations because towards the final episodes, Shinji becomes attracted to a boy named Kaworu (ka-aroo).

KAWORU: I'd like to keep talking with you. Do you mind if I go with you?

SHINJI: Uh.

KAWORU: To the shower, you're headed there right?

There's a really intimate scene as they're sitting naked in a bathhouse, hands touching. In the original English translation from 25 years ago, Kaworu tells Shinji that he loves him. The Netflix translation is different, which has been controversial, although Netflix claims this is more accurate.

KAWORU: Their hearts are delicate like glass, yours especially.

SHINJI: You think so?

KAWORU: Yes. You're worthy of my grace.

SHINJI: Your grace?

KAWORU: I'm saying, I like you.

Either way, the subtext of that scene is pretty obvious to Vrai Kaiser.

VRAI: Shinji is definitely a queer icon as it were, of just being scared and queer and not sure what's going on with your life. It's a big mess. This very anxious and depressed young kid who you know, really wants to connect to and other people and feels alienated and sort of crushed by all these gender expectations. I think a lot of trans kids can get kind of this nebulous feeling from Shinji of being that age and just knowing something is wrong or being told something is wrong with how you are and how society expects you to project gendered behavior.

Evangelion is very much about the teenage experience. But the great thing about the show is that it ages with you. Heather has experienced that in real time as she re-watched the show every year. When she was a teenager, she related to the teenager characters.

HEATHER: And then at some point I became, Misato's was age as a, as a kid looking at Misato's I was like, is that the kind of adult that I want to be? And I would kind of like deify and glorify her behavior as like fun, loving and cool. And then once I was 29, I was like, oh man, her behavior is, is fucked on a lot of different levels and she needs a therapist. And that's what the director and writers are saying about her is that she is, that she is – that its not cool that she drinks every day. That that's something that's her processing of PTSD and it's unaddressed and that it's not cool that she somewhat sexualizes a kid because she doesn't know how else to relate to people other than to define herself sexually and therefore define everyone else sexually because she has so little self value. And then I don't know what age Gendo is, but the last time I saw him, I saw the show. I was like, I feel more like Gendo than anybody else. And that feeling of like a life where you've made mistakes that you can't correct but are

desperate to correct them. I was like, he's not a bad person. He's just unable to move forward. And that's his, his coffin.

So Evangelion went much deeper and darker than a show about kids getting in giant robots to fight giant aliens. And remember, it was only one season and the episodes were half an hour.

And with only two episodes left to go, the show runner Anno needed to wrap up the story. But things had gotten so emotionally messy for the characters and for Anno himself. As they were speeding towards the finale, the crew could tell that something was off about Anno. They were genuinely worried about him.

And what happened next was unprecedented and it would change the nature of fandom. That is after the break.

BREAK

The final two episodes of Evangelion came out in March of 1996.

Remember, right beforehand, Shinji felt a deep connection with a boy named Kaworu. But there's a final twist. Kaworu reveals that he is actually one of the aliens sent to destroy the Earth -- even though he doesn't look like the giant monsters they've been fighting. He just looks like a teenager. But now that he's met Shinji, he doesn't want to end humanity. So he wants Shinji to kill him.

Shinji is confused. He doesn't want to do this, but Kaworu insists. And eventually, he crushes Kaworu with his Eva unit.

Then came the final two episodes. They are nothing like the rest of the series. Both episodes take place in Shinji's head, as if he's had a mental breakdown.

SHINJI: No one would ever understand someone like me

MISATO: The only person that can understand you, that can heal you is in the end you.

The animation is experimental, and unfinished. We actually see storyboards and rough drawings.

And after two episodes of what feels like a surreal therapy session, we end up seeing all the characters stranding around Shinji and clapping because he's finally learned to accept himself. And that's the final scene of the show.

Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations!

When Gene Park finally finished the series:

GENE: I was blown away and I was actually not sure whether I loved it or hated it. Obviously from a plot point wise, I hated it, but really soon afterwards, after sitting on it for about a week, I really appreciated it. And, and, and it started to make me cry. Like, as I said, I thought it might have more.

If Shinji is an avatar of Anno, the show runner, then Anno must have felt that he had some kind of psychological breakthrough when he wrote the ending. But Vrai says a lot of fans were not feeling it.

VRAI: When you're in the middle of depression, it is hard to, to look at that TV series ending and be like, ah, yeah, yeah, this speaks to me. Episode 26 is kind of that moment where Anno is speaking from the other side of a breakthrough he's had and it was so powerful to him, whereas if you're not on the other side of that, it can come across like this is bullshit. It's not that easy.

The fans that hated that ending decided Anno had been forced to put this half-baked idea on TV. If he really had enough time and money, he would've come up with something better. Aaron Clark, who runs the fan site Eva Monkey, says there's plenty of evidence to support that theory. It was so chaotic behind the scenes.

AARON: I asked, uh, Takeshi Honda, who is an animation director, um, on, on all of Evangelion about, you know, what it was like to work under Anno. He described it as being very frustrating because Anno was constantly changing things and rewriting things. Like he would visualize how he would animate something and then he would come in the next day to animate it and the whole script to be different. So Anno was basically constantly changing and rewriting things as they entered the second half of the series. So it was more a matter of them running out of time than money.

Many of the fans were furious that Anno didn't resolve the main storyline about alien attackers and the shadow government's secret plans to end humanity. I mean what happened to that? Anno actually received death threats. That shook him to the core.

In the midst of all this negative press, the studio announced they were going to make a feature length film that would be the "real ending" of Evangelion. In fact, the title of the movie would be "End of Evangelion."

And when End of Evangelion came out in the summer of 1997, there was a huge amount of anticipation. The theaters were packed. And when the movie began, we were back to the main storyline again. It's full of action and drama. But then one by one, the characters are all killed off. And some of them are killed in gruesome ways.

RADIO: (Crying) Asuka!

SHINJI: I can't do anything.

It's powerful but hard to watch. And Shinji?

VRAI: He's kind of gone down this almost incel path of "I have this mental illness, illness, I don't feel supported. I feel, you know, I'm inundated by this toxic masculinity and so this sort of depression and anxiety has turned to anger and resentment and starting to lash out in really violent and scary ways at the women in his life.

In the movie, we actually see the breasts of the teenage girls. But the fan service is done in a way that's intended to make you feel guilty. At one point, Shinji even chokes one of the girls in the pilot program.

VRAI: And I think it very much does speak to that kind of simmering rage. You know, it takes that branch point from, you're a hurting young person just being pummeled by, by these toxic masculinity social forces. And then you took the turn and made that decision to take it out on other people, more marginalized than you.

Remember how Shinji's father was part of secret cabal that had a plan to merge of all humanity into a single consciousness? Well that happens. People's bodies explode as their souls are sucked out. Shinji has the power to stop the apocalypse, but he's wrestling with his own demons.

GENE: That to me is a wonderful metaphor for how the stunted metaphor for the stunted growth of men and how we're not addressing men's emotional needs, and the dangers and pitfalls of what we go through if we don't address the serious issues in our head what could happen.

Then at the climax – we see live action shots of Tokyo. And we see an audience in a movie theater -- a real audience not animated. And hear Shinji's internal dialogue. He's imagining in his head that he's talking to the other girls about how he's addicted to fantasy worlds.

DREAM REI: You made a convenient fantasy to take revenge against reality

SHINJI: What's wrong with that?

DREAM REI: You were avoiding the truth by escaping into a fabricated world.

And then the death threats Anno received flash on screen.

NATE: I don't even know how else to describe end of Eva. It's such a smorgasbord of fuckery.

Again, Nate Ming.

NATE: I had read about Hideaki Anno getting death threats about the, the TV ending of Eva, even though I wasn't initially a huge fan of the TV ending, I was like, okay, that's, that's too much. Like, you know, there's, he's a creator and this is, this is his ending. This is his ending and his story. It's not yours. And hearing how all those death threats and all that negative press, he took it to heart and made the most beautifully animated fuck you I've ever seen and threw it up on a screen and forced everybody to watch it.

Heather Campbell:

HEATHER: I think that what the director is doing there is, is saying, hey, there's a difference between fandom and death threats and the death threats that come with a feeling of entitlement and ownership over the characters that that is different from self-examination and projection that happens when you project yourself into Shinji, and when he projects himself into the minds of other characters.

The movie eventually switches back to animation. The imagery is incredible, and very surreal. Shinji is still alive, but he's in a dark place, physically and emotionally.

That ending was actually a hit among the fans, but they couldn't agree on what it meant. That people who liked it said this is the true ending Anno wanted. That happy positive feel good TV ending – that was a mistake. Let's forget it ever happened.

Other people have argued that the two endings go together. The uplifting TV ending is what was going on in Shinji's mind during the apocalyptic movie ending.

But then there's the third argument: the TV ending was the true ending Anno wanted. And so the movie was an angry backlash to the fans, some of whom didn't realize they were being trolled by Anno himself.

And there are contradictory quotes from people behind the scenes to justify all of these arguments.

Meanwhile, Anno just wanted to move on. He made other shows and films - - animation and live-action. Evangelion retired to the shelves of video stores, or people's personal DVD collections.

And that should've been it for Evangelion. But something even stranger happened. The merchandise started to build a momentum of its own. Aaron Clark says it just kept going and going

AARON: Just the sheer volume and variety of Evangelion cross promotions, like mobile game, events, theme park attractions, Boutique Store licenses, like specialty Evangelion sunglasses or there's a cross promotion with Godzilla or Hello Kitty. There's an even going racing team. There's the Japan horse racing team association shorts. Like there's just so much stuff now. It's unbelievable.

Nate Ming.

NATE: I think Eva is able to have its cake and eat it too, which is kind of weird cause like Eva itself is not a very happy or fun series. It has its fun moments certainly. But I think just getting the chance to see these characters happy for once, even if it's like a Gillette shaving or Schick, actually the Schick shaving ad.

Look up, look up the Eva Schick promo and it was fantastic. You see Gando shaving his beard off. It's a beautiful promo.

Speaking of which, okay, I found this commercial. I want to watch this right here with you on. Can you hear it?

NATE: Yes. It's great. And you get to see these characters actually like enjoying themselves for once it works,

Even if what's truly making them happy is shaving -- something as simple as a product? If only they knew that capitalism and shopping could have made them happier.

NATE: I know, right? (Laughs)

The merchandise made the studio a lot of money. And to everyone's surprise, in the early 2000s, the studio announced they were going to remake Evangelion from scratch in a series of feature length movies. This time, Anno would have free reign – unlimited time and money. But they're not called remakes. They're rebuilds. Again, Vrai Kaiser.

VRAI: With the rebuild films there is that issue of we're now playing to kind of the cultural expectation of what Eva.

The first two rebuilds from 2007 and 2009 followed the storyline of the TV show closely, except it's punchier -- gets to the point quicker. The characters are more exaggerated. And there is a lot of fan service. There's even the other kind of fan service, where the fans get the moments they wanted – like a love triangle between Shinji and the girls in the pilot program. And at one point, Shinji actually mans up, gets in the f-ing robot and saves the girl.

But the third movie from 2012 veered off into a totally different direction, into a new dystopian timeline. So when the final film comes out in 2020, we are going to have a brand new ending for the characters.

Anno has been asked which ending is the real one for him? Was it the TV ending? Was it the 1997 movie that was called End of Evangelion? Or is this new movie coming out next summer? He said all endings are equally valid.

The fans aren't sold on that argument. The people who like the rebuild movies have said is the real Evangelion that Anno always wanted to make

if he had the wisdom, maturity, time and money to make the tell the story he always wanted.

But the fans who hate the rebuilds have complained that Anno has become a hack. He never should've revisited his previous work. Now he's cashing in, ruining something that used to be perfect.

Gene Park thinks the tension between Anno and the fans, which has been going on for 25 years, foreshadowed a lot of what's happening in fandom today.

GENE: And it's a very early progenitor of, of this debate, they were now having over author control, and gamers getting upset about the story and content and games. Uh, people getting upset about content in movies and wanting thing changed, massive online petitions to get things changed because that's what the fans wanted. And the stories was belonged to the fans, you know. Star Wars! Look at Star Wars and what happened to Last Jedi. Or George Lucas and Star Wars movies too originally, you know, with the trilogy and with the, with the, with the rereleases. It's such an interesting debate of who is, who really owns the art, you know, is it the artists or the audience. And all of that was, is just happening now. And I feel like Evangelion was really the earliest progenitor of Internet and fan outrage.

And I've been on both sides of those debates. I've felt really angry about show runners in my mind ruined a beloved character and betrayed everything that character stood for. And in other cases, I've thought filmmakers had the right instincts and the fan outrage was kind of overblown.

But I think the great thing about Evangelion is that the multiple endings are like a meta-work of art that's about fandom itself -- that embodies the themes of Evangelion writ large onto the very culture that created it.

It's like Anno is saying, "If you think this world belongs to you instead of me, then take responsibility, and make it a good one. Agree to disagree. Allow each other to embrace your own personal truths and live with ambiguity. If it's really yours, then it's up to you."

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Heather Anne Campbell, Vrai Kaiser, Gene Park, Nate Ming and Aaron Clark.

By the way, if you live in New York and you've always wanted to start your own podcast, I'm teaching a class at NYU called "Creating a Narrative Podcast." It runs every Tuesday night from October 8th to December 3rd. Enrollment is open now.

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.

And if you want to get the full back catalog of over 100 Imaginary Worlds episodes, subscribe to Stitcher Premium. You'll get your first 30 days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.