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

My favorite works of science fiction often change one thing about reality -- with the help of technology that's just out of our reach. Then they keep asking the question, if that's true, what else is true?

The show Pantheon fits that description perfectly. It's a sci-fi thriller. It's also animated, and the style of animation is influenced by anime. And it has a famous cast of voice actors like Paul Dano, Rosemary DeWitt, and Daniel Dae Kim.

The premise of the show is that new technology allows people to upload their minds to computers. The process of uploading a mind destroys the brain. So you can't be in the physical world and have a double of yourself in the cloud. You're either a living human being or a digital being.

The title of the show, Pantheon, refers to the way that digital people can have the power of gods. They can live forever online, and they can affect everything that we rely on. In this scene, an uploaded character named Lori addresses the human race.

LORI: We are not ghosts. We are not aliens. We are not machines. We are not gods. We are you. We are you if you could burn a building to the ground all by yourself without setting foot in it. We are you if you could command a missile to fire halfway around the world at a target of your choosing. <SFX MISSILE FIRING >

But these uploaded people are also fragile. Glitches in the software can turn them into corrupted files, which can no longer function.

Patheon first aired on AMC in 2022. But it didn't air on basic cable. It aired on their premium subscription service, AMC+. Craig Silverstein created the show.

CRAIG: I remember when we were writing season two, we were producing season one, and I got the call, uh, from AMC that, um, congratulations, you're going to be the first exclusive, you in this other show, a live action show, are going to be the first exclusive, uh, to debut on AMC+ premiere on AMC+. And I thought, and I just slipped out of my mouth. I said, oh, great. So no one's going to see it <laugh>, because I was like, even I don't have AMC+.

AMC didn't even air the second season, even though it was finished. And the two seasons of the show are a single storyline with a definitive ending.

CRAIG: They picked it up for two seasons, so I knew I had a guaranteed two seasons, and I just know, I just felt in my bones, I didn't know that it was going to get canceled, or the second season wouldn't air on AMC but I did feel like I should wrap this up or bring it to a point that would be a satisfying ending and if it was super successful, we would figure something out.

But eventually, Netflix picked up the show, and it's airing both seasons.

CRAIG: That was the best possible, you know, and for the second season to finally get seen.

In the last few months, I've had so many conversations with sci-fi nerds who discovered the show on Netflix and said, "Have you seen Pantheon?!" After one episode, I got hooked, and now I'm one of those people saying, "Have you seen Pantheon?"

Ideally, I think you should watch Pantheon without knowing anything else except the premise. But that would give me nothing to talk about. So, there will be spoilers from here on. I won't go too deep into spoiler territory. But if you feel like you're hearing too much, feel free to pause the episode, watch the show and come back. There's so much to unpack because the themes of the show touch on some of the most profound and everyday aspects of our lives.

THE PERFECT JEAN AD BREAK

It all started when Craig Silverstein had a meeting with executives at AMC. At the time, he was producing another show for the network. They said, you know, we have the rights to a lot of material. Here's a list. See if anything catches your attention.

CRAIG: And in looking at that list, it was an offhand comment made by, um, one of the executives, and we were kind of in, in informal setting, and she said, by the way, if any of these things look too expensive to produce, we're, we're open to animation. I just stopped and said, what? Immediately my target then became to create an adult animated drama on a linear network with commercials that was an hour long. That's what led. I didn't have the story, but it became, the animation, the idea of doing an adult animated drama led first. Then it became a search for the right story to fit that format.

On that list, Craig found a book called The Hidden Girl and Other Stories by Ken Liu. It includes a group of short stories that Ken Liu wrote which all take place in a world where people figured out how to upload their minds to computers.

Let's hear a selection from the first story, which is called The Gods Will Not Be Chained. It's read by the actress Eunice Wong.

A teenage girl named Maddie Kim is communicating with someone online who only types with emojis. Eventually, Maddie realizes she's communicating with her father David – who died years earlier. Maddie and her mother confront a scientist named Dr. Waxman, who worked with David at a company called Logorhythms.

READING: "He was dying," said Dr. Waxman. "We were absolutely certain of that before I made the decision. If there was a chance to preserve something of David's insights, his intuition, his skill, however slim, we wanted..."

"You wanted to keep your top engineer as an algorithm," said Maddie, "like a brain in a jar. So that Dad would go on working for you, making money for you, even after he died."

Dr. Waxman said nothing, but he lowered his face and hid it in the palms of his hands. "Afterwards, we were very careful. We tried to re-encode and simulate only the patterns we believed had to do with circuit layout and design. Our lawyers wrote us a memo assuring us that we had the right since the know-how was really Logorhythms' intellectual property, and didn't belong personally to David..."

Mom almost lunged out of her chair again, but Maddie held her back. Dr. Waxman flinched.

"Did David make a lot of money for you?" She spat the words out.

"For a while, yes, it appeared that we had succeeded. In some ways, it was even better than having David around. The algorithm, hosted on our data centers, was faster than David could ever hope to be, and it never got tired."

"But you didn't just simulate Dad's intuition for circuit layout, did you?"

"No." Dr. Waxman looked up. "At first, it was just odd quirks, strange mistakes the algorithm made that we thought were due to errors in identifying the parts of David's

mind that were relevant. So, we loaded more and more of the rest of his mental patterns into the machine."

"You brought his personality back to life," said Mom. "You brought him back to life, and you kept him imprisoned."

Dr. Waxman swallowed. "The errors stopped, but then came a pattern of odd network accesses by David. We thought nothing of it because, to do his job, he -- it, the algorithm -- had to access some research materials online."

"He was looking for Mom and me," Maddie said.

"But he had no way to talk, did he? Because you had not thought it relevant to copy over the language processing parts."

Dr. Waxman shook his head. "It wasn't because we had forgotten. It was a deliberate choice. We thought if we stuck to numbers, geometry, logic, circuit patterns, we'd be safe. We thought if we avoided the linguistically coded memories, we would not be copying over any of the parts that made David a person. But we were wrong. We were arrogant to think that we could isolate the personality away from the technical know-how."

Maddie glanced at the screen and smiled. "No, that's not why you were wrong. Or at least not the whole reason."

Dr. Waxman looked at her, confused.

"You also underestimated the strength of my father's love."

When Craig read these stories he thought:

CRAIG: This can work and it can marry in with a story that I've been playing with on my own about, uh, a kid who was cloned and discovered that in this sort of, uh, Siddhartha, Truman Show type of way, that his life was all set up for him and had a, a war between rejecting that life and being pulled toward it by his own, his own genes.

Maddie, the girl whose father is uploaded, became one of the main characters of the TV show. The other main character is a teenage boy named Caspian. He doesn't know he's a clone created by Logorhythms. That's the character which Craig invented.

Craig and the writers had to figure out how to weave Maddie and Caspian's storylines into a single narrative. In this scene, they talk for the first time on the phone. They've each been trying to figure out what Logorhythms is up to. Maddie is voiced by Katie Chang. Paul Dano plays Caspian.

CASPIAN: Maddie? Why'd she warn you not to talk to me?
MADDIE: She said you were being watched by Logorhythms.
CASPIAN: Because of Norway?
MADDIE: What's Norway?
CASPIAN: It's a country.
MADDIE: I know. Is that where Cody lives?
CASPIAN: I don't know who Cody is, but Logorhythms -- does this have something to do with uploaded intelligence?
MADDIE: I have to go.
CASPIAN: Then why'd you ask if I knew about it?
MADDIE: Thanks for your help, Cassian,
CASPIAN: Because I went down a rabbit hole three days ago and found Logorhythms has some kind of secret black sight in Norway. They must have caught me snooping.
MADDIE: She told me they were watching you two weeks ago.

There is other sci-fi media about people who upload their minds. I think the most famous example is Black Mirror, which is an anthology series on Netflix. There is an episode of Black Mirror about people living in a digital afterlife. It's called San Junipero and it's one of the few Black Mirror episodes that's actually uplifting – although it's still pretty dark. Craig didn't want to make that type of show.

CRAIG: My tonal joke to the network and to the, to writers where like, we're doing Rainbow Mirror
<laugh>.
CRAIG: Okay, <laugh>, this is, it's not just, it's not dark. We're going to examine the, the positive aspects of it as well. You know, you get your family member back, and the, the wish fulfillment of that and the horror of it too. It's, it's writing about death, which is, which is the best subject, really for anything. I feel like most people are, whether they know it or not, they're writing about death. Death is the boundary of life, and it's the, it's, it's what defines us a species and the human character and who we are. So all the interesting questions are about whether when you remove that, uh, when you can transcend death, when you can remove that boundary, all kinds of amazing, interesting philosophical things come up, and the, the ones I was interested in the most in first and

foremost, because it's, it's a TV show, and we're dealing with relationships and emotions and family.

Early on, Craig reached out to Ken Liu, the author of the short stories, and asked him to be part of the writing process. Ken was very excited to get that call.

KEN: It was super fun. I really enjoyed it. It's probably one of my favorite, um, adaptation processes. I mean, Craig came up with Caspian and all these new characters. And so he and the writers and I sort of sat together and tried to figure out what their stories would be. How would you take these seven short stories, which I wrote as a kind of precursor to a novel. I wanted to write about the whole universe. How do we take these stories and turn them into something that actually is rich enough to support a whole TV series?

Ken was also available to answer technological questions like how a character could hack a top secret computer or how uploaded intelligence could work.

KEN: The way to think about upload intelligence is really just sort of a hardware upgrade for human cognition. So the idea is that the human mind is merely a kind of software program running on a physical substrate. Um, right now the substrate is, brains, squishy actual wetware brains, but there's nothing magical about it. In fact, if we can replicate the mechanism by which cognition is achieved using other materials such as, uh, silicon transistors, then we can potentially move the human mind from our meat and blood bodies to a different kind of hardware that would be uploading. This is not as far away as people think. Um, the, the research into the technology that allows uploading to be possible, that's very real. I mean, this is being done right now. You can go look up papers and even science reporting. This is not nearly as science fictional as people think it is.

BUTCHER BOX AD BREAK

In the TV show, the technology to upload intelligence was spearheaded by a character named Steven Holmstrom. The character design looks like Steve Jobs, but older. When the show begins, Holmstrom has already died. At first, we only see him though archival footage. He was voiced by William Hurt, who died the year the show came out.

HOLSTROM: Each individual will be the God of their own customizable heaven. A world beyond scarcity, a world without rich or poor, without exclusion or possession, a world without death.

In the real world, there is a person leading the way – a computer scientist at Google named Ray Kurzweil. I asked Craig if he was inspired by Kurzweil when he invented this character.

CRAIG: Yes. We talked about Kurzweil. He's obsessed with defeating his own death. I don't think he's going to succeed.
And I think to hit that point home, William Hurt. Was that one of his final performances?
CRAIG: That was his final performance. Yes. He, yes, he was, uh, he was sick when he was doing the, the show. Um, we were on Zoom delivering his lines from Portland.
Why, why was it important for him that he wanted to be part of this show?
CRAIG: He was, he was into, uh, the story. I think he was into the themes. He was, he was fascinated by the, uh, the themes of, of what we are. He may have been that he was, uh, he didn't, he didn't talk about this, but that he, he knew that he was thinking about his own mortality a lot, perhaps that was, um, super relevant, uh, to him at the time.

A few months ago, I did an episode on the subgenre of body horror. I ended that episode by talking about the idea of uploading our minds as a way to bypass death and the limits of our bodies. I was thinking about Pantheon because in the show, there's a gruesome scene where we see what would happen to a person's brain during the procedure.

CRAIG: I don't think that I understood until we actually got into the writing, uh, and the, um, the storyboarding of it and the tech designing, you know, what we'd be seeing, kind of what was really, uh, involved in a destructive scan. I think that I knew that it would be visceral. Um, I assumed, I guess it would throw some people, but I think the place I was comfortable to settle on was, well, this is the truth. This is the way it would go. Let's look at it.

In the TV show, when characters are uploaded to the cloud, their personalities are the same as they were when they were alive. But in Ken Liu's stories, the transition isn't as seamless. Ken says people often talk about the mind body connection, but that metaphor implies the mind, and the body are separate to begin with.

KEN: Fundamentally, right, the mind body dichotomy is false, right? We don't, we don't really think the mind is separable from the body. They are the same. I mean, our cognition is not even fully human in the sense that one of our largest cognitive organs is

the, the microbiome in our guts. Many other species living down there, whose actions have a profound effect on our moods and our thinking. Um, I don't think you can upload just the brain by itself. You would not actually have the entirety of the human being. A lot of your personality and a lot of your moods are determined by things outside of the brain. And, you know, ultimately, even if uploading were to happen, you can imagine, uh, just like in Pantheon, in my stories, people wishing to be embodied in various forms. And we don't have to, to be embodied in robots that look like humans. I mean, I can imagine the future, you know, uploaded human beings wishing to be bodied in, in all kinds of new bodily forms. Uh, something that can fly, something that can dive deep into the ocean, something that can explore the sun, that would be profoundly interesting, um, for humans to be able to engage with the universe in new bodies, with new senses, with new dangers, new risks.

Craig wanted to explore these existential ideas in the show, but he also worried about confusing the audience and losing track of the story. So he had to:

CRAIG: Always gauge, like, is this going to get ahead of, of people? Are they going to lose it? Are they going to lose their way in this because they don't under, at some point they're not going to understand, are they not going to care The further we push and getting that pace right, essentially of that sort of slow, you're a frog and uh, the water of hard science fiction is bubbling up around you. I really wanted to work for a broad audience and trying to gauge whether or not we were getting too niche or too narrow and lose people that I think that was the challenge.

Yeah, I mean, I think the thing that one of the, or the many things I loved about the show, but one thing that kind of blew me away is I feel like with a lot of sci-fi shows, you get hooked, and it always ends <laugh> in a way that's very disappointing, or you know, you're like, oh, it had so much promise. The way you broke the story from the very beginning. So, it starts with a girl who is getting strange emoji text messages, and you have built it out bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and the stakes just kept getting bigger every single episode. And it felt, the pacing just kept escalating. It never felt like too much until by the end you have like the entire Earth and the existence of humanity and time itself, you know, <laugh>, like how did you pace that out? How did you break that story?

CRAIG: The short stories, uh, were a guide to that. The Gods Will Not Be Chained, Ken's first short story in the Apocalypse Triptych, started with Maddie and getting these strange emojis from a person who she quickly learned might be her dead dad. That's a great hook. It's a Twilight Zone episode. It's emotional, it's, it's grounded. And what I was looking for, again, leading from trying to find a concept for not just adult animation, but specifically this, um, grounded, uh, cinematic anime style, the story that would serve

that style the best was one that began grounded and in such a way that turned the everyday extraordinary and the pedestrian poetic by showing all these like, small details of, of life that you would take care to animate out, so, you really believed it on a ground level. And once you believed it, then the jump to evermore heightened first of all worlds, so, if we were doing it live action and we moved into a virtual world, you'd, you'd be thrown more than you would if you went from an animated real world to an animated VR world. And then also the international stakes, the World War III level stakes, you can dial up faster and transition to them much, much easier, uh, in a way that we would need a giant feature budget to do, if it weren't animation.

The other interesting, one thing I also really loved was how global the story was, and that people in different countries are going to have different reasons why they want this technology. Um, were there things that, I mean, that of course can be a minefield to try to \<laugh\>, you know, especially coming from an American perspective. How did you want to approach that?

CRAIG: In two ways. First was just an inspiration, uh, which was Close Encounters of The Third Kind. I loved, I loved that that movie's very unique, that it starts with regular people, uh, and some, and some people in, in higher positions like Francois Truffaut from all over the world. And you know that they're going to come together because of this phenomenon, and you, and you're anticipating that. So, I love that.

In this scene, Maddie is watching the news. She knows that rival nations are secretly uploading their spies, assassins, hackers, and scientists to the cloud.

TV NEWS: India nationalizes all telecom equipment naming the recent crash of Bombay stock exchange as justification, which it blames on a cyber-attack by close rival China. Saudi Royal Court demanding complete disclosure of NATO cyber capabilities in the wake of the drone strike that killed Prince Walid.

In deciding which nations to focus on, the writers looked at who the cyber superpowers are in the real world.

CRAIG: That's where we were guided to just, just the logic in the real world. Yeah. And yeah, knowing, knowing to be a minefield. And then we really, we had a lot of discussions about how would a theocracy, how would, uh, China, how would the, you know, approach, you know, the concept of, of uploading who would be the candidate to be realistically, uh, you know, because it's, you really do need, no matter who you are, you need a volunteer. You need a volunteer. Somebody who is, who really is all in, uh, to be this and who that character is based on those different cultures, and those different societies sort of led the way.

And they got to subvert expectations. For instance, there's a love story between an MI6 agent named Olivia and an Iranian scientist named Farhad. They were adversaries in the physical world. But as digital beings, they realize they have a lot in common. They start to have secret rendezvous on a virtual train.

FARHAD: They have convinced us that we need to fight for them.
OLIVIA: We still need to help them.
FARHAD: Look at us even with each other. We still act like we are human. We can need anything we want as much as we want, as much as we want.
OLIVIA: We don't have to eat,
FARHAD: But it tastes so good.
OLIVIA: See, it's natural for us to seek a physical way of experiencing this reality. That's just human nature.
FARHAD: I think we can do better. Close your eyes.

Ken Liu's short stories also kept raising the stakes higher and higher. He says it felt totally natural.

KEN: To me, the stakes are the same, whether it's you, thinking about your individual problems or the fate of humanity, I don't think these are different problems at all. They're the same, the stakes are the same. Um, ultimately, you're asking the question of what does it mean to have this whole thing that we talk about as consciousness, as cognition.

HIMS AD BREAK

Uploaded intelligence doesn't exist in the real world – yet. But we are at a significant moment with artificial intelligence.

You might have heard about the Turing Test. It was developed by one of the first computer scientists named Alan Turing. In the test, a human judge asks questions to a computer and a person, who they can't see. The judge has to guess which is the human and which is the computer. They've been doing this test for decades.

KEN: And now we're at this really extraordinary moment where the Turing Test, you know, has been blown apart. Chatbots can pass them easily, and all of us are just sort of reacting to it with a shrug. I don't really think that any science fiction author of the last few decades ever imagined that would be the response. I think a lot of sci-fi was imagining that when that moment happened would be profoundly interesting, important, I think the idea that everybody would just be saying, "So what?" is not how anybody

imagined this moment would be, but it's there. I mean, the reason why people are reacting that way is because we've achieved chatbots that can pass the Turing Test, if you will, doing something that seems profoundly not interesting to most people.

The Turing Test isn't measuring whether a machine is self-aware. It's testing whether AI can pretend to be self-aware and fool us. We don't really know if we'll ever create AI that has a mind of its own.

So the idea of digitizing a human mind can be the best of both worlds. You get the consciousness of a person merged with the power of a computer. That can be exciting, scary, and disorienting.

KEN: Once uploading is possible, you can imagine that a significant number of people will say, no, we don't want to be uploaded at all, because if uploading means being destroyed, right? I mean the idea of continuing in this copy that that's just not something that a lot of people would be comfortable with. So you would see a lot of people who would resist it. So you can imagine that at the same time, uh, there will be a huge movement in place of essentially saying that, you know, the first people who are going to upload are people who have terminal illnesses or who are near the end of their life who basically think that they have nothing else to lose. But over time, how do more people become comfortable with this idea? Or will people ever be comfortable with this idea? I think the, the, the questions of how society will change once uploading is possible, and what does that mean, right? Will this become a technology that creates more inequality or is it actually the ultimate way to achieve post scarcity? Right. A lot of the stories that explore uploading, um, that I wrote basically sort of take the position that the way to achieve a truly post scarcity economy and a post scarcity society, it's not in the physical world. It has to be in the uploader world where bits are much cheaper than atoms. And so the, the ability to actually give everybody unlimited, essentially functionally unlimited resources is far more achievable in a digital simulation, if you will, world than in the physical world. What does it mean to sort of have, uh, a population of digital beings far exceeding the population of physical humans? How will that change our politics? How will that change the way we think about rights? And once, you know, uploading has been achieved for the vast majority of the human population, what will politics look like then? How will democracy work? How will reproduction work? How will we imagine, you know, functionally immortal beings? Will we even want to have children? What does that mean?

Craig Silverstein wanted to make sure that when these ideas were explored in the show, it was within the context of the characters and what this would mean for them.

CRAIG: When you live thousands of years, right, what happens to marriage? The idea of a soulmate or a life partner? When your life is thousands of years, like maybe a, a really good marriage lasts, uh, 80 years, 100, and then you're like, you know what? I'm good <laugh> and you're good. Let, let's go with someone else now.

And you also don't experience aging, which is such a big part of marriage as you both, you know, if a, a good marriage that's, you grow together towards old age and you're experiencing things simultaneously, but in this case, you never age.

CRAIG: You never age. Or you could pick, you know, you could, you could select that right age. Um, it has an impact on all, all the moral questions of crime and punishment. What's a life sentence? You know, what's the punishment for murder? The, is the value of, you know, life. You are potentially denying somebody of another million years. Is it, is it deletion for you? Like all our moral framework and, and our relationships are all based on, uh, the, the fact of who we are and the fact of who we are is that we're going to die. So when you change that fact, it makes you look back at who you are as a human.

Let's hear another excerpt from Ken Liu's short stories, read by the actress Eunice Wong. This is from a story called Staying Behind. It takes place later in the chronology. All the tech issues have been worked out. A lot of people are living digital lives in the cloud. The physical world is starting to look desolate. The characters in this story are not in the TV show. And they give us a different perspective on what it's like for people who choose to stay behind.

READING: Mom lingered in her sickness for months. She was bedridden and drifted in and out of consciousness, her body pumped full of drugs that numbed her pain. We took turns sitting by her, holding her hand. When she had good days, temporary lulls of lucidity, there was only one topic of conversation.

"No," Mom said, wheezing. "You must promise me. This is important. I've lived a real life, and I will die a real death."

"If you upload," Dad said, "You'll still have a choice. They can suspend your consciousness, or even erase it, if you don't like it after you try it. But if you don't upload, you'll be gone forever. There's no room for regret or return."

"If I do what you want," Mom said, "I will be gone. There is no way to come back to this, to the real world. I will not be simulated by a bunch of electrons."

"Please stop," Laura pleaded with Dad. "You're hurting her. Why can't you leave her alone?"

Mom's moments of lucidity came further and further apart.

Then that night: waking up to the sound of the front door closing, looking outside the window to see the shuttle on the lawn. They were carrying Mom into the shuttle on a stretcher. Dad stood by the door of the grey vehicle, Everlasting, Inc. painted on its side.

"Stop!" I shouted over the sound of the shuttle's engines.

"There's no time," Dad said. His eyes were bloodshot. He hadn't slept for days. None of us had. "They have to do it now before it's too late. I can't lose her."

We struggled. He held me in a tight hug and wrestled me to the ground. "It's her choice, not yours!" I screamed into his ear. He only held me tighter. I fought to free myself. "Laura, stop them!"

Laura covered her eyes. "Stop fighting, all of you! She would have wanted all of you to stop."

I hated her for speaking as though Mom was already gone.

The shuttle closed its door and lifted into the air.

Dad left for Svalbard two days later. I refused to speak to him until the end.

"I'm going to join her now," he said. "Come as soon as you can."

"You killed her," I said. He flinched at the words, and I was glad.

A week after Dad left, we received an email from Mom:

Sometimes, I'm nostalgic and sad. I miss you, my children, and the world we left behind. But I'm ecstatic most of the time, often incredulous.

There are hundreds of millions of us here, but there is no crowding. In this house there are countless mansions. Each of our minds inhabits its own world, and each of us has infinite space and infinite time.

In my old existence, I felt life but dimly and from a distance, cushioned, constrained, tied down by the body. But now I am free, a bare soul exposed to the full tides of eternal life.

How can speech compare to the intimacy of sharing with your father psyche to psyche? How can hearing about how much he loved me compare to actually feeling his love? To truly understand another person, to experience the texture of his mind -- it is glorious.

How many consciousnesses will now live in this new world, pure creatures of electric spirit and weightless thought? There are no limits.

Come join us. We cannot wait to embrace you again.

Laura cried as she read it. But I felt nothing. This wasn't my mother speaking. The real Mom knew that what really mattered in life was the authenticity of this messy existence, the constant yearning for closeness to another despite imperfect understanding, the pain and suffering of our flesh.

She taught me that our mortality makes us human. The limited time given to each of us makes what we do meaningful. We die to make place for our children, and through our children a piece of us lives on, the only form of immortality that is real.

It is this world, the world we were meant to live in, that anchors us and demands our presence, not the imagined landscapes of a computed illusion.

This was a simulacrum of her, a recording of propaganda, a temptation into nihilism.

I asked Craig if he would upload if he had the chance.

CRAIG: I genuinely don't know. Part, maybe part of this was my attraction to this was, um, because I didn't know I thought that writing the show would give me the answer.
<laugh>
CRAIG: I think it would depend. I mean, the some of the most compelling arguments to me were, but in a world where most of everybody that I know has uploaded, then yes, I might do it. Um, it's less about me and it's more about my loved ones, my friends and family, my fellow humans, what are they doing? That's what affect I, I don't think I'd be the first <laugh>, let's put it that way.

Ken feels a similar way.

KEN: I would not, certainly not volunteer to be the first person to do it, <laugh>, that's just not me. Uh, the ways that can go wrong are so horrifying that I, I really don't want to do that, but I would love to talk to people who have been uploaded and sort of get a

sense of what the experience is like. I would also, it would also depend on whether I have other things I want to do on this Earth in this, you know, human form. I may decide that I actually don't want to go on anymore, that I'm actually done. I'm quite content with the limited time that I had on this Earth. Um, and, and that whatever I wanted to do was finished that uploading to me would not be interesting. I would not want to do that. I would wish to just see what would happen after you die. We make these most important decisions in our lives, not based on logic, but based on how we feel. And we're not going to know how we feel until the moment arrives.

I certainly wouldn't do it while I'm still healthy, even if my loved ones were in the cloud. But at the end of my life, I can't imagine that I wouldn't want to do it – if the uploaded people still feel their old selves, and if they're not considered the intellectual property of the company that uploaded them, and….there's a lot of conditions, a lot of ifs.

One thing I like about the short stories and the TV show is that they both acknowledge the fact that we don't often make major life decisions based on philosophical ideas. We follow emotions like love, anger, hope, enjoyment, envy. Technology allows us to follow those instincts with fewer limitations. But as we've seen with technology we already have -- new opportunities can lead to new complications and messy consequences.

That's why I don't think a digital afterlife would be like heaven. It's like when you travel, you think you're escaping your problems, but you bring them with you. If we're still ourselves in the cloud then the digital world will be like the real world just faster, bigger and more pixelated. If it's not, then we really won't be human anymore.

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Craig Silverstein, Ken Liu and Eunice Wong. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman.

We have another podcast called Between Imaginary Worlds. It's a more casual chat show that's only available to listeners who pledge on Patreon. Last week, I talked with historian and writer Kevin Baker about a long lost theme park in Coney Island called Dreamland. The stories about Dreamland are bonkers. And it tried to teach moral lessons on rides like Hell Gate.

KEVIN: Whereby this young woman is admiring herself in the mirror in the new hat. And for her vanity, she's taken down to hell by these demons, which I don't think, uh, any,

anybody there seeing this would've taken seriously. I mean, these are people who would've loved to have had a new hat. Uh, but it, but it was quite amusing to see the devils poking her with the, you know, with the pitchforks and all this sort of thing.

Between Imaginary Worlds comes included with the ad-free version of the show that you can get on Patreon. You can also buy an ad-free subscription on Apple Podcasts.

If you support the show on Patreon, at different levels you also get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, or a t-shirt, and a link to a Dropbox account, which has the full-length interviews of every guest in every episode. Another way to support the show is to recommend it to a friend, post about it on social media, or leave a nice review wherever you get your podcasts.

You can subscribe to the show's newsletter at imaginary worlds podcast dot org.