

Human Conditions

Exploring the messy, contradictory, and parasocial side of creativity



One AG-er had an imaginary friend for only two weeks. We know this because we asked.

Her name was Anna, and she had two thick pigtails because Pollyanna had two thick pigtails. Anna only came out in the backyard, and it took just a day to learn that she was really fucking annoying. Because Anna was modeled after a surreal beacon of positivity in a world riddled with gloom, she would suggest they do things like pick dandelions and give them to the neighbor who owned a furniture store and was only a little nice.

In film, television, and novels, imaginary friends typically teach real kids important life lessons through their adventures. But after a particularly heinous afternoon where all Anna wanted to do was look at moss through a magnifying glass, she got kicked out for good. There didn't seem to be a lesson learned there, and the blur of fantasy and reality wasn't fun anymore.

The thing about Anna and any imaginary friend from childhood — annoying or not — is that even though they aren't real, they're real company. There's something intensely comforting in that. Humans crave connection, and in our quest to make sense of the world, we look to others for help. Imaginary friends offer a space to explore the fundamentals, often guiding children toward discoveries they're too frightened to claim independently.

The prime time for imaginary friends is typically ages 3 to 7, as we develop social intelligence and work through the idea that other people think and feel differently than we do. We then reach a point in development where the lines between real and imagination feel clearer. We move on and pour ourselves into understanding the intricacies and complications of living, breathing human-to-human dynamics.

But lately, the lines between reality and fantasy have felt blurry again, especially when it comes to our digital relationships. We're navigating an increasingly sophisticated set of 'imaginary friends' — influencers, content creators, podcast hosts, media personalities — who blur the lines of trust and interest in ways our childhood didn't prepare us for. This raises a critical question: Do we understand each other any better in an era where we're more connected than ever?

The phrase "IRL" is used to differentiate between in-person and digital interactions, but the idea of "real life" as distinctly physical feels misleading. As we cheer for people we don't know when they finish the Walt Disney World Marathon, get their TV pilot greenlit, or go through with a separation we know is best, we're immersing ourselves in our entertainment. This immersion in others' lives flexes one of the main promises of the metaverse: that virtual reality will one day feel far less virtual and far more real. Most days, it already feels like we're there, but instead of being confined to a single platform, this experience spans across our entire digital landscape.

Often called the '[father of media studies](#),' Marshall McLuhan argued that the mediums we communicate through become "extensions of man," fundamentally altering how we perceive and interact with the world. Today, we're witnessing the literal realization of McLuhan's vision as our devices — not just cellphones and laptops, but also wearable technology and virtual assistants — become direct extensions of our physical and cognitive selves.

We bond with people through shared personal details. The person next to you on the plane who stares at their laptop with a privacy screen the whole time? You won't remember them. The person who tells you about the in-laws they're about to visit with the overbearing fertility questions? That's the start of a real bond.

The difference between the plane interaction and the one on your screen is that one is symmetrical and based on trust, and one is one-sided and based on adoration. The more we adore our favorite digital presences, the more we give them our limited attention. The more we give them our limited attention, the more we start buying what they're selling — whatever that means to them and their platform. These relationships are available to us 24/7, 365, if you're into that. And like with many other technological advancements that impact our behavior, it's up to us to manage them.

In a world where the tools at our disposal will inevitably continue to blur the lines of what's "real," there's a lesson here isn't about categorization or judgement, but rather the evolution of a very fundamental need. Humans are creatures of contact, and we seek it through whatever mediums we can, whether "irl," or with the figures who host our favorite podcast, or with our well-meaning but terribly utopian imaginary friends.

The feeling of friendship that we have with our digital favorites is a kind of relationship, both real and imaginary at the same time. Anna, with her perfectly thick pigtails and incessant cheer, may have been a fleeting figure in one AG-er's backyard, but she represents a timeless truth: in our search for connection, we weave intricate webs of relationships, both seen and unseen. But the value of these connections lies, maybe, in the meaning they bring to our lives — whether that's learning that you'd rather play something else, or that yes, you absolutely do deserve to do something for yourself today. It doesn't matter that advice came from someone you've never met.

You absolutely do deserve to do something for yourself today.

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