

Podcast: What If World

[Episode: 166: What if trees go to school?](#)

File Length: 00:22:54

Transcription by Keffy

[Rising harp scales followed by the What If World theme song.]

Lyrics: What if kittens played the glockenspiel? And what if unicorns were real? What if you could fly or travel back in time, we welcome you to What If World. What If World. This is What If World.

[Gentle bell music.]

Mr. Eric: Hey there, folks and welcome back to What If World, the show where your questions and ideas inspire off-the-cuff stories. I'm Mr. Eric, your host, and today we're starting off with a question from Will.

Will: My name is Will. I'm six and my what if question is what if trees were alive?

Mr. Eric: Excellent question, Will. We haven't visited our talking tree friends in quite a while. I'd also like to give a quick thanks to Will's sister, Bridgid for submitting her own great ideas, as well as listeners Madeline and Hayes, both of whom asked what if trees could talk?

Seriously, we've got so many tree questions that we're gonna get two more. First from a patron named Dillan who asks, what if trees took over the world?

And one last question from a patron named Kayley.

Kayley: Hi, my name's Kayley. My what if question is what if trees go to school?

Mr. Eric: Oh, that's a good one. Well, let's get J.F. Kat in here for a meow-out before we start our story.

JF Kitty: Not so fast, Mr. Eric. I've got to give a meow out for—oh, sorry. I'm used to interrupting you.

Mr. Eric: It's okay, Jojo. Go ahead.

JF Kitty: I'd like to meow out Taylor, who's nine, from Temecula, California. She loves horses, cats, and listening to What If World with her eight year old brother, Jordan.

Abacus: And I've teleported here to shout out James whose favorite hobby is currently playing swingball with his sister, Daisy.

Fred the Dog: Yeah, as usual, I have the most shout outs, like for Harvey, who's five and likes to jump on the trampoline and build amazing Lego houses with lava in them. Plus, one last shout-out to siblings Leo and Mabel from Asheville, North Carolina. Leo is ten and knows every word to the song "Rocky Raccoon." Mabel is eight and she loves Yorkies. They're almost as good as weird pug mixes, yeah.

Mr. Eric: Well, thank you Mabel, Leo, Harvey, Daisy, James, Jordan, Taylor, and Juniper. Now, let's find out what if trees were alive and could talk, and took over the world! And went to school?

Recap: Last time in Alternia, Pixicato was looking for Fred the Dog but now she's got help from former detective Albatross Zero and half-rat, half-robot photographer, Ronnie Kind. You, the listener, know that Fred the Dog is known in this world as the Fraken, a volcano dog of phenomenal power. But how will Pixicato find Fred? Maybe if we all shout at her, "Fred's at the volcano!" Ready, let's do it.

Fred's at the volcano!

Mr. Eric: Sorry, Recap, it doesn't work that way. We can't hear them.

Recap: It's a wonder I can hear anything. I don't have ears.

Mr. Eric: Oh, okay, Recap. So maybe we'll just get into the story, then? Recap?

Recap: I'm sorry, I was waiting for you to start the story. Isn't that your job?

Mr. Eric: Oh, a little more attitude than I'm used to from you, but thank you?

[Rising harp scale.]

Pixicato, Albatross Zero, and Ronnie Kind were flying high over the bright green and blue world that was Alternia, looking for Fred the Dog without any luck. Tall, mossy buildings climbed above ancient trees connected by a network of pristine roads and shady garden paths where people wheeled about in little self-driving cars and capsules. Every so often, they'd fly over a little city square where people traded and talked,

ate and played. But not one of the many varied people had ever heard of a Fred the Dog.

Ronnie Kind Cyprus, who sometimes had trouble focusing, was getting impatient.

Ronnie: Albatross, I can't take this anymore. Why don't we just go back and ask Harriknow, you know?

Mr. Eric: The little half-rat, half-robot was riding on top of Albatross beside his new friend, Pixicato.

Pixicato: Who is Harriknow?

Albatross Zero: Trust me, Pixi, you don't want to know. But I'll tell you anyway.

Pixicato: Okay...

Albatross Zero: They're a bunch of know-it-all trees. Think they're so great because of their intree-net connecting and recording all of Alternia's information.

[Record scratch.]

Pixicato: What? Why didn't we just start there rather than wasting all this time flying around talking to people?

Albatross Zero: Sometimes talking to new people is the best way to learn.

Pixicato: Not when you can just look it up on this intree-net.

Mr. Eric: So Albatross, begrudgingly, turned back to fly to the center of Know What City where an enormous tree stretched over even the tallest of buildings. It was Harriknow, the most knowledgeable tree in all of Alternia.

Ronnie: Okay, look, Pixi, just be respectful. He and his trees took over Alternia after Empress Kammy stopped threatening them with the Franken.

Pixicato: I am always respectful.

Ronnie: Sure you are, kid.

Harriknow: What knowledge do you bring to Harriknow?

Mr. Eric: Echoed the great tree as Albatross flew in front of one of its many faces.

Pixicato: Actually, can I ask you a quick question?

Harriknow: How dare you question me? [Record scratch.] Creator of the intree-net! Ruler of Alternia!

Pixicato: Okay, okay, can I just use your intree-net for a second, then?

Harriknow: Another question? The impertinence. All my little trees are in school right now memorizing every piece of information in the world. They do not have time for your pitiful queries.

Albatross Zero: Told you this was a bad idea.

Mr. Eric: Whispered Albatross.

Pixicato: Well, what is the point of all this knowledge if no one gets to use it?

Harriknow: That makes three questions! All without offering a single piece of information! [Grumbles].

Mr. Eric: The tree grumbled low like thunder and many tree limbs started stretching out toward Albatross, writhing, as flexible as vines and then encircling each of them in a vice-like grip.

Harriknow: You three are hereby sentenced to three consecutive millennia of pruning duty.

Ronnie: Pixicato, I thought I told you to be respectful!

Pixicato: How is asking questions disrespectful?

Harriknow: Another question? Now, you four are sentenced to four millennia of pruning. Intree-net, cease the fourth one of them.

Albatross Zero: Uh, there's only three of us.

Harriknow: Only three of you? Then due to your tree-sonous refusal to be four people, we must arrest a perfect stranger and force them into pruning duty as well.

Pixicato: How is that f—

Ronnie: Whoa, what she meant to say is, thanks a lot, oh, Harriknow. We'll do a great job pruning, we promise.

Mr. Eric: And tree branches from all over Know What City were suddenly surrounding them, dressing each of them in an old orange gardening smock with thick orange gloves and wide, floppy orange hats. Then they were each handed a pair of bent and battered gardening shears and

dropped down at a dark and tangled knot of trees near the heart of the city where a smaller tree spoke to them, sounding like sort of a young Harrigo.

- Harrigo: Welcome to the intree-net. Please prune our tangled branches so that we may continue our schooling.
- Albatross Zero: Four millennia spent pruning trees. Remind me how long albatrosses live?
- Ronnie: About 60 years.
- Albatross Zero: 60 years... four millennia... carry the one...
- Pixicato: 60 years is less than four millennia, I'm afraid.
- Albatross Zero: We'll see about that.
- Mr. Eric: Just then, a fourth figure, barely taller than Pixicato and Ronnie Kind, was suddenly plopped down across the overgrown courtyard from them. Their features were concealed beneath a big, floppy orange hat. And with barely a glance in their direction, the tiny figure shrugged and started clipping away at a little tree that was somehow both runty and overgrown at the same time.
- Pixicato: I am sorry we got you imprisoned.
- Mr. Eric: Said Pixicato. But the figure just shook their head and bent back to their work. Pixicato held her rusty old shears and looked around at the tangle of branches.
- Pixicato: I do not get it. This world is so vibrant and green. Why do these intree-net trees look so much less healthy than the ones we saw in the wild?
- Ronnie: Pixi, probably best to stop asking questions at this—
- Harrigo: We are unhealthy due to our tangled limbs and branches, the cause of which is improper pruning and too much sunlight and too little water and not enough sunlight and overwatering and the lack of pruning.
- Pixicato: But that does not make sense!
- Mr. Eric: Said Pixicato, snipping off a particularly gnarly branch with her shears. The sap of the tree glowed a sickly green and seemed to swirl with ever changing patterns.

Harrigo: You requested information and we delivered. Now I must return to school to collect all information so that we may share it with the world and learn more and grow stronger. It is simply a matter of proper pruning.

Mr. Eric: As the tree spoke, the branch Pixicato had just clipped started to grow back, even more twisted and knotted than before.

Pixicato: But just look at yourself. Everything we prune comes back and tangled up again. You will never grow healthy at this rate.

Harrigo: Hm... information accepted. Your pruning is ineffective. Your punishment is pardoned. We will await pruning from more qualified prisoners.

Mr. Eric: And just like that, branches came and tore away their orange gardening smocks and accessories and plucked the dull shears right out of their hands.

Albatross Zero: Oh, very clever, Kid. Now let's fly this coop.

Pixicato: I don't know, there's just something so wrong here.

Ronnie: Sorry, Kid. But how is that our problem?

Pixicato: These trees all think they're in school. No one is teaching them how to learn.

Albatross Zero: Sure, Pixi, but I think the fate of two universes is bigger than a couple of mixed up trees.

Pixicato: Maybe you are right.

Mr. Eric: Said Pixicato. And then she called out to their fellow prisoner across the courtyard.

Pixicato: Excuse me, if you'd like, we can give you a ride out of here.

Mr. Eric: But the little figure didn't seem to hear them. After losing their shears, they'd taken out a hatchet and pruned away dozens of dried up old branches. Albatross flew a little closer to the figure.

Albatross Zero: What are you doing?

Ellie Trick: Hacking the mainframe, what does it look like?

Albatross Zero: Hacking... I get it. You know what. She's got wings, I'm sure she's good, we should just leave her.

Mr. Eric: And Pixicato saw that indeed, this woman had colorful feathery wings with a pattern that seemed strangely familiar.

Ellie Trick: The three of you may leave. I've got this.

Mr. Eric: Said the woman as Pixicato and Ronnie Kind drew closer. And they saw that this winged woman had one arm that seemed to be made of winding roots with little flowers budding from them.

Pixicato: Are you part tree?

Ellie Trick: I'm a bioborg, little pixie.

Mr. Eric: And each of the bioborg's fingertips on her tree-like hand seemed to open up somehow and reach out to connect with the tree she'd just pruned back.

Ronnie: Whoa, cool tech, lady.

Mr. Eric: And one of her eyes, which appeared to be a rune-carved stone, threw up a bright green display into the air.

Pixicato: Whoa.

Albatross Zero: Whoa.

Ronnie: Whoa.

Mr. Eric: But Pixicato was less amazed by this strange technology than she was by the little bioborg in front of her. Sure it had feather wings rather than butterfly wings. But the color pattern was right. And sure, she was half tree, wearing raggedy old clothes rather than a smart trench coat and fedora.

Pixicato: Mom?

Ellie Trick: Sorry, Kid. You must have me confused with some other fairy bioborg.

Albatross Zero: No way. You're saying this is Alternia's Fair Elise?

Pixicato: Yeah.

Albatross Zero: The one who's supposed to be my detective partner.

Ellie Trick: I don't know what you're talking about, but my name's Ellie Trick.

Mr. Eric: And with a wave of her fairy hand, green sparks zapped the three of them, as she swiped her hand through the green display of information that she was pulling up from the intree-net, scanning for something.

Ellie Trick: And I work alone.

Pixicato: Mom, it is me!

Ellie Trick: Didn't anyone ever teach you to use contractions?

Pixicato: You said that I cannot use them outside of grammatical necessity.

Ronnie: Hey, hey, Pixi. Obviously she's, like, on her own side mission or something. We should get going.

Albatross Zero: Yeah, before Harriknow changes his mind. I'm not sure Albatrosses live for four millennia.

Ellie Trick: They don't.

Pixicato: They do not.

Mr. Eric: But Pixicato was barely paying attention to Albatross. She was scanning through the display, alongside Ellie Trick.

Pixicato: What are you looking for?

Mr. Eric: Asked the young pixie.

Ellie Trick: A way to free my forest. Harriknow is doing something to my trees. I've got to break their connection somehow.

Mr. Eric: A few of the trees in the courtyard seemed to slowly, creakingly, turn towards the four of them, their branches moving in so slowly that you might hardly notice the courtyard getting darker.

Ronnie: Hey, uh, you can hardly notice this, but the courtyard's getting darker.

Mr. Eric: Said Ronnie Kind.

Ronnie: Can we just jet? That's my nickname, you know, The Jet, because sometimes you just gotta run!

Pixicato: Ellie Trick, may I try something on this display for a minute.



Mr. Eric: And Ellie gave the pixie a quizzical look.

Ellie Trick: Be my guest.

Mr. Eric: And Pixicato drew her wand and started flicking through the floating green display, taking in information at lightning speed.

Pixicato: You see, the connection is not the problem. Connection can be very powerful.

Mr. Eric: Roots were starting to crack the old pavement around them, closing in on the four, as yet unescaped prisoners.

Ronnie: Pixi... you're in the mainframe, just get the info we need and let's jet!

Pixicato: Yes, I already found Fred, he's actually the Fraken. I should have figured it out already.

Albatross Zero: Then what are we doing? Let's go!

Pixicato: See, the problem is here.

Mr. Eric: Said Pixicato, pointing to a holographic projection of many knotted tree limbs.

Pixicato: Any idea you feed is going to grow, even wrong ideas.

Ellie Trick: So what?

Pixicato: So that is why every good learner has to be part detective.

Mr. Eric: Said Pixicato, looking at her mother from another dimension.

Pixicato: You taught me that.

Ellie Trick: I did?

Mr. Eric: Ellie Trick blinked in confusion. Tree limbs suddenly shot through the green holographic display and it winked out.

Albatross Zero: Yeah, yeah, yeah, being a detective's great.

Mr. Eric: And the big albatross scooped up the three tinier people in this talons and started flying off, just as branch after branch, limb after limb shot through the sky and they heard the booming voice of Harriknow.

Harriknow: One of you hacked my mainframe and it really hurt!

Ellie Trick: Oh, it's nothing worse than a bite on the finger for you. Meanwhile, you've destroyed my whole forest home!

Mr. Eric: Ellie Trick argued as Albatross ducked, dove, and weaved his way through the flailing tree limbs like a fighter pilot.

Albatross Zero: Ellie Trick, now's not the time to incense the city-sized tree monster!

Harriknow: I am not hurting the trees! I am helping them learn.

Pixicato: No, Harriknow. Soaking up every bit of information on the intree-net is not learning and it is not healthy!

Harriknow: What?

Mr. Eric: Said Harriknow, using one of his own great limbs to swipe at them like a building falling from the sky.

Harriknow: [Grumbles] No one questions Harriknow!

Pixicato: Ronnie, I need you to print some photos for me, fast.

Ronnie: That's the only way I print, Pixicato.

Mr. Eric: Pixicato whispered to the rat bot and he quickly spat out two photos from his built-in printer, just before the mass of building-sized tree limb was about to smooch poor Albatross and the rest.

Pixicato: Harriknow, here's some information for you.

Mr. Eric: Said Pixicato, closing her eyes and holding up one of the two photos. And the tree limb stopped, a few knots on a limb formed one of Harriknow's many faces.

Harriknow: Wow, look at that.

Mr. Eric: Said the great, gnarled tree, staring at a photo of a beautiful, lush, healthy forest with no tangle of dead limbs and no gnarl of sickly, leafless branches.

Harriknow: I used to look like that.

Mr. Eric: Said the tree, and a few of its turning leaves fell like tears from the sky.

Harriknow: What has happened to me?

Pixicato: You are not teaching your trees how to learn. You are just throwing all the information at them.

Mr. Eric: And she pulled out the second photo, Ronnie Kind's photos were very special. The ink could shift, wave, and roll, to play out a scene and the photo had little bumps on its back that Pixicato ran her wand across, making sound, like the little musical nodes on a music box. And so the photo played back what the young tree had said to them earlier.

Harrigo: We are unhealthy due to our tangled limbs and branches, the cause of which is improper pruning and too much sunlight and too little water and not enough sunlight and overwatering, and a lack of pruning.

Mr. Eric: And Harriknow watched the little tree speak these contradictions, and as it did, its branches knotted and turned in on themselves.

Ellie Trick: Every good learner is part detective.

Mr. Eric: She said, giving Pixicato a nod.

Ellie Trick: So why don't you tell us what you're seeing.

Harriknow: Well, the tree thinks it knows two things that contradict one another and so it grows sickly and strange.

Pixicato: And do you think it will be easier for new knowledge to branch out from these twisted knots?

Harriknow: No, of course not.

Mr. Eric: And as Harriknow spoke, a fresh, green, willowy branch sprouted right where his nose would be.

Harriknow: Look, I'm learning!

Ronnie: Yeah, buddy. You've got all this information, but you've got to learn how to take a closer look at it.

Harriknow: And then my nose will get bigger and stronger?

Ellie Trick: Your nose for the truth.

Pixicato: Oh, I like that.

Albatross Zero: Man, I think you woulda made a great detective, Ellie Trick.

Harriknow: What about me? Could I be a detective? I already know everything.

Ronnie: No, you don't... oh, boy. Are we starting this all over again?

Mr. Eric: And Ronnie Kind crawled up onto Harriknow's freshly grown nose.

Ronnie: You know, I've got kind of a knack for helping people learn from their mistakes.

Albatross Zero: That's some truth, right there.

Ronnie: So maybe I'll stick around and help teach you how to run a better tree school.

Harriknow: Oh, my young trees would be so grateful.

Ellie Trick: They are my trees.

Harriknow: Mm, conflicting information. Perhaps they are our trees?

Mr. Eric: And a fresh, leafy little branch sprouted up and out from Harriknow's nose.

Harriknow: Hey... I did a truth.

Ellie Trick: All right, Harriknow. I suppose you did.

Albatross Zero: I'm so sorry to interrupt everyone, but I've been hovering in place for like five minutes, I'm getting really tired.

Pixicato: Oh, right. We've got to save the universe.

Ellie Trick: I thought it was two universes?

Harriknow: The two-niverse.

Ronnie: Yeah, you three go save the two-niverse, okay? Frankly, you all have wings and I've been terrified for my life for the past several weeks.

Pixicato: Ellie Trick, would you like to come with us?

Ellie Trick: What kind of fairy would I be if I didn't help a little girl find her mother.

Pixicato: Yeah... okay...

Mr. Eric: And Albatross, Pixicato, and Ellie flew off in the direction of a volcano, far in the distance.

Harriknow: Okay, Ronnie.

Mr. Eric: Said Harriknow to the little rat bot.

Harriknow: Maybe for starters, you could teach me why the intree-net has so many cat videos.

Ronnie: Uh, well, that... um.

Harriknow: Oh, or how to win an argument on social media.

Ronnie: I'm not sure that that's a good use of our—

Harriknow: Oh, or what makes someone qualified to start a podcast?

Ronnie: Well... uh...

Mr. Eric: The end.

[Falling harp scale.]

All right, Kayley, Dillan, Hayes, Madeline, and Will, I hope you enjoyed your story. I'd like to thank Karen O'Keeffe, my co-creator, Craig Martinson for our theme song, and all you kids at home who know that every good learner needs to be part detective, especially when you're on the intree-net.

Until we meet again, keep wondering.

[What If World theme plays.]