World Building

Boni, Marta

Published by Amsterdam University Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66361.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66361

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2329078
19. **Traversing the “Whoniverse”**

*Doctor Who’s Hyperdiegesis and Transmedia Discontinuity/Diachrony*

*Matt Hills*

Boni, Marta (ed.), *World Building. Transmedia, Fans, Industries*. Amsterdam University Press, 2017

DOI: 10.5117/9789089647566/CH19

**Abstract**

This chapter argues that the world building of long-running media franchises cannot be seen purely as a matter of textual attributes and instead partly emerges over time as a result of fans’ reading strategies. Taking *Doctor Who* (BBC TV, 1963—) as a case study, it is suggested here that fans and official producers have co-created the ‘Whoniverse’ across decades—not simply because small numbers of privileged fans have become producers/writers/showrunners, but also because fan interpretations have been diachronically recognized within the program’s canon. *Doctor Who* has been marked by textual discontinuity, but fan audiences have playfully reconstructed its diegetic contradictions into coherent accounts of the Whoniverse. As such, fan practices have helped to generate and to conserve an integrated transmedial world.

**Keywords**: *Doctor Who*, fandom, hyperdiegesis, transmedia

In this chapter, I’ll return to a concept I introduced in *Fan Cultures* (Hills 2002, 137), considering how it can inform debates surrounding transmedia and world building. That concept is “hyperdiegesis”:

a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen [...] within the text, but which [...] appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension [...] stimulating creative speculation and providing a trusted environment for affective play. (Hills 2002, 137—8)
I used this term to think about how cult texts offer up hyperdiegetic realms for their fans to learn about, become immersed in, and playfully transform, whether by playing trivia games, consuming episode guides, or writing fan fiction. I suggested that a combination of topophilic detail and coherence/extensibility act as incitements to fan creativity and affect. However, as Elizabeth Evans has noted, “transmedia storytelling offers an expansion of […] Hills’ theory of […] hyperdiegesis” (Evans 2011, 28). This is because, increasingly, rather than narrative gaps being left for fans to speculate over, “the moments that are missing from the source text [can] become manifest […] as the narrative world stretches across […] platforms” (ibid, 29).

I will examine a case study in order to complicate my earlier definition of “hyperdiegesis”, one that encompasses key industrial shifts in discourses of transmedia world building, as well as involving different generations of fans, producers, and producer-fans. My focus will be on the BBC science fiction TV series *Doctor Who* (1963—1989, 1996, 2005—), and the gradual, discontinuous creation of what has become known as the “Whoniverse”.

There are two main arguments I want to pursue. First, that a focus on the “aspirations” of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2014, 244) is often too quick to assume that world building should be equated with narrative continuity and coherence. “Transmedia discontinuity” (Hassler-Forest 2014, 103) can itself be a significant factor in shaping producer-fan interactions and extending hyperdiegetic worlds. Second, theories of transmedia worldbuilding have also over-emphasized spatiality (Fast 2012, 313). Perhaps appropriately for an analysis of *Doctor Who*—a show in which the title character is a “Time Lord” from Gallifrey who can travel in time and space thanks to his TARDIS, an extraordinary vessel disguised as a 1960s UK Police Box—I want to focus on the issue of temporality in relation to world building. This will enable me to consider how fans and official producers have significantly co-created the “Whoniverse” from the 1960s to today, both via fans occupying vital production roles and through interactions between the institutions of fandom and production (i.e. informal and formal economies of *Who’s* creation) (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 39). First, though, I will consider how the narrative universe of *Doctor Who* has been—and continues to be—a far from coherent “hyperdiegesis”.

**World Building and Discontinuity**

Although the term was used in *Doctor Who—A Celebration* (Haining 1983, 169), the “Whoniverse” referred to then-televised episodes as well as *Doctor
Who’s producers and fan clubs. More recently, the “Whoniverse” has meant the show’s overarching diegetic universe, following the model of other pop-cultural “-verses” (Cochran 2015, 160).

However, the Whoniverse has never been marked by consistency (Perryman 2008). As many different production teams have worked on the series over the years, operating in differing industrial contexts, the show has displayed many “contradictions (failing to respect the core consistency audiences expect within a franchise)” (Jenkins 2006, 105). A number of infamous discrepancies include the “UNIT dating” conundrum, which is that lack of clarity concerning which years, or even decades, certain third Doctor (Jon Pertwee) stories are set in; the genesis of the Daleks, which presents incompatible accounts of the creatures’ history; the creation of the Cybermen, who appear to have hailed from two home planets; and the Doctor’s alien, “half-human”, or human nature, which alters according to whether one is watching the BBC TV series, the BBC/Fox TV Movie from 1996, or the two 1960s Dalek movies (1965 and 1966). As Piers Britton puts it, if this is a hyperdiegesis, then it is a “failure”, repeatedly breaching “its own internal continuity [...] due to [...] sheer [...] duration and proliferation” (Britton 2011, 17). And Colin Harvey similarly notes that although key storyworld elements of the Doctor Who universe—the eccentric protagonist [...], his ability to regenerate, the fact that [...] the TARDIS is bigger on the inside—have accrued over decades to become iconic signifiers of the “Whoniverse,” [...] so have multiple diegetic contradictions and dissonances, within the programme itself but also within multiple other media. (Harvey 2015, 185)

Rather than such “diegetic contradictions and dissonances” somehow being contingent or accidental, Felan Parker argues that the “construction and maintenance of franchise canon is an active, dynamic and multiple process that belies the complete lack of consistency or consensus inherent in its own construction” (2013, 158). That is, transmedia and “transfictional” consistency (across media and across a single medium, e.g. TV episodes) need to be produced via industrial paratexts and discourses; they do not necessarily inhere in official media texts. Acknowledging this possibility, Marie-Laure Ryan distinguishes between forms of transmedial and transfictional “expansion” that can be “world-preserving” (i.e. the narrative world is expanded upon without contradictions or continuity errors) and “modification” that, instead, fractures processes of world building into “related but different worlds” or worlds that “overlap” with prior continuity
while also differing in problematic ways (Ryan 2013, n.p.). Yet, both Parker and Ryan view transmedial/transfictional coherence as a matter of industrial discourses or practices: neither fully addresses the extent to which fans may themselves discursively convert “modifications” into “expansions”, rather than these analytical categories somehow remaining objectively rooted in “canonical” textual strategies.

Nor does the Whoniverse settle into any newfound full coherence in its most recent BBC Wales’ incarnations. Neil Perryman has discussed continuity disagreements between the BBC online game “Blood of the Cybermen” and the series five (2010) episode “The Pandorica Opens”, noting that some fans were pragmatic in their response to contradictions regarding whether or not companion Amy Pond (Karen Gillan) had encountered the Cybermen: “[T]hey [“Blood of the Cybermen” and “The Pandorica Opens”] clearly don’t fit! Moffat admits he sometimes just says yes to stuff [because] he’s actually focused on the TV product” (an anonymised fan quoted in Perryman 2014, 239).

Continuity problems haven’t just emerged between BBC Wales’ Doctor Who and its transmedia extensions; such issues have also afflicted spin-offs such as Torchwood (Perryman 2008, 31), as well as surfacing intra-textually in relation to the program’s own (narrative) history. Show-runner Steven Moffat has engaged in audacious narrative gambits such as “rebooting” the entire Whoniverse as well as introducing versions of companion Clara Oswald (Jenna Coleman) throughout the Doctor’s timeline (Hills 2015a, 8). The former development perplexed many fans and, in his critical analysis of series five, Frank Collins observes that “‘The Big Bang’ promulgates a slightly altered Doctor Who universe, perhaps one that is so subtly changed that we may never completely grasp the reality of it or, indeed, the full meaning of this” (Collins 2010, 239). Clara’s omnipresence throughout the Doctor’s past also raised the question of how the Time Lord could not have known who she was, with one fan commentator describing the character as a “Continuity Nightmare Child” due to the contradictions and uncertainties that her dissemination (or not) throughout the Doctor’s timeline created:

Of course, with the fresh set of regenerations bestowed upon the Doctor at the end of The Time of the Doctor, the events of The Name of the Doctor never actually happened, and Clara, therefore, does not enter the Doctor’s timestream … Is anyone else’s brain dribbling out of their ears? (Elliott 2014, 334—335)

In each of these cases, Moffat appears to be less concerned with engineering a fully coherent Whoniverse than with creating shock effects that are suited
to respective season finales. Or, to put it another way, his focus is on the impact of specific story resolutions rather than on the overall coherence and narrative integration of Doctor Who’s longer history. This may help to construct finale episodes as “event” TV, but it also demonstrates the tension between serialized narrative reveals or “modifications” and transmedia storytelling construed as narrative “expansion” (Ryan, online). At the same time, though, Moffat aligns his work on Who with discourses of art and authorship (Chapman 2013, 277), introducing new narrative possibilities that the show has never explored before, whether this involves the Doctor travelling back through his own past adventures (“The Big Bang”) or Clara hurtling into his timeline (“The Name of the Doctor”). Rather than merely identifying and then reproducing “rules” of the Whoniverse, Moffat’s work as show-runner has often operated transgressively, precisely in order to surprise fans and destabilize their assumptions and established knowledge. Thus, the Time War is undone in “The Day of the Doctor” (2013), as well as a new version of the Doctor, the War Doctor (John Hurt), being introduced.

Moffat is, as a highly knowledgeable fan himself, interested in shaping novel forms of Who that subvert or complicate fan lore—not least of which has been his (sub)textual sexualization of the character—rather than integrating material into received wisdom and received back-stories. Just as science fiction involves imagining a “novum”—something changed in the norms of culture or the current knowledge of science—Moffat has insistently developed a “fan-cultural novum” by reimagining the possibilities of Doctor Who. World building, in this case, does not mean iterating more of the same—or simply adding to a stockpile of narrative facts or lists—it means deliberately defamiliarizing “fan culturally acquired logics of continuity and characterization” (Hills 2015a, 9).

This adoption of world building “discontinuity” therefore gives long-term fans “unexpected variations on familiar narratives”, such as a mayfly Doctor or a contemporary companion being introduced into canonical events like the first Doctor (William Hartnell) leaving Gallifrey (Hassler-Forest 2014, 103). But its playful, innovative engagement with fan cultural capital also works to comply “with the […] narrative conventions of Quality TV” (ibid.) by stressing authorial agency, novelty, and complexity over fan-culturally (and transmedia-ly) normative shackles of established continuity (Mittell 2015, 265).

It is tempting to analytically carve the Whoniverse’s discontinuities into different eras and industrial practices, with much classic Doctor Who offering “an expansion of the fictional world” via tie-ins, merchandising, and adaptations, but without “integration […] [with] the television programme” (Evans 2011, 23). By contrast, we could suggest that BBC Wales’ Who displays
“a shift in transmedia practice” (ibid.) whereby narrative integration across media platforms and merchandising is greatly enhanced, even if errors are made and even while discontinuity (or neo-continuity) is embraced as an aesthetic, authorial principle. Yet, such a binary position—of old/new Who, or an older “licensing system” versus contemporary transmedia discourses (Jenkins 2006, 105)—can’t discern specific differences within “new Who” as well as longer-term similarities across the program’s history. Particular events in the cultural career of BBC Wales’ Doctor Who, such as 50th anniversary commemorations in 2013, have reconfigured how world-building coherence is self-reflexively drawn on and displayed. In the webisode prequel “Night of the Doctor” and anniversary special “Day of the Doctor”, what Roberta Pearson and Maire Messenger Davies term “extended seriality” (2014, 128) was deployed as a kind of celebratory stunt (see, also: Valentina Re’s chapter in this volume). “Extended seriality” involves crafting explicit connections across otherwise distant, detached moments in a long-running franchise; here, the Whoniverse was unusually stitched together into what fan critics Brian J. Robb and Paul Simpson describe as a “superlative unification of classic- and new-era Doctor Who” in [...] a single, unbroken narrative” (2015, 309). Not only were all the Doctors united in saving their home planet, but “Night of the Doctor” also featured the eighth Doctor, Paul McGann, regenerating into a new body, thus presenting long-term fans with a missing link in the overarching Whoniverse—something they had waited to see for many years, and a hyperdiegetic event that integrated the 1996 TV Movie into BBC Wales’ Who. To see this heightened hyperdiegetic, transmedia integration merely as part of a wider industry shift would be to miss its particular status as a “gift” to fandom (Hills 2015b, 41) and as an anniversary “milestone moment” (Holdsworth 2011, 36).

The binary of licensing discontinuity versus transmedia coherence also assumes that fandom always desires canonical narrative coherence or integration. But inconsistencies across different production teams or eras of Doctor Who can facilitate creative fan retconning (“retroactive continuity”), as well as what Paul Booth calls “narractivity” (2010, 105) in which “fans assimilate individual units of narrative knowledge and, as a community, re-enact and reform them in new ways” (ibid., 104). Continuity errors facilitate fan debate and enable fans’ attempts to fill in gaps or smooth over contradictions (Jenkins 1992, 102—103). Such errors also mean that fans can treat a rickety hyperdiegesis as a series of possibilities whereby continuity can be “gleaned” from available options by discounting some and prioritizing others (Garvey 2013, p. 47—48). Such textual gleaning also makes hyperdiegesis “neutrosemic”—that is, rather than fans simply
accepting strictures of canon, they can demarcate which continuity they favor. As Dan Hassler-Forest has pointed out, this proffers a flexible type of transmedia practice [and] increases the franchise’s commodity value dramatically because it allows for numerous entry points [...] [However,] this transmedia strategy in which continuity and discontinuity exist side by side is always in danger of proliferating in ways that are perceived as inauthentic and [...] unattractive to [...] established audiences. (2014, 104)

Although there may be a danger of specific incarnations being viewed as “inauthentic” Who by fans—whether this is a half-human 1990s Doctor or an entirely human 1960s version in the Dalek movies—such fan evaluations remain open to revision over time. Cornel Sandvoss positions neutrosemy as a narcissistic act of self-reflection in which fans embrace versions of a fan object that mirrors their prior sense of self (2005, 126). Likewise, Timothy Corrigan argues that the “art of world-making” builds [...] knowledges [...] [in] relatively closed communities who, in a sense, perform only themselves [...]. Within contemporary cultures of fandoms, world-building [...] and contemporary appropriative activities [...] describe a spirit of an age defined by [...] digital narcissism” (2015, 55).

Yet, these invocations of narcissism underplay the extent to which navigating transmedia discontinuity, as a fan and in order to actively shape a preferred and coherent continuity, is a dynamic process involving multiple factions of a fan community. Thus, contra Sandvoss, one is not locked into a mirroring relationship between text and self, but is instead involved in engaging dialogically with fan sub-communities. And contra Corrigan, neither is one enclosed by a community performing only itself—quite to the contrary, gleaning hyperdiegetic continuity out of discontinuity means interacting with other fans, and other factions, who have differently evaluated Doctor Who’s merchandising, spin-offs, tie-in novels, and audios. Such “narractivity” hence persists in a variety of ways, rather than “old” Who merely frustrating fans focused on continuity and “new” post-2005 Who straightforwardly rewarding fannish interests. Since BBC Wales’ Doctor Who itself acts as a hyperdiegetic continuation of the series cancelled in 1989, then all preceding versions of the show remain in play in fan debate rather than being definitively over-written—this, too, makes it very difficult to separate different eras or industry discourses of transmedia, since all the strata in Who’s hyperdiegetic development can be relevant to fandom’s “transmedia memory” (Harvey 2015, 182). All variations of the Whoniverse
remain open to fans’ gleaning for continuity in a “game” of interpretation (Parkin and Pearson 2012, 23).

This state of affairs—in which Doctor Who has been and continues to be, marked by hyperdiegetic discontinuity—raises the issue of just how important fan practices have been to its world building. In the following section, I will argue that, over time, the Whoniverse has been significantly co-created by fans and official producers. World building implies a temporal dimension, as audiences are introduced to additional details of a narrative, and as creators elaborate upon a narrative universe. But such temporality also means that world building can be collaborative, unfolding between professional and fan “creators” and, hence, becoming a matter of pro-am (professional-amateur) “world-sharing” as well as being distributed across different production teams (Johnson 2013, 109). Indeed, world building can also traverse generational time, as fans become media professionals in their own right.

World Building and Diachrony

When I introduced the notion of hyperdiegesis in Fan Cultures, I viewed this as a textual attribute, “a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen […] within the text” (Hills 2002, 137). The difficulty of viewing narrative spaces in this way is that such a textualist perspective neglects audiences’ “narractivity” (Booth 2010, 105) and the extent to which, as Henry Jenkins notes in Convergence Culture, world building is “bigger even than the franchise—since fan speculation and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions” (2006, 114). Even here, though, Jenkins places fans’ contributions to world building “outside” the franchise (i.e. as non-canonical and happening elsewhere, beyond primary textual confines as a kind of “meta-text”) (Jenkins, 1992, 98). Mark J.P. Wolf, in Building Imaginary Worlds, makes a related assumption:

Fans who are serious about contributing canonical material to a world can become employees or freelancers, or in some cases, even the torchbearers assigned to continue a world (as is the case with lifelong Doctor Who fan Steven Moffat […]). However […] the majority of them are on the lower end of the hierarchies of authorship. (2012, 280)

Again, this suggests that the majority of fan contributions to world building occur as non-canon, exceptions to this rule happening only when fans enter
the official production process as media professionals, whether working as “torchbearers” (i.e. showrunners in positions of textual authority) or as “freelancers” (i.e. as tie-in authors subordinated to franchise guidelines; see: Clarke 2013, 79 and 85; Johnson 2013, 150). There is a type of pro-am “world-sharing among creative workers and communities” here (Johnson 2013, 109), but it is one in which fan contributions to world building tend to be recognized and accrue forms of authority, only on the basis of showrunner-fandom or other varieties of professionalized fan status.

Set against such accounts, I want to suggest that viewing *Doctor Who*’s hyperdiegesis as textual—and, hence, as locked into canonical narrative universes—means neglecting the extent to which formal (producer) and informal (fan) economies surrounding the show can interact over time, and not only via the mediating lenses of professionalized or corporately “enfranchised” fandom (ibid., 229). Hyperdiegesis can, instead, operate as a reading strategy, and, hence, as a way of narratively reading-for-coherence that is produced through fanworks in ways that then, potentially, feed back into official production. It is thus important to move from an excessively textualist view of hyperdiegesis to one that acknowledges the accumulative and diachronic significance of fan paratexts (Jenkins 1992, 98—107; Gray 2010, 162—163 and 2015, 232). Indeed, Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas’s work sets out a series of ways in which the interdependency of formal and informal media economies can be recognized:

*functions, effects and controls* [...] provide a way of thinking about the boundaries and linkages between formality and informality, across multiple dimensions. *Functions* are ways that informal elements get used within a formal media market. [...] *Effects* describe what may happen to a particular media economy [...] when informal elements are incorporated into formal systems over time. *Controls* are ways of managing, organizing or understanding informality. (Lobato and Thomas 2015, 30)

Work in fan/production studies has typically focused on the “controls” side of this equation, suggesting that informal practices such as fan tourism—where fans travel on pilgrimages to visit filming locations and sacralized sites linked to their beloved media texts—can be mimicked via “convergent incorporation” into corporate settings such as the “*Doctor Who Experience*” (Booth 2015, 120—121). In this case, *Doctor Who* fans’ interest in visiting locations linked to the show’s production in Cardiff is co-opted by a commercially-run BBC Worldwide exhibition and “walk-through” interactive mock-up of the program’s hyperdiegetic world, both of which are located
in Cardiff Bay, adjacent to the Roath Lock studios where *Who* is filmed. Similarly, fan creativity can be incorporated into industrial models via “consumer enfranchisement” (Johnson 2013, 230); Amazon’s “Kindle Worlds” initiative offers one example of this process, though *Doctor Who* is not one of its authorized franchises. Here, relations between fans and producers are policed from both sides (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Hadas and Shifman 2013, 288): producers effectively delimit how fans should be creative, and fans have little choice other than to assent to the rules of the game if they want to participate. The BBC’s 2015 “Mission Dalek” competition represented a *Who* example of this “consumer enfranchisement”, with UK fans being invited to use “rights-cleared assets” (i.e. authorized programme clips) to make and submit their own 90-second digital adventures.¹

In terms of “functions,” rather different relationships between the informal and formal can be discerned in relation to *Who*’s hyperdiegesis, such as superfan Ian Levine working on the 1980s programme as an (uncredited) advisor to the programme’s then-producer John Nathan-Turner, in order that the show’s history could be accurately honored (in actuality, this did not completely avoid continuity errors being made). In terms of “effects,” *Doctor Who* began to significantly incorporate informal elements into its formal economy during the so-called “wilderness years” when the program was off-air. As Miles Booy has argued:

> In 1975, when the *[Doctor Who]* Appreciation Society was formed, the show, its fans and its spin-off products were discrete entities with few sustained points of connection. Fandom—such as it was—was invisible to the general public and merchandising was mostly aimed at schoolchildren. [...] In the 1990s, in the absence of a television programme [...] the three once-distinct areas of “show”, merchandise and fandom [...] merged completely. (Booy 2012, 2)

If, by “the early years of the new millennium, fans had completely taken over all official merchandise lines” (ibid., 171), then this would also set the stage for fans who had previously written original spin-off novels and built up TV experience to migrate into the official TV production at senior levels. One end result of this, or “effect” in Lobato and Thomas’s terms, was that BBC Wales’ *Doctor Who* acted as a kind of “fanbrand” (Hills 2010, 66 and 2014, 110), incorporating high levels of fan knowledge and fan-cultural awareness along with industry/BBC norms of “360 degree commissioning” and transmedia practice. Indeed, it would be reasonable to argue that the move to a more integrated transmedia *Doctor Who*—albeit simultaneously
marked by continuity errors and by parallel, discontinuous audio and comic strip versions of the series—was itself over-determined, drawing as much on fannish readings-for-hyperdiegesis as on industry developments.

These developments in fan-producer relations also illuminate the need for a diachronic approach to hyperdiegesis and its emergence through formal-informal interactions, rather than addressing such world building synchronically as an intra-textual formation or a matter of encyclopedic fan wikis. Adopting a diachronic view of world building means being able to consider how taxonomies of transmedia storytelling, for example, may not only act as different options, but may also work sequentially as ways in which fans can gradually move “between peripheral and central forms of power” in terms of (trans)media production (Fast 2012, 324). Colin B. Harvey’s tripartite schema of detached, devolved, and directed transmedia storytelling (2015, 187—189), for example, captures some fans’ career moves from unofficial and fan-targeted world building (e.g. the Faction Paradox novels that link into BBC Books’ Doctor Who New Adventures without using copyrighted characters) to licensed but uneasily non-canonical or officially over-writable world building (e.g. Big Finish audios that may not be recognized in televised Who) and then to strictly controlled transmedia extensions integrated into a canonical hyperdiegesis. Rather than simply existing as alternatives, the history of relations between Who fandom and official production has been one of movement between these modes, with “devolved” hyperdiegetic extension sometimes acting as an intermediary position between “detached” fan fiction and fully canonical or “directed” productivity.

Only a limited number of fans are able to successfully pursue a career path from “detached” to “directed” world-building, but this does not mean that “rank and file” fandom has no relationship to canonical world-building in the Whoniverse. In fact, the end-title credit for the show’s lead character was altered from “Doctor Who” to “The Doctor” in 1982 when producer John Nathan Turner acknowledged fan advice, only reverting to “Doctor Who” in 2005. This latter change was presumably a result of show-runner-fan Russell T. Davies wanting to avoid the new show being seen as overtly fannish, as well as harking back to the program’s origins and the more casual, non-fan audience’s recollection of the title character being “Doctor Who”. It was only when life-long fan David Tennant took on the title role, after Who had again become a huge industry-recognized success, that the fan authenticity and fan cultural capital of “The Doctor” was officially, paratextually restored as an end-credit. Each shift to “The Doctor” was not a way of policing or controlling fans’ informal practices; it was, rather, a recognition effect within
the canonical TV programme of the accumulated density of (fan-culturally normative) paratexts that understood the character to be “the Doctor”, as well as fans’ hyperdiegetic speculations over the titles of renegade Time Lords such as the Master and the Doctor. Such interactions between informal and formal understandings of the Whoniverse are not merely about fans becoming professionalized and working in/on the program itself—they are also a matter of fan talk, interpretation, and writing, over time, accruing a weight of collective validity.

Fannish reading-for-hyperdiegesis is markedly evident in fan publications such as *Ahistory* (Parkin and Pearson 2012) and *Lost in Time and Space: An Unofficial Guide to the Uncharted Journeys of Doctor Who* (Elliott 2014). Where the former aims to compile a sequential timeline of all events in the Whoniverse, reconciling contradictory or “failed” hyperdiegetic elements, the latter compiles all of the Doctor’s adventures that have been referred to canonically without actually being depicted. A mass of conflicting information is thus organized chronologically by Lance Parkin and Lars Pearson, while Matthew J. Elliott treats often throwaway remarks (providing humor in their original narrative contexts, or demonstrating the Doctor to be an incorrigible name-dropper) as a further source of coherent world building to be catalogued and thematically grouped together. In each instance, these fan practices work more as *world projecting* rather than world building—that is, they desire and project a consistent, coherent hyperdiegesis that is very much not given canonically. By projecting the Whoniverse, expert fan paratexts work to anticipate and co-create the show’s expansive narrative world through a form of “distributed expertise” (Banks 2013, 114). Such “collaborative creativity aims to bring into focus the multiplicity of modes of production [...] Whose creativity is valued; whose is recognized and within which spheres?” (Condry 2013, 206). This co-creation does not deny the powerful institutional and creative roles performed by official producers, but it remains possible—even while noting that this is not a “genuinely ‘participatory culture’” of absolute equals (Fast 2012, 319)—to map the variety of ways in which informal fan practices of world projecting and formal production practices of world building become diachronically intertwined and interconnected nonetheless. Studying similar processes in relation to anime, Ian Condry has written of the “soul” of anime as a matter of collaborative creativity and “collective energy” (2013, 111). While observing that the term “soul” here may carry “possibly problematic connotations” (ibid., 205), Condry continues to insist on it “as a kind of energy that arises [...] out of collective action” (ibid., 30).
Yet the notion of a “soul” to world building, emerging through collective fan interpretations and projections of coherence, may be more than “problematic”. It threatens to displace any critical reading of world building with ineffable religiosity, despite the fact that “[c]apitalist valorization [...] depends on the development of worlds” (Steinberg 2012, 183). Indeed, Marc Steinberg draws on Maurizio Lazzarato’s work to argue “that contemporary capitalism is characterized not so much by the creation of products but by the creation of worlds” (ibid.). In such an argument, it is not that “the difference between a brand community member [...] and a fan [...] seem[s] moot” (Kozinets 2014, 171), but rather that these positions are actively made to coincide due to processes of “convergent incorporation” (Booth 2015, 103). But again, to see this only as a matter of industrial processes aiming to control informal fan activities means missing the ways that, diachronically, formal-informal interdependencies arise.

Colin Harvey argues that “transmedia memory” can “constitute [...] a conflict between fans who want to remember elements [...] of a franchise's diegesis and the intentions of IP holders who would rather ‘non-remember’ specific elements” (2015, 97). But this conflict can work in more complex ways: in relation to the Whoniverse, it was a dominant section of fandom who sought to “non-remember” and dismiss the discontinuity of the eighth Doctor’s half-human status in the TV Movie (1996), thereby restoring overarching narrative coherence. This fan conflict (with other factions of fandom, devolved transmedia producers and TV producers) was itself recognized and validated in Doctor Who’s canon when show-runner-fans Russell T. Davies and Steven Moffat ignored the Doctor’s contentious semi-humanity in the show’s return, as well as in Paul McGann’s return to the role, in which his Doctor describes himself straightforwardly as a “Time Lord”. Thus, “non-memory” can migrate from fans’ world projecting to the canonical world building carried out by successive production teams, working to exnominating (if not exterminate) inconsistencies that emerged via the creative regeneration or reimagining of the franchise by prior producers. Some auteurist discontinuities are diachronically embraced by fandom and appreciated after the fact (Gallifrey’s radical reinvention in “The Deadly Assassin” in 1976 proved to be one such case), whereas others are consigned to fannish and canonical “non-memory” over time. Rather than “world-sharing” across different production teams and across formal-informal interactions, “producers and communities within media franchising [...] make claims to creative identity [...] In making these claims to creativity, moreover, these producers often pursue textual strategies of difference” (Johnson 2013, 151). But not all such claims, and all such
differences or discontinuities, are carried forward: in some cases, there is in fact a kind of world blocking, as previous creative reinventions are dropped, edited out, and non-remembered. In such cases, fans are not coincident with members of a brand community, as their conflictual “non-memory” can be a way of seeking to deny unwanted canonical twists and developments that are viewed as very much going in “the wrong direction” (Fast 2012, 319).

To conclude, the Whoniverse has been marked by “transmedia discontinuity”, and this is something that persists in its current incarnations. However, such discontinuity—linked to an array of versions of Doctor Who whose canonical status is unclear—means that fans can select which continuities they favor, as well as carry out activities of world projecting in the form of debating textual evidence. Such discontinuity cannot solely be aligned with fan frustrations over “inauthentic” Who—it is rooted in the program’s history, and facilitates fan creativity while condensing together what are otherwise assumed to be different models of transmedia practice. Discontinuity emerges, perhaps unexpectedly, via the work of show-runner-fans, especially Steven Moffat’s shaping of a “fan-cultural novum” that challenges established fan lore in ways aligned with auteurist discourse.

The Whoniverse also needs to be considered diachronically. It has no singular “big bang”; it has coalesced over time, with the Doctor’s home planet first being named as Gallifrey in 1969, despite the program beginning in 1963. Importantly, the Whoniverse has also emerged diachronically as a result of interactions and relations between fandom and official production; as Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman have noted, “transmedia storytelling has been not only a narrative practice but also a social one across a range of historical moments” (Scolari, Bertetti, and Freeman 2014, 75). Fans’ meta-textual world projecting has led to reconfigured world building within Doctor Who’s canon, even down to the naming of the lead character. Fan constructions of a coherent Whoniverse have also been mediated via what Colin Harvey terms “devolved” transmedia storytelling, as well as through strategic “non-memory”, such as the eighth Doctor’s half-human nature latterly being ignored by show-runner-fans.

Although world building may sometimes be assumed to be a matter of (transmedia) narrative integration and coherence, this chapter has argued that vast world building can flourish, over many years, while such criteria aren’t observed. Fans have co-created the Whoniverse in ways that are not merely “controlled” by official producers but are also diachronically recognized within the program’s canon. As such, narratologically separating
out transfictional/transmedia “modifications” of a diegetic world and “expansions” of that world (Ryan 2013, n.p.)—in which the former fracture world building coherence and the latter preserve a singular transmedial world—fails to perceive how fan audiences can themselves manage contradictory textual “modifications” and reconstruct them, over time, as “expansions” of the Whoniverse. Seriality and transmediality are fundamentally interwoven here, with fan practices helping to generate and conserve a transmedial world in the face of serialized textual differences, dissonances, and contradictions (often occurring across different production teams in a very long-running show such as Doctor Who). Hyperdiegesis, I have argued—contra my prior use of the term—is not just a textual attribute inciting fan affects/speculations. Rather, it is the medium and the outcome of Doctor Who fans’ world-projecting activities.

Note


Works Cited


Media Cited


*Dr Who and the Daleks* (1965) dr: Gordon Flemyng, wr: Milton Subotsky (adapted from TV episodes by Terry Nation), AARU Productions.


‘The Deadly Assassin’ (1976 *Doctor Who* story) dr: David Maloney, wr: Robert Holmes, BBC TV.


About the author

Matt Hills is a Professor of Media and Journalism at the University of Huddersfield. He is the author of six books, including *Fan Cultures* (2002) and *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Event* (2015); he is also the editor of *New Dimensions of Doctor Who* (2013). Matt has published widely on cult media and fandom, including articles in *Convergence, Critical Studies in Television, International Journal of Cultural Studies, Journal of Fandom Studies, New Media and Society, New Review of Film & TV Studies, Transformative Works and Cultures*, and *Participations*. 