

Chapter 1: On Canon

The Impossible Game

"I suggest you don't worry about those things and just enjoy yourself. That goes for you all, too."

- Basil Exposition to Austin (and the audience) on time travel,
Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me (1999)

Most people know the etymology of the word *fan*. It comes from *fanatic*—in other words, “a person exhibiting excessive enthusiasm and intense uncritical devotion toward some controversial matter (as in religion or politics)”¹. *Fandom*, as it’s become known in the internet age, is a wide-reaching, overwhelming thing, often with a lot of creative endeavours mixed in. Before everything moved online, fan communities required mailing lists, club meetings and unofficial magazines, but now people all over the world can share fiction, art, fan-films, fan-edits, theories, reviews and news with anyone who wishes to read it.

There’s a lot of talk of “toxic fandom” these days, though. Personally, I steer away from negativity when it comes to things I like. A critical review is one thing—as a writer, I like to see people play with ideas or spell out how they could have been better presented—but back in the days of Tumblr (remember Tumblr?!), I found myself unfollowing anyone who “loved to hate” the things they professed to like. It’s just... draining. Then there’s the concept of *gatekeeping*. That’s when fans claim others aren’t “real fans,” because they haven’t read or watched as much or don’t like a specific thing or—*Heaven forbid!*—they like a new thing more than an old thing!

It might seem that those people go against that definition I shared (“intense uncritical devotion”) but it’s often the case that the most vocal and abrasive fans are intense and uncritical not towards a series, but towards their own understanding of it. We all experience entertainment a little bit differently and when we find a work that we can attach to, we want to contextualize it in our own lives. Sometimes it’s easy to forget that this contextualization—our understanding of a work—is not the whole thing. It’s kind of like Roland Barthes’ “death of the author.” Barthes says an author’s intentions mean nothing once the words have been read. In the same vein, I would say that one reader’s understanding is no more correct than another’s.

There’s another way to be intense and uncritical about a series, though; some of us just pretend it’s all real.

I don’t necessarily mean that there are masses of people out there that believe that Skynet will one day exist or that anyone they talk to *could* actually be Sam Beckett from *Quantum Leap* trying to rewrite their history. I mean there are many fans—myself

¹ “Fanatic”, *Merriam-Webster*, merriam-webster.com (accessed 5 May 2020)

included—that approach fictional worlds as a cohesive whole. The bad installments count just as much as the good ones and any contradictions are not errors in production, but rather mysteries to be solved. The text of a work is a gateway to another dimension. As the Eighth Doctor² said in *The Gallifrey Chronicles*:

'Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character,' Trix pointed out.

The Doctor grinned. 'My dear, one of the things you'll learn is that it's all real. Every word of every novel is real, every frame of every movie, every panel of every comic strip.'

'But that's just not possible. I mean some books contradict other ones and –'

The Doctor was ignoring her.

Actually, Sherlock Holmes might be where this game of pretending *it's all real* started, as Doyle devotees gathered to examine the Sherlock Holmes canon. While they knew Holmes and Watson didn't really exist, they treated the canon as if it were a work of biography, rather than fiction. They called it "The Great Game," and played it by putting the stories in order, writing biographies about Holmes and Watson and attempting to explain away any errors—for instance, the famous problem of Watson's forename: John in one story, James in another.

With only fifty-six short stories and four novels (and over a century of study), you'd think there'd be a single, unified timeline for the series by now, right? After all, the final Sherlock Holmes story was published in 1927. But no, the Holmesians are divided still.

So, if that study of a mere sixty stories is "The Great Game", a similar study of the multimedia mammoth that is *Doctor Who*, consisting of constant releases from 1963 to the present day, might just be "The Impossible Game".

In this book, I will play said game until it is complete or I am forcibly removed from the pitch.

² Yes, this is a book about *Doctor Who* and I am getting to that...

The Other Players

Somewhere, hidden deep within my hard drive, there is a document titled **Doctor Who Checklist.rtf** which I used way back in the year 2012 to chart my progress through the Classic Series of *Doctor Who*. I would bold the ones I had fully watched and underline anything in progress and, over the course of that year, I bolded the lot of them. But you're never really finished *Doctor Who*.

That's a fact I knew before I started. Back in 2011, when a friend of mine told me I should watch it, I said I couldn't do it or I'd end up watching the whole thing, classics and all.

"You don't have to watch the classics!" he protested.

"But I know I would," I replied.

But I knew I would enjoy it. I liked time travel. I liked Christopher Eccleston. I liked strange, campy things. So when I caved, I caved hard. Not just the new series, not just the classics, but the whole expanded universe. After all, I'd enjoyed listening to the narrated soundtracks... so why not check out Big Finish? And everyone loves these novels so much, I should at least read a few of them. Oh, and the comics have a penguin as a companion? Sign me up.

So the checklists couldn't just be lists of series—they had to be in chronological order, so I could see what was next, timeline-wise.

That, I would need help for.

Of course, there isn't one definitive Doctor Who timeline. There are many attempts, by fans around the world, scratching their heads and trying to figure out where to put ***The Infinity Doctors*** on their bookshelf.³

Probably the first one I found was the website managed by Andrew Kearley, also known as Eyespider. He has a great big colour coded timeline, with annotations for the tricky bits, and I copied large chunks of said timeline wholesale at first. Kearley still updates today and has great creative ideas about how to fit things together when they seem complicated—some of them will show up within these volumes and will be credited as such!

But I also found other sources that say different things, either theorizing differently or pointing out facts that other timeline creators might have missed. And ultimately, as I read and absorbed different ideas, different orders—and made my own discoveries through reading, listening and rewatching *Who* myself, I ended up with something that was not a direct copy of anyone, but my own timeline.

However, it would be remiss of me not to mention every other person who has come before (and many who are still going), theorizing and piecing together... the other players in the Impossible Game:

- Tim Bradley ([link](#))

³ I'm afraid you'll have to wait quite a few chapters for my answer to that question!

- The Divergent Wordsmiths (link)
- Andrew Kearley (link)
- (drwhoguide.com)
- (The Discontinuity Guide)
- The TARDIS Wiki Timeline Pages
- The TARDIS Wiki Articles (which are usually *completely* different)
- Lance Parkin (aHistory)
- David Banks
- John Peel
- Gary Russell
- & so many others that I apologize profusely for forgetting

So, if so many people have come before, you might ask...

Why Bother?

Well, it boils down to three reasons:

1. **Fun**
2. **Ego**
3. **Effort justification**

First off, it's a game, as I said above, even if it is essentially one without an ending—but that doesn't stop people from playing Tetris, does it? Although, even that has a high score... What's an even more pointless game? Fantasy football, maybe? Nobody *really* wins in fantasy football.

Secondly, I want to offer my own opinion on a few things and pack all that info into a neat little box for people to read it all. Even if there are a million other timelines and guides out there, this one's mine⁴. I've tried to make this book—in its many volumes—something unique. It's a celebration of the Doctor Who multiverse and all its oddities from a singular perspective.

And thirdly, *good golly gosh* have I spent a lot of time on this! Having spent countless hours over several years tweaking and fine-tuning this monstrosity, I would be doing myself a disservice to keep it hidden away.

⁴ Although, as we get into the rules I use (in Chapter ??), you'll see that the method I used to make this guide/timeline is very simple, and it could be kept up by anyone!