

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...