“Too Broad and Deep for the Small Screen”: Doctor Who's New Adventures in the 1990s

Abstract

Introduction: Doctor Who's “Wilderness Years”

1989 saw the cancellation of the BBC's long-running science fiction television series Doctor Who (1965 -). The 1990s were largely bereft of original Doctor Who television content, leading fans to characterise that decade as the “wilderness years” for the franchise (McNaughton 194). From another perspective, though, the 1990s was an unprecedented time of production for Doctor Who media. From 1991 to 1997, Virgin Publishing was licensed by the BBC’s merchandising division to publish a series of original Doctor Who novels, which they produced and marketed as a continuation of the television series (Gulyas 46). This series of novels, Doctor Who: The New Adventures (commonly referred to as “the Virgin New Adventures” by fans) proved popular enough to support a monthly release schedule, and from 1994 onwards, a secondary "Missing Adventures" series.

Despite their central role in the 1990s, however, many fans have argued that the Doctor Who novels format makes them either less "canonical" than the television series, or completely "apocryphal" (Gulyas 48). This fits with a general trend in transmedia properties, where print-based expansions or spin-offs are generally considered less official or authentic than those that are screen-based (Hills 223). This article argues that the openness of the series to contributions from fan writers -- and also some of the techniques and approaches prioritised in fan fiction - resulted in the Virgin range of Doctor Who novels having an unusually significant impact on the development and evolution of the franchise as a whole when compared to the print-based transmedia extensions of other popular series’. The article also argues that the tonal and stylistic influence of the New Adventures novels on the revived Doctor Who television series offers an interesting counter-example to the usually strict hierarchies of content that are implied in Henry Jenkins’s influential model of transmedia storytelling.

Transmedia Storytelling
Jenkins uses the term “transmedia storytelling” to describe the ways in which media franchises frequently expand beyond the format they originate with, potentially encompassing television series, films, games, toys, comics and more (Jenkins “Transmedia 202”). In discussing this paradigm, Jenkins notes the ways in which contemporary productions increasingly prioritise “integration and coordination” between the different forms of media (Jenkins Convergence Culture 105). As Jenkins argues, “most discussions of transmedia place a high emphasis on continuity – assuming that transmedia requires a high level of coordination and creative control and that all of the pieces have to cohere into a consistent narrative or world” (Jenkins “Transmedia 202”).

Due to this increased emphasis on continuity, the ability to decide which media will be considered as “canonical” within the story-world of the franchise becomes an important one. Where previously questions of canon had been largely confined to fan discussions, debates and interpretive readings of media texts (Jenkins Textual Poachers 102-104), the proprietors of franchises in a transmedia economy have an interest in proactively defining and policing the canon. Designating a particular piece of media as a “canonical” expansion or spinoff of its parent text can be a useful marketing tool, as it creates the expectation that it will provide an important contribution. Correspondingly, declaring that a particular set of media texts is no longer canonical can make the franchise more accessible and allow the authors of new material more creative freedom (Proctor and Freeman 238-9).

While Jenkins argues that a reliance on “one single source or ur-text” (“Transmedia 101”) is counter to the spirit of transmedia storytelling, Pillai notes that his emphasis on cohesiveness across diverse media tends to implicitly prioritise the parent text over its various offshoots (103-4). As the parent text establishes continuity and canon, any transmedia supplements are obligated to remain consistent with it, but this is often a one-sided and hierarchical relationship. For example, in the Star Wars transmedia franchise, the film series is considered crucial in establishing the canon; and transmedia supplements are obliged to remain consistent with it in order to be recognised as authentic. The filmmakers, however, are largely free to ignore or contradict the contributions of spin-off books.

Hills notes that the components of transmedia franchises are often arranged into “transmedial hierarchies” (223), where screen-based media like films, television series and video games are assigned dominance over print-based productions like comics and novels. This hierarchy means that print-based works typically have a less secure place within the canon of transmedia franchises, despite often contributing a disproportionately large quantity of narratives and concepts (Guynes 143). Using the Star Wars Expanded Universe as an example, he notes a tendency whereby “franchise novels” are generally considered as disposable, and are easily erased or decanonised despite significantly long, carefully interwoven and coordinated periods of storytelling (143-5).

**Doctor Who as a Transmedia Franchise**

While questions of canon are frequently debated and discussed among Doctor Who fans, it is less easy to make absolutist distinctions between canonical and apocryphal texts in Doctor Who than it is in other popular transmedia franchises. Unlike comparable
transmedia productions, *Doctor Who* has traditionally lacked a singular authority over questions of canon and consistency in the manner that Jenkins argues for in his implicitly hierarchical conception of transmedia storytelling (*Convergence Culture* 106). Where franchises like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* or *The X-Files* have been guided by creator-figures who either exert direct control over their various iterations or oblige them to remain broadly consistent with their original vision, *Doctor Who* has generally avoided this focus; creative control has passed between various showrunners and production teams, who have been largely free to establish their own style and tone.

Furthermore, the franchise has traditionally favoured a largely self-contained and episodic style of storytelling; and different storylines and periods from its long history often contradict one another. For these reasons, Booth suggests that the largely retroactive attempts on the part of fans and critics to read the entire series as the type of transmedia production that Jenkins advocates for (i.e. an internally consistent narrative of connected stories) are counter-productive. He argues that *Doctor Who* is perhaps best understood not as a continuing series but as a long-running anthology, where largely autonomous stories and serials can be grouped into distinct “periods” of resemblance in terms of style and subject matter (198-206).

As Britton argues, when appreciating *Doctor Who* as franchise, there is no particular need to assign primary importance to the parent media. Since its first season in 1965, the *Doctor Who* television series has been regularly supplemented by other media in the form of comics, annuals, films, stage-plays, audio-dramas, and novelisations. Britton maintains that as the transmedia works follow the same loosely connected, episodic structure as the television series, they operate as equally valid or equally disposable components within its metanarrative (1-9). *Doctor Who* writer Paul Cornell argues that given the accommodating nature of the show’s time-travel premise (which can easily accommodate the inconsistencies that Jenkins argues should be avoided in transmedia storytelling), and in the absence of a singular revered creator-figure or authority, absolutist pronouncements on canon from any source are unnecessary and exclusionary, either delegitimising texts that the audience may value, or insisting on familiarity with a particular text in order for an experience of the media to be considered “legitimate”.

### The Transmedia Legacy of the Virgin New Adventures

As the Virgin *Doctor Who* novels are not necessarily diminished by either their lack of a clear canonical status or their placement as a print work within a screen-focused property, they can arguably be understood as constituting their own distinct “period” of *Doctor Who* in the manner defined by Booth. This claim is supported by the ways in which the New Adventures distinguish themselves from the typically secondary or supplemental transmedia extensions of most other television franchises.

In contrast with the one-sided and hierarchical relationship that typically exists between the parent text and its transmedia extensions (Pillai 103-4), the New Adventures range did not attempt to signal their authenticity through stylistic and narrative consistency with their source material. Virgin had already published a long series of novelisations of story serials from the original television series under its children’s imprint, Target, but from their
inception the New Adventures were aimed at a more mature audience. The editor of the range, Peter Darvill-Evans, observed that by the 1990s, Doctor Who’s dedicated fan base largely consisted of adults who had grown up with the series in the 1970s and 1980s rather than the children that both the television series and the novelisations had traditionally targeted (Perryman 23). The New Adventures were initially marketed as being “too broad and deep for the small screen” (Gulyas 46), positioning them as an improvement or evolution rather than an attempt to imitate the parent media or to compensate for its absence.

By comparison, most other 1990s print-based supplements to popular screen franchises tended to closely mimic the style, tone and storytelling structure of their source material. For example, the Star Wars “Expanded Universe” series of novels (which began in 1991) were subject to strict editorial oversight to ensure they remained consistent with the films and were initially marketed as “film-like events” as a way of emphasising their equivalence to the original media (Proctor and Freeman 226). The Virgin New Adventures were also distinctive due to their open submission policy (which actively encouraged submissions from fan writers who had not previously achieved conventional commercial publication) alongside work from “professional” authors (Perryman 24). This policy began because Darvill-Evans noted the ability, high motivation and deep understanding of Doctor Who possessed by fan writers (Bishop) and it proved essential in establishing the more mature approach that the series was aiming for. After three indifferently received novels from professional authors, the first work from a fan author, Paul Cornell’s Timewyrm: Revelation (1991) became highly popular, due to its more grounded, serious and complex exploration of the character of the Doctor and their human companion. Following the success of Cornell’s novel, the series began to establish its own distinctive tone, emphasising gritty urban settings, character development and interpersonal drama, and the exploration of moral ambiguities and social and political issues that would have not been permissible in the original television series (Gulyas 46-8).

Works by previously unpublished fan authors came to dominate the range to such an extent that the New Adventures has been described as “licensing professionally produced fan fiction” (Perryman 23). This trajectory established the New Adventures as an unusual hybrid text, combining the sanction of an official license with the usually unofficial phenomenon of fan custodianship. The cancellation of a television series (as experienced by Doctor Who in 1989) often allows its fan community to take custodianship of it in a variety of ways (McNoughton 194). While a series is being broadcast, fans are often constructed as elite but essentially “powerless” readers, whose interpretations and desires can easily be contradicted or ignored by the series creators (Tulloch and Jenkins 141). With cancellation and a diminishing mass audience, fans become the custodians of the series and its memory. Their interpretations can no longer be overwritten, and they become the principle market for official merchandise and transmedia extensions (McNoughton 194-6).

Also, fans can explore and fulfil their desires for the narrative direction and tone of the series, through the “cottage industries” of fan-created merchandise (196) and “gift economies” of fan fiction (Flegal and Roth 258), without being impeded or overruled by official developments in the parent media. This movement towards fan custodianship and production became more visible during the 1990s, as digital technology allowed for rapid
communication, connection and exchange (Coppa 53). The Virgin New Adventures range arguably operated as a meeting point between officially sanctioned commercial spin-off media and the fan-centric industries of production that work to prolong the life and memory of a cancelled television series. Indeed, the direct inclusion of fan authors and the techniques and approaches associated with fan fiction likely helped to establish the deeper, more mature interpretation of *Doctor Who* offered by the New Adventures.

As Stein and Busse observe, a recurring feature of fan fiction has been a focus on exploring the inner lives of the characters from its source media, and adding depth and complexity to their relationships (196-8). Furthermore, the successful New Adventures fan authors tended to offer support and encouragement to each other via their informal networks, which affected the development of the series as a transmedia production (Perryman 24). Flegal and Roth note that in contrast to often solitary and individualistic forms of “professional” and “literary” writing, the composition of fan fiction emerges out of collegial, supportive and reciprocal communities (265-8). The meeting point that the Virgin New Adventures provided between professional writing practice and the attitudes and approaches common to the types of fan fiction that were becoming more prominent in the nineties (Coppa 53-5) helped to shape the evolution of *Doctor Who* as a franchise.

Where previous *Doctor Who* stories (regardless of the media or medium) had been largely isolated from each other, the informal fan networks that connected the New Adventures authors allowed and encouraged them to collaborate more closely, ensuring consistency between the instalments and plotting out multi-volume story-arcs and character development. Where the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe series of novels ensured consistency through extensive and often intrusive top-down editorial control (Proctor and Freeman 226-7), the New Adventures developed this consistency through horizontal relationships between authors. While *Doctor Who* has always been a transmedia franchise, the Virgin New Adventures may be the first point where it began to fully engage with the possibilities of the coordinated and consistent transmedia storytelling discussed by Jenkins (Perryman 24-6). It is notable that this largely developed out of the collaborative and reciprocal relationships common to communities of fan-creators rather than through the singular and centralised control that Jenkins advocates.

While the Virgin range of *Doctor Who* novels ended long before the revival of the television series in 2005, its influence on the style, tone and subject matter of the new series has been noted. As Perryman argues, the emphasis on more cohesive story-arcs and character development between episodes has been inherited from the New Adventures (24). The 2005 series also followed the Virgin novels in presenting the Doctor’s companions with detailed backgrounds and having their relationships shift and evolve, rather than remaining static like they did in the original series. The more distinctly urban focus of the new series was also likely shaped by the success of the New Adventures (Haslop 217); its well-publicised emphasis on inclusiveness and diversity was likewise prefigured by the Virgin novels, which were the first *Doctor Who* media to include non-Anglo and LGBTQ companions (McKee “How to tell the difference” 181-2). It is highly unusual for a print-based transmedia extension to have this level of impact. Indeed, one of the most visible and profitable transmedia initiatives that began in the 1990s, the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe novels (which like the New Adventures was presented as an officially sanctioned
continuation of the original media), was unceremoniously decanonised in 2014, and the interpretations of Star Wars characters and themes that it had developed over more than a decade of storytelling were almost entirely disregarded by the new films (Proctor and Freeman 235-7). The comparably large influence that the New Adventures had on the development of its franchise indicates the success of its fan-centric approach in developing a more relationship-driven and character-focused interpretation of its parent media.

The influence of the New Adventures is also felt more directly through the continuing careers of its authors. A number of the fan writers who achieved their first commercial publication with the New Adventures (e.g. Paul Cornell, Gareth Roberts, Mark Gatiss) went on to write scripts for the new series. The first showrunner, Russell T. Davies, was the author of the later novels, Damaged Goods (1997), and the second, Steven Moffat, had been an active member of Doctor Who fan communities that discussed and promoted the Virgin books (Bishop). As the former New Adventures author Kate Orman notes, this movement from writing usually secondary franchise novels to working on and having authority over the parent media is almost unheard of (McKee “Interview with Kate Orman” 138), and speaks to the success of the combination of fan authorship and official licensing and support found in the New Adventures. As Hadas notes, the chief difference between the new series of Doctor Who and its classic version is that former and long-term fans of the series are now directly involved in its production, thus complicating Tullouch and Jenkin's assessment of Doctor Who fans as a “powerless elite” (141).

**Conclusion**

The continuing influence of the nineties New Adventures novels can still be detected in the contemporary series. These novels operate with regard to the themes, preoccupations and styles of storytelling that this range pioneered within the Doctor Who franchise, and which developed directly out of its innovative and unusual strategy of giving official sanction and editorial support to typically obscured and subcultural modes of fan writing. The reductive and exclusionary question of canon can be avoided when considering the above novels. These transmedia productions are important to the evolution and development of the media franchise as a whole. In this respect, the Virgin New Adventures operate as their own distinctive, legitimate and influential "period" within Doctor Who, demonstrating the creative potential of an approach to transmedia storytelling that deemphasises strict hierarchies of content and control and can readily include the contributions of fan producers.

**References**

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