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# Fan Self-Identity in the *Doctor Who* Universe

Lyndsey Johnson

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the  
Department of Communication at Trinity University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation  
with departmental honors.

April 20, 2012

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Fan Self-Identity in the *Doctor Who* Universe

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Honors Thesis

Department of Communication

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Trinity University

San Antonio, Texas

*Submitted April 20, 2012*

## Fan Self-Identity in the *Doctor Who* Universe

### **Introduction**

There's nothing like walking alone into a gathering of thousands of *Doctor Who* fans. My palms were sweaty with nervousness, my body aching from lugging around pounds of equipment, and my head constantly whirring with excitement and fear all at the same time. After I had walked into the *Gallifrey One* convention, my emotions never seemed to diminish for three days. I was still anxious from the plane ride and jarred from the time difference, but once I saw a real live Dalek rolling along the carpet, I knew that it was going to be a magical weekend despite the worries in my head.

The study of fans and their involvement within specific fan communities has been growing throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and continues to be an area of interest in academic circles. More contemporary methods of research, such as documentary and ethnography, allow researchers to observe fans more interactively in real time and can offer critical dimensions towards key findings and conclusions. This thesis aims to construct an identity of fans as they view themselves within the *Doctor Who* fandom through use of a video ethnography.

### **The History of Doctor Who**

The BBC fantasy drama, *Doctor Who*, chronicles the Doctor as a heroic, enigmatic and eccentric nine-hundred year old humanoid alien, with two beating hearts who travels through space as well as time in a "multidimensional machine disguised as a 1920s British police telephone box" (Charles, 2011, p.1) otherwise known as his Time and Relative in Space, or

TARDIS, spacecraft (Chen, 2008; Hills, 2008; McKee, 2001). The Doctor, who is usually accompanied by a young attractive female companion, has also been seen with a mechanical dog (Chen, 2008; Hills, 2008). The Doctor is from an alien population called the Time Lords who have the ability of corporeal regeneration. He can change his physical appearance and personality, but remains the same inner self (Charles, 2011; Chen, 2008; Hills, 2008). Regeneration usually occurs when a Time Lord is about to die. For example, if the Doctor receives a serious gunshot wound, he could choose to die permanently or he could regenerate into another form. This clever ploy allows the series to continue on many years, with the Doctor being portrayed by multiple actors (Hills, 2008).

The show chronicles the adventures of The Doctor in the past, present, and future with a wide array of settings, plots, and characters. *Doctor Who* originally was “a show designed for children, which nevertheless attracted an unexpectedly adult audience” (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, p. 110). The initial writers were inspired by stories such as *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, and the *Quatermass and the Pit*, a science fiction serial written by Nigel Kneale. While Wells supplies the time travel, Kneale’s inspiration comes in the form of the “use of familiar setting in the present, its distrust of bureaucracy and the military mind, its tracing of anxieties from the recent past into Earth’s prehistory, and its conflation of science and the supernatural” (Leach, 2009, p. 3).

The show also evokes an “uncanny” feeling. There is a sense that aspects of the storyline are familiar, yet unfamiliar; “it is that which is deeply familiar but which we have subconsciously attempted to conceal from conscious recognition” (Charles, 2001, p. 3). In this sense, *Doctor Who* plays with our minds by utilizing things that we already know but which we are not yet aware that we know. This play on the mind achieves an “uncompromisingly horrific

effect” that seems to have captivated audiences (Charles, 2001, p. 16). All of these aspects sewn together have created an international phenomenon aired in about fifty different countries and seen by millions of *Doctor Who* fans (Leach, 2009).

The epic that is *Doctor Who* started on November 3, 1963, the day after John F. Kennedy was assassinated (Leach, 2009; McKee, 2001). The airing was the first show on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and evoked a new experience of space and time made possible by modern communication technology (Leach, 2009). This science fiction series that first started out as filler in the BBC schedule would become the longest-running sci-fi series in television history (Leach, 2009). The original *Doctor Who* series ran for 26 years, with 26 seasons, 159 televised stories, and seven Doctors (McKee, 2001). By June 1985 “it was being seen in 146 American markets, covering 70% of the country” (Howe, Stammers, and Walker, 1993, p. 235). Despite the cancellation of the show in 1989 ending with the seventh Doctor, fans still remained active within this much-loved series. Fans migrated to conventions, started their own Internet sites, and also produced thousands of pieces of fan fiction. Magazines and books were created that continued where the last episode left off and opinions from fans were integrated into both of these texts. Most just wanted the story to continue. The Doctor reappeared “in a series of audio dramas beginning in 1999,” (Leach, 2009, p.86) and the BBC also “experimented with Web-based stories” based on the *Doctor Who* characters (McKee, 2001, p. 9). Producers even created an eighth Doctor movie released for television in 1996 (intended to be a new series pilot). However, the movie was not as widely appreciated as hoped in the United States, even though it was well received in the United Kingdom. This setback kept the series from being relaunched at that time (Charles, 2001; McKee, 2001).

Finally, after immense pressure from fans and consistent nagging, Russell T. Davies rejuvenated the show in 2005 starting with the ninth Doctor. The new series experienced great popularity, but also mixed emotions from fans (Charles, 2001; Hoskin, 2011). Some doubted the updated reworking from the original series, while others embraced the new departure (Leach, 2009). The monsters were more believable thanks to higher budgets and computer technology, the media environment was completely different with fans reacting to a wider use of the Internet, the new Doctor was less “smock-coated,” and yet most of the *Doctor Who* formula remained the same (Chen, 2008). Davies kept the concept of “harnessing ordinary characters to high-concept storylines” while also “emphasizing the thrills and fun... determined to plug it directly into mainstream culture” (Hoskin, 2001; p. 131). The Doctor still came up against desperate situations, and continued to “resolve them with humor and ingenuity” (Leach, 2009, p. 91). A huge difference between the original and rejuvenated series was the frenetic pace. Davies explained his method as “fun, fast-paced,” and one that “takes viewers on a rollercoaster-ride” (Leach, 2009, p. 91). The new series was very different from the slower storylines that evolved week after week throughout the older series. The new show was linked by cliffhangers and usually finished a story within a forty-five minute time-frame as opposed to the original series’ length at about 25 minutes (Leach, 2009; Chen 2008). Each show now has previews at the end used to “sustain viewer interest” and keep the audience guessing what might happen next. Another big difference is “the future and the past seem to be more clearly defined,” Leach, 2009, p. 92) in the new series as it adapts to a different culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. After the fourth season of the reboot with the highly eccentric David Tennant as The Doctor, Steven Moffat took over Davies’ spot as lead writer. Moffat wrote “scarier, more imaginative and plotted episodes with far greater rigour” (Hoskin, 2001, p. 131). This seemed to bring audiences back into the

stories, for some fans started to become a “little disenchanted” with the level of monotonous and predictable narratives of the Tenth Doctor (Hoskin, 2011, p. 131). Despite this “rigour-booster” by Moffat, the show still remains funny, reliant on high-concept ideas, and filled with wit (Hoskin, 2001, p. 131).

Even though *Doctor Who* is a British institution, the show has been highly acclaimed in the states, though primarily to “geeks” (Chen, 2008). Some audiences view the show as a “bargain warehouse of hopped up science fantasy” or a “hokey blockbuster, cornball yet also generously weird,” but nevertheless, the show remains successful (Chen, 2008, p. 52).

Out of its pulp science fiction conventions, the *Doctor Who* series has also created successful spin-off shows. One is *Torchwood*, featuring “sexually ambiguous” Captain Jack Harkness, who was first seen in the ninth Doctor storyline. The show follows Captain Jack as the head of the Torchwood Institute (an anagram of *Doctor Who*) “set up to protect the Earth from alien forces by Queen Victoria” (Leach, 2009, p. 94). Other shows such as *School Reunion* (2006) and *The Sarah Jane Adventures* include the third Doctor’s companion, Sarah Jane Smith, along with the mechanical dog K-9, and their own experiences after the Doctor. Continuing in the spirit of devoted fans during *Doctor Who*’s absence, BBC is continued releasing DVDs of the original series, as well as publishing novels of the “further adventures” of the new Doctors and their companions (Leach, 2009, p. 94).

### **Audience Research**

Fan studies began in earnest as a research topic in the 1990’s propelled by Dr. Henry Jenkins, but the analysis of audiences has been an active area of research in the field of communication for many decades on two separate tracks, one in America and the other in the



United Kingdom. David Morley, writer for *The Museum of Broadcast Communications*, stated in his history of audience research that these separate research paths resulted in two separate perspectives of audience research, with both having speculations about “protecting” the audience “from the potential effects of the message” (Morley, para. 1).

One of the first perspectives in effects studies on audiences was the “hypodermic needle” model, where media seem to have the power to inject audiences with a particular message and to cause them to believe certain information or behave in a particular fashion. Media were viewed as breaking down “traditional values” and left the audience more susceptible to the “pressure of mass propaganda” (Morley, para. 2). Researchers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were the most influential researchers on the hypodermic needle theory, along with the Frankfurt School of Social Research in the 1930s. During this time, they conducted researching regarding a breakdown of modern Germany into fascism and found that the “hypodermic model had power to inject a repressive ideology directly into the consciousness of the masses” (Morely, para. 2)

The Frankfurt School traveled over to the Americas in the 1930s, which then helped develop the American schools of communication research during the following decades. The American perspectives viewed the hypodermic needle theory as a “pessimistic” view on mass society, and many researchers in the United States argued that it was “too direct and unmediated an impact by the media on its audiences” (Morley, para. 3). American researchers believed that the American society was “pluralistic in nature” and that media effects were “neither all-powerful, simple, nor even necessarily direct” (Morley, para. 3). Audience research consequentially got its big start in American communication studies as a reaction to the Frankfurt “critical social theory and qualitative and philosophical analysis” with researchers Elihu Katz, Herta Herzog, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Robert Merton who were grounded in social science and

quantitative research. The goal of these researchers throughout the 1950s and 1960s was to “produce a more qualified notion of ‘media power’” (Morley, para. 4). This perspective resulted in audiences and media consumers being viewed not simply as passive victims, but more like a communities. Some of the major achievements by the American researchers during this time were Merton’s *Mass Persuasion* and Katz and Lazarsfeld’s *Personal Influence* which suggested “possibilities for convergence, or at least productive dialogue... as researchers collectively see to understand how... people can... engage with media...” (Livingstone, 2006, p. 233). There was also the development of the “two step flow” communication by Katz and Lazarsfeld (Livingstone, 2006), where “the influence of the media was seen as crucially mediated by ‘gatekeepers’ and ‘opinion leaders’ within the audience community” (Morely, para. 5).

Audience research continued to grow in the 1970s, and created a new perspective of media consumption with the Uses and Gratifications approach, largely associated with Katz and Jay Blumler (Millington & Wilson, 2010). With this approach in audience study, the viewer now took on an active role within media consumption, which raised the question: what are audiences doing with media? This catalyst moved audience debates forward since the research now involved looking at particular television programs or other forms of media and how an audience member engages with it. This perspective was, however, very limited due to the fact that researchers looked at individual engagements as opposed to mass audience reactions. This led to an overwhelming number of different responses and interpretations, which were ultimately affected by individual personalities and experiences. There were different needs that a person could have, as well as different combinations of media such as characteristic contents, typical attributes, and typical exposure situations that provided needed gratification for the individuals.

Pioneers in the United Kingdom, such as Stuart Hall, studied different forms of audiences to further push the Uses and Gratifications theory in attempt to understand the way audiences receive, interpret, and respond to the media in everyday life (Livingstone, 2006; Hagen & Wasko, 2000; Hall, 1973). Hall was among researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies who approached communication studies from a critical, Marxist perspective. Hall took the notion from effects theorists, such as Parkin and his political meaning systems, and proposed a model as a “semiotic alternative to the more linear communication model (sender-message-receiver) underlying the dominant traditions of audience research (Hagen & Walsh, 2000, p.6). The Uses and Gratification theory was also used by Hall with the idea of the active viewer who “creates a meaning from the signs and symbols the media provides” (Morley, para. 7). What came from Hall’s research was the notion of encoding/decoding and how audiences will have a “passage of forms,” or transform “raw” events into different representations (Millington & Wilson, 2010; Hagen & Wasko, 2000; Hall, 1973). Audiences take the concept of transforming a story (encoding) into signs and then will decode a message to understand the story.

However, Hall went deeper into the mind of audience member to find that most people will see these symbols as reality, instead of just a representation. It is the appearance of words or visual stimuli that make audiences decode messages as real and literal as opposed to representations of ideas or stories (Hall, 1973). Audiences can perceive television programming, movies, the medium, or the content as a *real* entity and become so wrapped up in the stories and representations that they have socially constructed it to be real instead of decoded to be arbitrary. Hall also found within his study that the same event could be encoded in more than one way:

messages always contain more than one potential ‘reading.’ Messages propose

and ‘prefer’ certain readings over others, but they can never become wholly closed around one reading; they remain polysemic. Understanding the message is also a problematic practice, however transparent and ‘natural’ it may seem. Messages encoded one way can always be decoded in a different way. (Morley, para. 7)

There are means that producers of media use to create a “preferred” reading of their message, and audience research was redirected to find the “extent to which decodings take place within the limits of the preferred or dominant manner in which the messages had been initially encoded” (Morely, para.9). In other words, Hall was asking through his model what was the preferred message, how are producers navigating audiences to that message, and are audiences decoding the messages to receive the preferred message? If not, what are the factors that lead them to an alternate message?

Parallel to Hall’s research in the 1970s was a growing influence of feminism, anthropological studies, and cultural studies on communication studies and rising interest in psychoanalytic theory (Livingstone, 2010). These directions in audience research started to “give the audience a voice, and opened the way to a sea change in the wider critical analysis of media power” (Livingstone, 2010, p. 567). In this context, Michel Foucault began breaking down audiences into categories, or subgroups, such as “homosexual, woman, race, and the worker” (Butsch, 2003, p. 17). These themes of subcultures and specific representational studies on minorities has influenced contemporary cultural practices, and has paved the way for more specific research such as fan studies within audience research (Hagen & Wasko, 2000).

It is Hall’s encoding/decoding model that continues to heavily influence audience research today (Hagen & Wasko, 2000). The study of audiences hit a huge stride in the 1980s and 1990s with analysis of media consumption and a closer look at the audiences themselves.

Notable examples are David Morely's (1980) study of *The "Nationwide" Audience* which integrated Hall's encoding/decoding model with a focus on culture, Radway's (1984) study of readers of romance fiction and her "exploration of the contexts in which media is consumed," Fiske's (1987) study of television culture, James Lull's (1990) "ethnographic investigation into the ways television viewing structures family life," Jhally and Lewis' (1992) studies of American audiences for *The Cosby Show*, and the work of Henry Jenkins (1992) as it pertains to the study of the science fiction fandom subculture. These cultural and ethnographic studies continued to grow throughout the 80s and 90s with research focusing on the domestic context of television's reception within the household. This research used ethnographic methods and focused on gender differences, television viewing habits, and characteristics within the household. Such cultural and reception studies implemented ethnographic methodologies to view audiences, more than likely a subculture, in their "natural environment" (Hagen & Wasko, 2000).

Throughout the latter 1990s and 2000s, scholars focused on "empirical audiences" and examined media culture (Bratich, 2005). Fandom research was becoming more accepted as academic study with work from Henry Jenkins concerning the *Star Trek* and science fiction fandoms, and Matt Hills (2004), who analyzes varied fan cultures (Hermes, 2009). With continued efforts to integrate fan activity and technology, scholars such as Mark Andrejevic researched the Uses and Gratifications theory applied to the productivity of online fans. Andrejevic was interested in "exploring the way in which online viewer activity doubles as a form of value-enhancing labor for television producers..." and attempted to look into both sides of interactivity of viewers and producers (Andrejevic, 2008). This research was able to look into the motivations and personalities of those who are active audiences, and also to approach the study from the perspective of critical theory as well as cultural studies. In this aspect,

Andrejevic's research combined both the economics of Hall's model, and the Uses and Gratifications theory. There is a sense of enjoyment coming from audiences when they are active and they get something out of what they create, whether it be a blog, art, or conversations that arise from whatever it is they are active in. This fan enjoyment is essentially the finding within uses and gratifications research.

Audiences want to be "entertained, informed, well-read, and involved" (Andrejevic, 2008). Media or their content was no longer the final product, but rather the "raw material to which value is added by the labor" (Andrejevic, 2008). Audience research revealed that audiences are being active and being involved in order to satisfy some sort of need or to receive gratification for their hard work.

### **Fans and Fandom**

Many researchers have studied fan communities that optimize the use of online space to collaborate in decoding and transforming adored media texts (Jenkins, 1992). As the area of fan study evolved, researchers found significant understandings "about participatory culture's characteristics and origins (Jenkins, 1992). Scholars found from case studies and ethnographic research that "participatory cultures are characterized by commitment to access, expression, sharing, mentorship, the need to make a difference, and the desire for social connections" (Jenkins, 1992).

### *Fans as Active Producers*

In his highly acclaimed book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Cultures*, Henry Jenkins outlined different types of participatory groups; fans, poachers, and

nomads (Jenkins, 1992). Jenkins categorized fans as “active consumers” of media products who “construct their own cultures and subcultures from popular culture” (Meyer, 2007, p. 103). In other words, Jenkins viewed fans not as “cultural dupes” but as a subject of “legitimate scholarship” that should be studied within audience research. As Jenkins described, fans are those who interact with the text, textual poachers are those who borrow from others to make new media, and nomads float between fandoms and are adaptable to different communities (Jenkins, 1992). It is through these three subcultures of fandom that scholars interpret participation, stereotypes, and the gratifications fans get out of a specific fandom. Fan research has expanded our understanding of fandom, or the “interrelationships between humans and media” whether the relationships are between film, television, video games, or the Internet.

There have been many contemporary views on fans. Scholar Matt Hills (2002) has analyzed fandom as a cult or a type of religion, Joli Jenson (1992) views fandom as pathology, and Pierre Lévy (1994) categorizes fans as a form of collective intelligence, working together to share individual intelligence through collaboration. Another viewpoint of fan study is Lewis Hyde’s anthropological study of fandoms found they constituted as an “alternative regime to capitalism,” or a gift economy (Pearson, 2010, p. 87). The community-building, or collective body, within a fandom will “drive the gift economy with fan giving, receiving, and reciprocating which results in the creation of fan social networks” and collaboration (Pearson, 2010, p.87).

Fans have been stereotyped as misfits, unbalanced, obsessive, childish, unromantic, not “normal,” easily manipulated and distracted, or cultish (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Jenson, 1992). Although these aspects can describe some fans, they are not adequate descriptions for all fan communities (Jenkins, 1992; Grossberg, 1992). These are negative connotations that researchers, people not involved in a fandom, or fans from opposing fandoms

may use as descriptors. The reality is that fans are curious, meaning makers, identity constructors, a collective intelligence, an active audience, and textual poachers (Murray, 2004; Coppa, 2006; Jenkins, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Meyer and Tucker, 2007; Shefrin, 2004; Jenkins, 2002; Hills, 2002). For these fans, fandom is a way of life; they constantly read and reread canonical material to find some sort of connection with the community and fulfill their needs and desires (Coppa, 2006; Grossberg, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2002).

### *Fans as Consumers/Used by Corporations*

Fans comprise the ultimate participatory culture and they use technology such as the Internet and pop culture to create communities and identities. Fans were the early adopters of digital technologies and these technologies helped them breach the communication gap between others that are also involved in the fandom (Jenkins, 2002). This Internet activity has allowed fans to pool their community knowledge and create many different off shoots of canon material (Pearson, 2010; Jenkins, 2002; Shefrin, 2004). With the help of new technological tools, fans have become more effective as consumers and producers, affecting the economics of pop culture (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 2002; Murray, 2004; Coppa, 2006).

One of the first theories of fan culture was established by Michel de Certeau (1984), which focused on the everyday subversion (Murray, 2004). This style of “theoretical framing” has been reworked primarily by scholars John Fiske and Henry Jenkins to apply concepts such as “collective intelligence” to the complex changes within fan behavior, gratification, and fan interaction with the economic values of a fandom (Murray, 2004; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Meyer and Tucker, 2007). There are specific fans that are savvy enough to talk directly to producers of television show or movies, such as *Doctor Who* fans, and they will actually affect



the film market because of their relationship with media conglomerates (Murray, 2004). Companies will use fans to create buzz or they take advantage of their collective knowledge and dedication towards a canon and use it for publicity (Murray, 2004, Jenkins, 2002). This aspect of fans has changed from relegated fandom to the status of pathology, “characterizing fans as slavish adherents to the whims of media producers” (Murray, 2004; Jenson, 1992). Companies wanting economic gain use fans by exploiting their dedication towards a specific fandom, but there are producers such as Joss Wheedon and Peter Jackson who genuinely value the fans’ opinion (Murray, 2004; Jenkins, 2002).

### **Doctor Who Fans and Fandom**

#### *The Phenomenon of Doctor Who Fans*

Along with the Science Fiction series *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who* is one of the only series to have survived cancellation and re-emerged as an updated show. It continues to attract a huge number of fans and followers (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995). To date, the Doctor has appeared as twelve incarnations and has spanned fifty years of canonical texts and fans. The current wave of fans, known as the third wave, has been seen as “much less didactic than earlier fans, less elitist, more pluralistic and tolerant” (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995, p. xi). The fans seem to be more diverse and able to laugh at themselves as opposed to the earlier more scrutinized science fiction fans that were told unceremoniously by William Shatner to “get a life.” *Doctor Who* appeals to a broad fan base. The franchise was originally intended for children, “which has become as popular with adults as children without losing its child audience” (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983, p.5). *Doctor Who* has gained momentum internationally apart from its central hub in the UK, and continues to gain international success. Conventions solely dedicated to celebrating the show and

its creation have sprouted up throughout the United States and across Europe and each year thousands of fans flock to them just to be fully submerged in the culture (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983). Despite cultural differences, the barrier between the text and the perception of audiences does not exist, and fans continue to crop up from all over the globe.

### *Transmedia Storytelling*

The involvement of fans within the *Doctor Who* fandom has spanned across multiple media platforms and the fandom itself has “embraced the convergence culture” by implementing new technologies such as mini-episodes, podcast commentaries, interactive adventures, video blogs, and metatextual websites (Perryman, 2008). This convergence of media is also known as transmedia storytelling. Henry Jenkins (2006: 20-21) views it as “a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence, where audiences act as ‘hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels’ – a participatory process that can potentially result in a ‘richer entertainment experience.’”

As it pertains to *Doctor Who*, this process of reaching across platforms has been successful with both hardcore fans as well as the more casual ones. In the early years of *Doctor Who*, 1965 – 1979, there were spin-off novelizations about the Daleks, a group of aliens that always antagonized the Doctor. These novels allowed fans to revisit the stories in greater depth, providing extra information not covered in episodes. Vinyl and radio stories were created starting in 1976 and *Doctor Who* comic strips ran from 1964 – 1979. Additions to the *Who* text, however, resulted in the fans feeling as though they did not contribute significantly to the legitimacy or canon of the *Who* universe (Perryman, 2008).

Why *Doctor Who* was cancelled in 1989 is still debated among fans. Some believe it was due to poor scheduling, scripting, production values, or as researcher Kim Newman believes, the show “declined into niche cultdom” (Perryman, 2008, p. 23). Whichever the reason, *Doctor Who* wasn’t going to disappear anytime fast. New Adventure novels aimed primarily at adult fans emerged only months after cancellation and began what has become an extremely powerful producer-to-fan collaboration. Even though the New Adventure novels featured more adult-themed stories (such as with the Doctor taking LSD or assassinating JFK) the creation of these stories was that of an “open submissions policy” where fans could submit their story ideas no matter what kind of experience they had. They actually had the potential to contribute to the official *Doctor Who* canon. Fans collaborated with the authors through email, forums online, and also met together to discuss story arcs and continuity (Perryman, 2008).

Some fans still strived for more officially sanctioned material, and as a result, BBC in conjunction with Big Finish Productions, began to produce audio dramas on CD in 1999 (Perryman, 2008). However, Big Finish was actually staffed by *Doctor Who* fans, which thus continued the fan-driven media tradition (Perryman, 2008). Fan-produced videos were becoming novelized, and those characters were becoming featured in audio dramas. The transmedia loop just kept spinning, and fans were in the driver’s seat.

With the rise of the Internet, BBC created an online output for content intended for the more hardcore fans. Photos, facts, and behind-the-scenes featurettes became accessible to fans. The innovation of the webcast drama in 2003 pushed *Who* ahead towards its television revitalization in 2005 (Perryman, 2008). *The Scream of Shalka* was a webcast specifically created for the Internet and featured a brand new ninth Doctor. These transmedia outlets kept *Doctor Who* alive. Editor of *Doctor Who Magazine*, Clayton Hickman, explained that “for any

one month between *Doctor Who* ending and the new series coming on you could get up to five or six separate *Doctor Who* stories a month, which is a lot more than you ever got when it was on the telly” (Perryman, 2008). This is due to the fact that the franchise bounced along the different platforms, books, CDs, radio, comics, and the Internet, with writers and producers of the *Who* show revival having written for all of the derivative products. This further supports Jenkins’ position “that consumers who actively engage with a franchise that flows across different platforms can potentially enjoy ‘new levels of insight and [an] experience [that] refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty” (Perryman, 2008, p. 26).

With the reboot of the show in 2005, fans flocked to online message boards to converse about the new series, and to speculate about a new incarnation of the Doctor (Perryman, 2008). Producers who were also fans of *Who* helped the show become even more participatory by including intertextual clues and mysteries strewn throughout episodes (Perryman, 2008). For example, producers repeated the meme “Bad Wolf” throughout the first series by hiding those words within episodes throughout the first season. They acted as “Easter eggs” that appeared on signs, dialogue, or casually strewn in the background. This tactic of stringing along mysterious clues throughout episodes was successful in that both “hardcore fans and a mainstream audience had enjoyed engaging in the hype that it generated” (Perryman, 2008, p. 28). This sparked further use of the repeated meme, which has now become a staple of use in *Doctor Who*.

Images, names, music, and hints to real world interaction also drove viewers to become more attentive when watching the show and also added another dimension of interactivity with the Doctor. The storytellers also created meta-textual websites. These sites included Easter eggs that fans could find either throughout existing websites about the Doctor or from the episodes themselves. The website page could appear on a character’s computer and would exist in the real

world as well and offer producers a way to handle “television overflow” or “a lifestyle experience around a core text, using the Internet to extend audience engagement and encourage a two-way interaction” (Perryman, 2008, p. 29).

With each season, *Doctor Who* producers thought of more complex ways to interact with the audience, creating websites within websites with hidden video clips and puzzles that could only be solved by incorporating clues from the episodes. The sites also served as a way for producers to correct errors made in the show concerning continuity or vagueness. What was vital to *Doctor Who*'s success was its ability to have content that was appealing to multiple audiences: hardcore and mainstream, young and old audiences, and British and international audiences. The evolution across media platforms has helped drive such a story and has kept audiences wanting more.

### *Fans as Producers*

The fans of *Doctor Who* are just as unique as the show they admire, and they are also an instrumental piece in the creation and production of the *Who* universe. Throughout the 1990s, the vision of media fandom and cultural studies was thought of as “essentially different from ‘official’ media production. Fans were creative but relatively powerless” (Hills, 2010, p. 56). With a fandom that stretches across fifty years, *Doctor Who* has a different production model where the fans can potentially become producers of the media that they love. It is this love of creating that urged the show back into production after a sixteen-year hiatus. The new episodes’ writers and producers such as Russell T. Davies were fans of the original series. Thus, the production team was a “*Doctor Who* Mafia.” It was a unique situation. The show revitalization had fans in high places within production because their previous love for the show drove them

into the media industry (Hills, 2010). Fans such as Davies continued to believe in the franchise despite the assumption that *Doctor Who* merely “disappeared” from 1989 to 2005 (Hills, 2010).

Davies argued:

I've always believed that the programme has survived and enriched itself because of the gaps in its production, the space between what was intended, what is, and what could be. Those gaps allow our imagination to slip inside. And there's a crucial gap, right there, right at the start: we don't know the central character's name. It's a clumsy device... it's slender premise... Technically, it's a mess... Genius doesn't make sense, it isn't nice and clean and shiny. (Hills, 2010)

It was also difficult for fans to string the old episodes into the new due to the fact that most of the older episodes either do not exist or only survived in partial clips. This lack of canonical text motivated the fans to become even more imaginative. Hills (2010) recognized that “post-2005 *Doctor Who* has involved the most senior levels, a generation of fans-turned-media-professionals” and argued that the development of fan ‘gamekeepers’ has not done away with Jenkins’ notion of ‘poachers.’ The creators must still remain empowered if they desire to coexist with fans. Writers such as Davies and Moffatt were more concerned with stories leaking or spreading across the Internet. As a result, a new realm within a fandom emerged as ‘pre-textual poachers’ of “information that producers would prefer to keep under PR control and ahead of television transmission” (Hills, 2010). This was not so that producers remained more ‘elite’ than regular fans, but rather to keep the mystery alive for everyone until their time seemed fit.

### *Documentary as an Ethnography*

Typically, academic case studies on specific groups of people, such as audiences or fans, arise from ethnographic research, but this study aims to push the boundaries of traditional ethnography. Instead of compiling data through personal immersion and note taking, the question in this thesis will be answered in the form of a film, or an ethnographic documentary.

There is much to be said about ethnographies in both the communication and anthropological fields. However, the methodology for this study is a hybrid incorporating different aspects of both documentary film and ethnography processes. Ethnographic research is a method of studying a certain group of people, and integrates personal interviews, observations, and connects findings to pertinent research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Ethnographies are tricky because there are so many assumptions that come with studying behaviors of a specific group of people. For example, there are inferences that the behavior documented is linked with the meaning of the situation, one's understanding changes as he/she interacts with others, that there are usually different perspectives within a situation, and that a group or culture must be studied "as it is." A common practice of ethnography is to interview a select group of participants directly involved in some aspect of the source material. In this way, an ethnographic study is more like a snapshot, or observations from one short span of time that are applied to the whole of time. Participant groups may consist of different types of fans, races, genders or any conceivable category.

There is criticism among some researchers that ethnographies do not use enough quantitative data to back up their assumptions, but in reality, the data collected is from different perspectives and by different methods. Ethnographies should be written with an established purpose as well as described to increase ecological and construct validity. Those performing the study will use interviews, encounters, or their observations of different people within a group in

order to put together a cohesive summary of a population, and thus hopefully create a big picture look from different views within the community.

In turn, documentaries come in various styles depending on the intended purpose of the film (Barbash & Taylor, 1997). Documentaries have been adapted for anthropological purposes, primarily to study non-western social groups, which is exactly what ethnographies originally did (Ruby, 2008), for the key method in anthropology of studying is ethnographic. Barbash and Taylor outline the four main styles of documentary, “expository,” “impressionistic,” “observational,” and “reflexive.” For the sake of this study, expository and observational are the core styles. Expository is the style where the “film addresses spectators directly and tends to be somewhat set apart from the rest of the film.” The “didactic arguments” within an expository film give it a “National Geographic” feel or look like a television news spot.

The observational style “attempts to mirror the world rather than be propagandistic.” In this style, loosely linked vignettes are filmed to explore and depict life in the raw as much as possible. Two ways to approach this style as a filmmaker is to either be the “fly-on-the-wall” that does not disrupt everyday life, or to be an active element of the study. Both executions have a quantum effect to them in that they may influence reality. The latter could affect what could have happened if the researcher was not present, and the former is still not a fully unaltered representation because people may *change* when they are aware of documentation. Personal dimensions and interviews make the observational style a popular pick among ethnographic filmmakers.

The method of documentation for this particular research question will be a mixture of aspects from academic ethnographic study and documentary film styles, the primary approach being observational interviews. Like ethnography, the film will aim to be a social case study of a



specific group of people, *Doctor Who* fans, and also incorporate different perspectives from the fan-base. Three categories of fans will be highlighted in the film: “dedicated” fans at a *Doctor Who* convention, fans who are actively involved in the fandom by writing fan fiction, frequently purchasing merchandise, or theorizing story plots, and others who just enjoy watching the show. These categories were selected from previous fan studies and scholarly research on the levels of activity within fandoms.

Past documentaries such as the quirky *We Are Wizards* (2008), about the *Harry Potter* community, or *Macheads* (2009), that explores the fanaticism of the Apple brand, will serve as methodological inspirations. The filmmaker will be actively involved with the fans, interviewing and accumulating data that will aid in answering the research question. Despite ethnography’s tendency to be biased towards the view of the filmmaker, the final film will not have a pre-determined point or argument. In other words, it will not be used as a political platform or a space for individual opinion. The film will serve as a visual representation of the wide range of *Doctor Who* fans.

### **Significance of Study**

As stated in previously, *Doctor Who* is one of the longest running Science Fiction television shows and will celebrate its fifty-year anniversary in the coming year, 2013. That feat in itself is enough to make *Doctor Who* unique, but there’s more to the fandom than its long run. Tulloch and Alvarado stated twenty years ago that:

[*Doctor Who*] is definitely an important area for future media analysis and research and on which, when engaged with in terms of the differentials of class, sex and race (as

well as in terms of age...) will prove to be theoretically, analytically and politically crucial.

In essence, *Doctor Who* holds great potential as a textual artifact because it crosses cultural barriers. The show is a British convention yet is renowned throughout the world, and does not attract one specific demographic. Women, children, Hispanics, gays – they're all infatuated with the show. Scholars Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) asked themselves the question, "Why then, are so many *Doctor Who* fans gay?" Their response? Perhaps it's the fact that the *Doctor Who* fandom, and fandom in general, can be more accepting than the "real world." There isn't one group of people who the show targets or that society judges to be *Doctor Who* nerds. Anyone could be a Whovian. We're all just geeks.

### **Research Question**

How do *Doctor Who* fans perceive their role(s) within the *Doctor Who* community?

### **Methods**

The research approach to pinpointing fan self-identity and role(s) within any fandom required more than standard observation. Careful consideration was taken to capture the true essence of all fan participants, and video ethnography proved to be the best method of choice. Through this process, the fans interviewed were able to fully express their opinions verbally, add elements of body language, and interact in conversation with the interviewer. All of these aspects together worked towards finding a better understanding of the fan, as well as produced engaging footage for audiences.

The film incorporated a convergent sample of fans. The selection of fans was decided based on a volunteer basis. A call for *Doctor Who* fans was sent out to students on Trinity University's campus who were thought to have had interest in the show, no matter what level of interest, and those who replied with acceptance were recorded in a neutral location. Participants were also recruited at the *Doctor Who* convention *Gallifrey One*, held in February 2012 in Los Angeles, California. *Gallifrey One* is an annual science fiction convention focused primarily on *Doctor Who* and its spin-offs, *Torchwood* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. It has been held every year in Los Angeles since 1990, with over 2,000 attendees for each convention. Generally at the convention fans had a higher level of engagement with the fandom. A second call for *Doctor Who* fans was released to faculty and staff in order to recruit fans that may have been fans of the older generation of *Doctor Who*. These fans were also selected based on consent and willingness to be filmed. The following were asked of each fan:

- 1) How do you distinguish fan life from your "real" life? Are they the same?
- 2) How often do you participate with *Doctor Who*?
- 3) How much do you participate?
- 4) What sort of things do you do?
- 5) Do you have any emotional connections with *Doctor Who*? The characters?
- 6) What do you get out of participating? What is your motivation?
- 7) Are you proud of being a *Doctor Who* fan?
- 8) Who's your favorite/least favorite character? Why?
- 9) Who is *your* Doctor? Companion?
- 10) How many of your friends are *Doctor Who* fans too?

These questions were not asked verbatim or with the anticipation of unelaborated answers, but were asked by using a conversational approach. By creating a relaxed conversational space between *Doctor Who* fans, feelings, emotions, arguments, and the true identity of each fan could be represented more truthfully on film.

### **Findings (see video)**

### **Conclusion**

I was initially drawn to studying *Doctor Who* fans because I am one myself. I was curious if others ever thought about their place or status within the fandom since fan identity can be just as powerful if not as important as personal identity. Sometimes, the two are the same. The research of fans is still growing as a study, and the *Doctor Who* fandom is a special group to watch. The show has spanned decades, reaching out to many different generations and cultures, as well as “created a Transmedia world that supports demographic-spanning spin-offs that straddle media platforms and storytelling techniques” (Perryman, 2008, p. 37).

*Doctor Who* as a fandom not only targets multiple media and demographics, but also different types of fans. There are select categories of fans that range from casual viewers, to those who have integrated the show into every moment of their lives, and the fandom accepts all categories. Fans interviewed at the convention claimed not to be die-hard fans themselves, and the whole community was accepting of new fans and all levels of participation. As with all of the interviews, no matter what the level of participation, fans are proud to be a part of the *Doctor Who* fandom and were not ashamed of admitting it. Each fan is invested for different reasons, but they all have reactions to the show and its plot. The show itself does not shy away from the

different categories of fans because it implements elements for the more active fans, and yet allows the more passive audiences to simply enjoy watching the show.

*Doctor Who* is one of the most widely appreciated fandoms, spanning generations, genders, races, cultures, and participation levels. Fan self-identity is not based on a status of how dedicated they might be within the fandom. Rather, it's the fact that they have invested in *Doctor Who* to begin with that makes them a fan. They do tend to admit the involvement they may have, how they participate, and why, but fellow fans seek out the community rather than a status. The fans of *Doctor Who* do not come from a specific group of stereotypical people, nor is the fandom structured based on elitism. Rather, *Doctor Who* is a community that accepts all types of fans, so you can never assume exactly what type of person is a *Doctor Who* fan. But that is a beauty of it. You never know who a Who could be.

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