

**Time and relative dimensions on line: *Doctor Who*, wikis and the production of narrative/history**

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**Abstract**

The wiki illustrates an entwining of history and narrative, a relation that becomes obvious through comparisons with the long-form television programme *Doctor Who*. In this article I examine the fan-created wiki for this long-running British television series, <http://tardis.wikia.com>, to articulate the interconnectedness of narrative and history on wikis. Tardis.wikia illustrates an important tension present within editable digital archives: that is, wikis represent the archival of knowledge as both a historical misrepresentation as well as a necessary step in equating 'knowledge' with historical truth. Wikis represent a particularly salient view of how memory, culture and history collide in a 'Web 2.0' world. By looking at four different functions of history in the narrative of *Doctor Who*, and then examining how these functions become represented on [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com), I illustrate some of the ideology, production, historical memory and editability of our contemporary digital culture, and show how traditional media forms can often offer a useful heuristic for understanding new media technologies.

**Keywords**

wiki

narrative

history

digital technology

new media

*Doctor Who*

**Introduction**

‘Time is being rewritten’, concludes the Doctor towards the end of ‘Flesh and stone’, the fifth episode of the 2010 series of *Doctor Who* (Smith 2010). ‘Time’, he follows up, ‘is being unwritten’. The Doctor, here, is referring to the supernatural disappearance of time as an entity in and of itself. Indeed, at the conclusion of the 2010 series, history literally is erased from ever happening – a fact made salient by the setting of the majority of the final episode in a rapidly disappearing National History Museum. In a science fiction show like *Doctor Who*, such occurrences are par for the course; and for the Doctor, as a time travelling alien, such utterances are commonplace. For example, in 2007’s ‘Blink’, the Doctor attempts to describe the function of historical time: ‘People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but *actually* from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint – it’s more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly, time-y wimey, stuff’ (MacDonald 2007). Time as a concept is often described in *Doctor Who* not as an objective

phenomenon – observable but unalterable – but rather as an immediate, subjective experience; one that cannot only be changed but can actually influence events themselves.

Yet, in a more terrestrial sense, the way the Doctor describes *time* in space could just as easily be the way cultural historians refer to *history* on wikis. Wikis, websites that facilitate the communal writing, editing and deletion of information, represent a view of knowledge as fluid and collective. Further, as a corollary to this collective behaviour, wikis also provoke a sense of knowledge not as stable and indelible, but rather as *always already being rewritten*. *Doctor Who* offers an emblematic look at the way wikis entwine history and narrative in a complex cultural system. For, not only does *Doctor Who* as a media text deal with the mutability of time as an irresistible, inescapable force, but so too does the *Doctor Who* narrative force a reconceptualization of the very nature of history. This inevitable alterability of this history/narrative connection comes to a head in the guise of the fan-created wiki for *Doctor Who*, [tardis.wikia.com](http://tardis.wikia.com).<sup>1</sup>

I believe that an understanding of knowledge production on wikis – as representative of knowledge production in general – can be represented through an analysis of the historical/narratological tension inherent in *Doctor Who*. Further, as represented by [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com), an analysis of the fictional history in the *Doctor Who* narrative presents a number of important ideological constructs that guide the way we understand historical knowledge in contemporary digital environments. I contend that *Doctor Who*, as a popular culture text and long-form television narrative, provides a useful inductive heuristic for understanding the fluid nature of knowledge on wikis. History, in this cultural sense, is inherently shaped by the community that uses it. In this

way, history itself can be seen as a conduit towards a larger understanding of cultural ideology. Texts like wikis exemplify the beliefs, ideas and moments of the past that are inherently political, partial and problematic (Beer and Burrow 2007). Wikis become a way of representing this mutable and meaningful nature of history. I begin this analysis with a description of wikis as representations of knowledge and a discussion of *Doctor Who* as a representation of narrative, specifically focusing on the complexity of both knowledge and narrative in both texts (see Mittell 2006). Following this, I describe four different historical codes on *Doctor Who* and establish how each one features in the companion wikia. Finally, I examine wikis as a form of narrative history, and argue that just as history is ideologically constructed on *Doctor Who*, so too is it on wikis.

### **Wiki theory and tardis.wikia**

Wikis can be both source and storage of narrative information, although they portray narrative in a form different from what we are used to seeing in traditional media (see Booth 2009; Mittell 2009a). Wikis present narratives not with beginning-to-end linear causation, but rather with separated events, each hypertextually linked. Additionally, the ability of users to continually revise highlights one facet of wikis: that they are constantly impermanent. And this is why *Doctor Who* as a narrative text may be perfect fodder for the wiki. Just as information on wikis can be revised at a moment's notice, so too does historical information on and of *Doctor Who* go through a continual process of rewriting and revision through many different versions (see Hills 2009, 2010).

The Doctor is not just a time traveller, but also a revisionist historian; so too is the wiki not just a website, but also a revisionist narrative.

As Bruns (2008: 103) points out, wikis illustrate not so much knowledge itself, but rather ‘representations of knowledge’. What he means is that wikis exemplify the diverse sets of knowledge bases that make up a community’s multi-faceted viewpoint on a subject. It is not that Wikipedia, for example, attempts to show The Truth, but rather that it idealistically shows many different truths that complement or contradict each other to create a knowledge base. Because wikis can be continually updated, they are inherently *present*, but also remain tethered to ideas about the past: in this way, they are, quite literally, multiple representations of what Crary (1989: 98) argues, the ‘different meanings [that emerge] depending on how [texts are] situated historically’. Wikis allow a space where truth can be rewritten, where knowledge is changeable and where history is literally written by anyone with a modem and a presentist state of mind.

Ultimately, then, wikis represent a tangible form of the changing dynamic between production and consumption in the digital age. One of the key components of today’s ‘convergence culture’, according to Jenkins (2006), is the shift from an auteuristic, top-down look at production to a grassroots, bottom-up examination of the consumptive powers of audiences. Much of this work in the activity of audiences has been previously discussed by scholars focused on active engagement with media texts (e.g. Hall 1980; Bourdieu 1984; de Certeau 1984; Fiske 1987; Radway 1991; Allen 1992; Jenkins 1992). Rather than a centralized, singular ‘meaning’ that emerges from a text, active audience studies posit that audiences have the power to read texts in their own way, constructing personalized meaning from elements within the text. Authorship, in

this model, is inherently problematized: as Hall (1980) shows, the messages a producer ‘encodes’ in a text an audience may not necessarily ‘decode’ using the same signs and meaning. Yet, as Hall demonstrates, and indeed as Bourdieu (1984) and Jenkins (1992) both describe, the signs that audience decode are influenced by the type of cultural system in which the audience sits: one cannot ‘decode’ outside of one’s own cultural system.

The same can be said for narrative truth on the television show *Doctor Who*. Narrative itself is continual process that runs both backwards and forwards in time; audiences must decipher elements of narrative in order to make sense of elements that later appear. *Doctor Who* takes this narrative conceit one step further: by actually playing with time as an inconsistent, yet constant series of events, the concept of narrative truth is interrogated in *Doctor Who*. What is revealed is a particular *construction* of narrative truth that has specific ideological currency. For example, the Doctor can affect [has affected?] historic events and the programme has shown audiences such major historical moments as the rise of the Aztecs, the French Revolution and WWI. As moments in the *Doctor Who* universe, they stand beside and astride what viewers may know to be ‘authentic’ history. As a fictional television programme, *Doctor Who* makes no claims of authenticity, and no one (hopefully) watches *Doctor Who* thinking that they are watching actual historical re-enactments.<sup>2</sup> But as a representation of a particular type of *narrative* truth, *Doctor Who* forces a reconceptualization of the nature of history with every episode. In each moment, the show concentrates on Euro-centric values such as power, dominance and leadership.

For example, the history of humankind, and the role of the Doctor in its development, becomes revised throughout the show, illustrating the way both *Doctor Who* and wikis rework the subjective experience of history through this lens. A pertinent example is the depiction of the Roman city Pompeii in ‘The fires of Pompeii’ (Teague 2008). The story of Pompeii is familiar to many who have taken world history: Vesuvius erupts, covering the city of Pompeii in ash and ‘preserving’ the inhabitants (or, at least, the shape of them) for thousands of years. When the Doctor and Donna arrive, however, they learn that the ‘historical truth’ of the event is far from what *really* happened: namely, a race of aliens called the Pyrovillians stole energy from Vesuvius and, in order to stop them, *The Doctor* had to erupt the volcano. The narrative history of Pompeii is thus changed as the cause of the eruption (the ‘righting’ of history) becomes an auteuristic event, although the events (the explosion, the resulting preservation of the city) are not. Similarly, wikis preserve the specifics of an event, but can alter or change them if the historical truth is reviewed: if, for example, we learn the *actual* eruption occurred differently than we first thought. And yet although wikis are supposedly ‘democratized’ media, in that anyone can write and publish, each writer is necessarily constrained not just by his/her cultural background, but also by the technologically determined format of the text. Although ‘anyone’ can edit ‘anything’ on a wiki, one must always follow certain rules and regulations, as well as syntax. ‘Anything’ is a constrained term.

Wikis do not just record and present history, therefore, but are in the process of constantly recording a *narrative* of history. In this way, wikis come to represent in practice the same ideological practices that have shaped and moulded our conceptions of history. In a concrete sense,<sup>3</sup> wikis provide a tangible illustration of the shifting

relationship between *time* and *power*. This idea of a constantly updating temporal location for history and knowledge contrasts with what Debord (1994) discusses in his *The Society of the Spectacle*. For Debord (1994: 158), all knowledge is circumstanced around particular moments in time, discursive arenas of mediated power. The modern ‘spectacle’ – the over-capitalization of the image as it dominates the masses – placates the population through ‘a paralyzed history... a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time’. As Crary (1989: 106) suggests, ‘Debord sees the core of the spectacle as the annihilation of historical knowledge – in particular the destruction of the recent past. In its place there is the reign of a perpetual present’. This ‘absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things’ as Baudrillard (1983: 133) later takes up in reference to postmodernity, revels in the ever-present moment. The spectacle, today’s über-mediated environment, becomes a tool used to control the masses.

I want to argue, however, that wikis demonstrate a different type of ‘presentism’ than what Debord (1994) originally argues. Although wikis writers may mirror the ideological underpinnings of today’s society, the underlying strength of the wiki is the way it is continually *present* in its relationship to history. History is not stolid on a wiki, but rather in a constant state of rewritability. There is no ‘annihilation’ of historical knowledge; rather, a persistent ‘refresh’ of historical details as they pertain to particular units of knowledge. Wikis do not make consumers passive, but rather aid in the activity of the meaning-producing audiences. Debord (1994: 155) sets the ‘innovation’ that is ‘ever present in the process of the production of things’ at odds with ‘consumption’, which ‘is never anything than more of the same’. Through their own production, wikis demonstrate a ‘presentism’ that is concerned not with erasure, but with accumulation.



The premiere of the eleventh Doctor (Matt Smith) offers insight into this ‘presentism’ on [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com). Before the premiere, little description of the episode existed on the wiki, and only two sentences constructed the plot:

The Doctor has regenerated into a brand new man, but danger strikes before he can even recover. With the TARDIS wrecked, and the sonic screwdriver destroyed, the new Doctor has just 20 minutes to save the whole world – and only Amy Pond to help him.

([http://tardis.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Eleventh\\_Hour#Synopsis](http://tardis.wikia.com/wiki/The_Eleventh_Hour#Synopsis))

Yet, barely 21 hours later when the episode aired, the plot had expanded nearly ninefold, and two days after that had blossomed into a full-fledged synopsis, complete with descriptions of scenes and characters that had been added since the first iteration. Over one year later, the plot summary has grown to nearly 2000 words and lists the myriad connections that became apparent only as the series progressed. Other wiki pages similarly increase with the addition of more historical knowledge: [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com) can only grow with more history, more knowledge, more time. Obviously, it is difficult to generalize from the description of one particular page on [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com). But what is remarkable here is the transience of the narrative contained on the wiki. The narrative is constantly being performed in the present tense.

Ultimately, history itself is just a narrative we tell ourselves to link events. Indeed, as White (1987: 1) points out, narrative is a ‘meta code’, the ‘basis of which [transmits]... messages about the nature of a shared reality’. In other words, a historically

grounded discussion of culture must necessarily be based in narrative terms. We create the concept of ‘history’ to order and make sense of an ultimately senseless progression of time. And online writing may be one of the most effective ways to display this historicity. As Robertson (2006: 445–46) notes, ‘History (as a subject) is the ideal vehicle for hypertext – the myriad connections between subjects can be visualized and actualized more completely’. As represented on the screen, history has always been problematically presented as a particular reflection of a time period. Looking at history in Hollywood often tells us more about the culture that made the film rather than the culture it depicts (Toplin 1996: 1). At the same time, *Doctor Who* and other fictional narratives are also written, more obviously so in this case. History, in both senses, is always fluctuating. By allowing users to edit, convert or rewrite entire sections of history, the wiki tangibly represents the mutability of historical truth, by ‘Using links to create the more dynamic relationship between historical interpretations and the evidence on which they are based’ (Robertson 2006: 447). This feature of the *Doctor Who* narrative becomes emblematic of some characteristics of wikis. For example, as Beer and Burrows (2007: ¶3.1) show, wikis are particularly credited with a ‘new rhetoric of “democratisation”’. These stories and images of the web circulate in scholarly and popular press: the way that ‘Web 2.0’ opens up discussion of ‘collaborative, participatory or open culture’ (Beer and Burrows 2007: ¶3.6). Yet, as they go on to show, these discussions of the democratization of the web elide the fact that much of the web is ‘commercial and [a] lightly regulated market’ (Beer and Burrows 2007: 3.7). What is written on wikis is not always truth, but it is also not always universal either.

### **Historio-narrative truth**

For the Doctor, history is unsettled. For example, he often notes how ‘unused’ he is to travelling ‘normally’ in history (Haynes 2010a), or asks ‘this how time normally passes? Quite slowly... and in the right order?’ (Campbell 2010). Similarly, for *Doctor Who*, as for any fictional text, the very essence of traditional narrative structure is the split between the events as they are, and the representation of those events as they occur on the screen (or in the text). Classic narratologists from Seymour Chatman (1978) to Gérard Genette (1979) and even more recent narrative scholars like Richard Walsh (2001, 2007; see also Gorman 2010) have noted this division between what early twentieth-century Russian formalist scholars called the ‘fabula’ and the ‘sjuzhet’ of narrative form. The sjuzhet defines the way events are recounted by a narrator and experienced by the audience. The fabula describes the presence of these events as separated from their appearance within a linear retelling of the sjuzhet. Fabula is ever present in narrative, existing at the edge of perception: when we watch a film and imagine what happened to the characters off-screen, we are moving from the sjuzhet to the fabula.<sup>4</sup> Although he does not specifically mention the pairing of the fabula and the sjuzhet, the spectre of narratology haunts Jason Mittell’s (2006) analysis of complex narrative structures on television. In his article, Mittell discusses the role that extended and long-form narratives play in the construction of contemporary complex television narratives like that of *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Alias* (2001–2006). His analysis of ‘narrative complexity’ defines many contemporary television narratives as a ‘redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration’

(Mittell 2006: 32). That is, narratively complex shows establish detailed long-running fabula whilst not ignoring the episodic *sjuzhet* inherent in storytelling (see also Askwith 2009).

To extend Mittell's analysis from fictional television to non-fictional history, there exists an interesting parallel between the fabula as a reconstruction of narrative and history as a reconstruction of the past. For example, *Doctor Who* often reveals discursive 'holes' in the narrative – an 'endlessly deferred narrative', as Matt Hills (2002: 134) calls it – that provide entry points for understanding and developing an underlying narrative story to the show (see Dena 2008). One such discursive hole is the Doctor's age, which increases at a rate faster than that of the audience's viewing of the show: for example, in a serial broadcast in 1978 (Spenton-Foster 1978) the Doctor's age is given as between 756 and 759. In an episode broadcast in 2010, 32 years later (Smith 2010), the Doctor states that his age is 907. The complexity of the *Doctor Who* narrative makes it such that the 'missing' 148 years of the Doctor's life *exist* but are *unseen*, a part of the fabula.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, to fill in the gaps in the *sjuzhet* by expounding the fabula becomes one key aspect of fandom.

The understanding of history makes a similar demand on cultural participants as does narrative. Most events of history are unseen, and contemporary historians must reconstruct and place them into a narrative context. The fact that I can mention the Battle of Waterloo, for example, and others can understand to what I refer, means that we have all reconstructed this battle in our own minds, in our own ways. Yet, this memory itself is shaped by the multitude of cultural codes that go into the collective memory of the Battle of Waterloo. As Confino (1997: 1393) describes, 'the construction of the past, through a

process invention and appropriation, affect[s] the relationship of power within society'. History has already become narrativized, as we cultural participants reconstruct a subjective understanding of our common cultural context. Nora (1992) argues, like Jameson (1991), that the concept of memory is subsuming history so that our collective memories overshadow our understanding of any historical event (cited in Olick and Robbins 1998: 120–21). The consequences of this historical reconstruction are immense: if our understanding of history is necessarily always re-created, then *history itself* can be changed (Debord 1994: 131–34). Writers like Orwell understood this quite well: protagonist Winston in *1984* works as a historical revisionist, literally rewriting the history of Oceania to coincide with The Party's official version of history. To be able to rewrite not only the facts but also the interpretation of those facts lends great power to those with the pen – or keyboard.

As a representation of that rewritability, wikis become a technology of historical uncertainty – that is, they symbolize the mutability of historical narrative. Wikis can come to symbolize, then, the precise historical moment we exist in today: a postmodern restructuring of truth and history as eternally constructed and constructing. The events that cultural participants reconstruct through their own interpretation of a historically motivated fabula become realized through wikis; but this realization is consistently inconsistent. As a literal representation of the melding of narrative and history, *tardis.wikia* presents the historical existence of *Doctor Who*'s the events as rewritable nuggets of narrative information. The *Doctor Who* narrative re-presented on *tardis.wikia* becomes preserved as a historical fabula within the framework of the wiki/sjuzhet itself. By examining more closely the way narrative production functions on *tardis.wikia*, we

can develop a framework for understanding the presence of history itself within our cultural framework.

### **The historical codes on *Doctor Who* and *tardis.wikia***

As present in and around the text of *Doctor Who*, four historical codes develop and extend the relationship between narrative and history. Due to the dense relationship between the narrative of time travel, the length of the show's run,<sup>6</sup> and the inclusion of historical events within the text of the show, *Doctor Who* offers a unique text to see these codes highlighted and exemplified. Furthermore, these codes also reflect in the way the technology of the wiki creates and maintains its own unique relation between narrative and history. In this section, I examine what I call the Meta Code, the Diegetic Code, the External Code and the Future Code of *Doctor Who* and illustrate the comparison to and analysis of their emergence on *tardis.wikia* as exemplars of the talk page, the history page and the rewritability and citation styles of wikis.

#### **Meta Code**

I use the term Meta Code to refer to any discussion within the narrative that intra-textually references its own production. The use of Meta Codes also features heavily in the editing and writing of wikis. As Konieczny (2009: 166) shows, dialogue about the construction of a wiki page can be as intense and as lengthy as the page itself: this dialogue is crucial to the success of Wikipedia, as it is 'a social institution, a part-community, and a part-social movement'. As Beer and Burrows (2007: 4.5) argue, one of

the key traits of wikis is the ‘Wikizens’ debate and discuss issues. As wiki articles grow and develop, pages emerge that focus on discussions about the content on the original article. These pages, as Bruns (2008: 113) points out, include ‘increasingly specific and complex policies for content creation and community collaboration’. In other words, to understand the relationship between the articles and their respective discussion pages on wikis – pages that could be considered ‘meta’ content on wikis – it is useful to engage in a dialogue with similarly meta-moments in *Doctor Who*.

A particularly relevant example of one of these Meta Codes in *Doctor Who* is in the 1988 story ‘Remembrance of the Daleks’ (Morgan 1988). In this serial, the Doctor and Ace travel to the location and time of the events that transpired immediately before the first episode of *Doctor Who* aired on 23 November 1963. Of course, as an episode during the 25th anniversary of the show, ‘Remembrance of the Daleks’ focuses much of its attention on a reflection of and comment on the *Doctor Who* series as a whole – but no allusion is more clear or more specific than when the titular hero and his companion are watching television in the episode on 23 November 1963 and the television announcer intones: ‘This is BBC television, the time is quarter past five and Saturday viewing continues with an adventure in the new science fiction series *Doct*’ [and then the scene cuts away] (see Parkin 2006). By mentioning its own premiere, *Doctor Who* not only self-consciously describes its own creation, but also self-referentially circles back to articulate a connection to a particular Meta Code.

A more recent episode tells a subtler example. In ‘Human nature’ the Doctor has – temporarily – given up his identity and replaced it with a false one (Palmer 2007a). He believes his name is John Smith and that he was a school teacher in 1913. As part of the

false memory construction, the Doctor also believes that his parents (or, rather, John Smith's parents) are named Sydney and Verity. It is difficult to believe that these character names were chosen at random, as they reference Sydney Newman, the original creator of *Doctor Who*, and Verity Lambert, the first producer of the show. Such minor details become references to the show itself that may appeal to fans and connoisseurs of *Doctor Who* trivia.

Another Meta Code on *Doctor Who* appears in episodes that premiere on the date depicted in that episode. For example, the series finale of the 2010 series revolved around the wedding of Amy Pond, which took place on 26 June 2010 – the same day the episode aired. Other *Doctor Who* episodes have also aired on the same day as the action on the screen took place: 'An unearthly child' (Hussein 1963), 'Image of the Fendahl' (Spenton-Foster 1977), 'Remembrance of the Daleks' (Morgan 1988) and 'Silver nemesis' (Clough 1988), to name but a few (see Parkin 2006). These meta-moments become self-reflexive, aiming for a close connection to the audience and viewers.

In these Meta Codes, the information gleaned from watching *Doctor Who* comes to the viewer in two separated, but connected, areas that affect our understanding of wikis. The first is the narrative information of the show itself, which increases with each additional unit of information given – that is, by telling viewers that The Doctor has landed on 26 June 2010 to attend Amy and Rory's wedding, Haynes (2010a, 2010b) has created a piece of narrative information that helps viewers to construct a complete view of the character, of the story and of the *Doctor Who* universe (a view that Parkin (2006), has used to write a revised history of the world according to *Doctor Who*). The second aspect of information that arrives through the Meta Code is information about the



development and creation of the television show *Doctor Who* as a television show – that is, so-called ‘behind-the-scenes’ information that reveals how the show developed.

It is this second type of information that most directly references and reflects the peculiar nature of wikis as both knowledge archives and as meta-comments on those archives. As Stvilia et al. (2008) have noted, this dual purposing of wikis is one of the unique aspects that make them particularly useful for researchers: to reflect on the construction of a wiki article as it is being written allows for a practical functionality. Further, as Bruns (2008: 109) writes, ‘community discussion about the content creation process ...takes places in the wiki environment itself, and contributes to the development of content as well as community structures’. The result of this dual purposing on wikis is to acknowledge alternate viewpoints and reflect the multivarious and complex nature of historio-narrative construction. In other words, by facilitating group discussion *about* a topic, wikis illustrate that no topic has a singular viewpoint.

Seeing *Doctor Who* through this lens reveals even more variability. In many ways, this is similar to type of postmodern criticism defined by Naremore (1990: 17) as a ‘mixture of familiar discourses ... [that] can’t be identified completely with any of them’. For Naremore (1990: 18), the cultural politics of (in this case) film criticism became influenced by the mediation of film on television: critics began ‘viewing films in no historical order, regarding the classic cinema as something distant or dying’. History became outweighed by the sheer volume of texts, the polysemic availability of media. More concretely, we can see this in the article/discussion about ‘The big bang’ on [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com). The article for ‘The big bang’, like any article for an episode of *Doctor Who* on [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com), features an episode synopsis, a plot description, the cast and crew list,

references to other episodes, story notes, trivia for the episode, continuity reference and other citation material. The different elements are written in precise language and with the same neutral point of view (NPOV) that characterizes entries on Wikipedia. For example, the ‘episode synopsis’ element reads: ‘The Doctor is trapped in the Pandorica, the TARDIS has been destroyed and silence has fallen. The only hope for all reality is a little girl who still believes in stars’.

A tab at the top of the page leads to the ‘talk’ page that contains a discussion thread that expounds upon various aspects of the main article. For example, under a section titled ‘Let’s keep rumours clean’, a poster by the name Delton Menace writes (*all sic*):

The description of what is inside the Pandorica fits the description of the Doctor [...] and he is shown being dragged to the Pandorica in a released picture most have seen by now. There has been a [p]opular rumour that Omega in returning, too, and some reliable spoiler people on Gallifrey Base (these are people who, in all honestly, know quite a way ahead, some see unreleased pictures earlier on, ect..) may not know if the rumour is true or not, but they mostly say it is possibly nothing even they know suggests it can’t be. (2010)

And this is but one of 49 separate sections of entries, each of which has hundreds of user-generated words written about it. All in all, the ‘talk’ page is almost four times as long as the page about which it talks.<sup>7</sup> Because the ‘talk’ page is not only connected to, but is

actually a part of the article page, it becomes a requisite part of the wiki text. Any references become intra-textually articulated, much like the meta-moments on *Doctor Who*.

The Meta Code on *Doctor Who* develops because the nature of the television show allows for multiple authorship and collaborations through time. It is not uncommon for television shows like *Doctor Who* to have many people writing episodes, constructing backstories, illustrating key points, or adding to the narrative. The multiple authorship at the heart of *Doctor Who* (as well as other television programmes) matches the multiple authorship of wikis. Further, because of the long-running nature of *Doctor Who*, it, more than many other television programmes, has featured different writers, producers and directors over its tenure on television. By illustrating its own history within the narrative context of the television text, *Doctor Who* acknowledges the collaboration of the many people who worked on the show throughout the years; and serves as a metaphor for the way knowledge *as a collaborative product* is created by groups on wikis.

### **Diegetic Code**

A similar type of connection between the television series and the wiki exists with what I call the Diegetic Code. The Diegetic Code articulates moments that reference previous episodes, events or characters as aspects of the particular narrativized history within the show's texts. For example, when the Doctor rises up on a rock in the middle of Stonehenge in 2010's 'The Pandorica opens' and yells to the spacecraft circling the planet to 'Remember every black day I ever stopped you, and then, and then, do the smart thing. Let somebody else try first' (Haynes 2010b), he not only allows his enemies to

recall the events that have previously led to their defeat, but he also concurrently speaks to the viewers and memorializes previous episodes, previous components of a diegetic history, that have undergirded the narrative of *Doctor Who*.

In fact, it is a rare *Doctor Who* episode that does not reference, directly or obliquely, the events in the show's timeline that have previously aired. Such allusions are common and help to structure a show that has a 40-year history. The references can be minor – exclamations of, 'The Daleks are my most formidable enemy' – or can be major, as in 'The big bang', when the Doctor is thrust backwards through his own timeline and actually witnesses or interacts with his previous self or companions (Haynes 2010a). One such palpable event actually figures into the time-twisty plot of the 2010 series: as the Doctor hurtles backwards through his own timeline, he arrives in a scene the audience has previously watched in 'Flesh and stone'. Amy Pond, temporarily blinded, has just said good-bye to the Doctor when he comes back and monologues a speech about her memory of him. During an initial viewing of 'Flesh and stone', such a monologue might seem slightly out of place: his insistence and his vigour (not to mention his outfit) do not seem to fit the scene.<sup>8</sup> The inconsistency is later explained in 'The big bang', when it is revealed that the audience actually saw a *future* Doctor in 'Flesh and stone' coming back in time. To watch, 'The big bang' is to be enveloped within a diegetic history that forces the audience to rewrite entire sections of the previously viewed narrative.

The Diegetic Code represents a way of looking at the story canon as something akin to fictional fact.<sup>9</sup> That is, although *Doctor Who* is fictional, the amount of narrative history and the adherence to a canon of elements that remains constant from one iteration to the next lends credence to these events, and gives them the appearance of factuality in

the fictional space. This fact/fiction amalgam is one way, according to Gwenllian-Jones (2004), that fans become enamoured of a media text and treat it as an emotionally relevant portion of their lives. As a specific example of a Diegetic Code, the episode ‘The next Doctor’ (Goddard 2009) features a man who has been implanted with all of the Doctor’s memories, and thus thinks that he *is* the Doctor. In the dialogue between the two men, much of the in-show history of the character of the Doctor is revealed or recounted, and functions as a form of diegetic backstory for the story.

Along the same lines, a connection exists between the television show’s narrative history and the narrativized history as written on wikis. The diegetic code provides a useful heuristic for understanding the ‘history’ page of the wiki. Every wiki entry has a ‘history’ tab, which allows users to read through the revisions of the wiki in order to see which changes have been enacted. Just as the talk page on the wiki functions as a glimpse into an intra-textual discussion of the wiki, so too does the history page function as a way to look at the evolving and changing ‘facts’ of the wiki. The history page is one of the most important on a wiki, as it is a visual reminder that, as Rosenzweig (2006) shows, wikis are a form both of collaborate history and of historical events. Every change on a wiki is meticulously recorded and noted, and can be undone by anyone with a cursor. Our memories become shaped by what we read as history – and problematically, as Nora (1989: 8) discusses, ‘memory and history... appear now to be in fundamental opposition’. Memory, like a wiki, is constantly evolving, shaping through cultural use. History, however, has today turned into a ‘problematic and incomplete’ reconstruction of what memory visualizes. The wiki plays with and reverses this dynamic, creating history-as-memory and writing both as narrative.

Just as the Diegetic Code at play in *Doctor Who* is a continual reminder of the vast network of narrative history of the show, so too is the history page of a wiki a continual reminder of the vast network of historical narrativizing that has characterized the wiki article. It is not just that each page can be authored by many people, but that the history of that authorship can be recalled and analysed as well. For example, on the aforementioned 'The big bang' page, there are over 1000 different edits, each recorded on the history page. The history page is a reflection of the diegesis of the wiki. Through an analysis of traditional popular culture texts, we can examine anew the properties of new media like wikis.

### **External Code**

The third code of history exemplified both by *Doctor Who* and by wikis is what I term the External Code. In this code, historical events that have actually occurred in humanity's past are represented in *Doctor Who* as events that are either witnessed by or, in some cases, created by the Doctor. These events may sometimes feature in episodes as backdrops – that is, they are merely historical context while the plot of the episode focuses on something else – or they can sometimes feature as the main plot line. To filter events through the lens of *Doctor Who* means necessarily appropriating history – the beliefs, ideas, experiences, events, movements and moments of the past – as ideologically determined moments. That is, every historical moment in *Doctor Who* must be seen as tinged with present-tense meaning. Cook (2005: 218), although writing here about the cinema, describes how the representation of history on-screen contributes more to an understanding of the present than it does to that historical moment. For example, any

reconstruction of the past ‘is a matter of cut and paste, of cutting bits and pieces of meaning’, and thus reflects a contemporary attitude towards the subject matter (Cook 2005: 221). In the same way, similar codes are present on wikis, as wikis also represent historical situations with varying degrees of reliability.

Recent examples of the External Code on *Doctor Who* include ‘Tooth and claw’ (Lyn 2006), in which The Doctor and Rose travel to visit Queen Victoria, ‘The Shakespeare code’ (Palmer 2007b), in which The Doctor and Martha travel to 1599 and meet Shakespeare, and the aforementioned ‘Fires of Pompeii’ (Teague 2008). The effect of this melding of history and narrative in the fictional canon of *Doctor Who* is that historical events actually become appropriated by the narrative of the show: it is no longer the eruption of Vesuvius, but rather the Doctor’s version of the eruption of Vesuvius. Indeed, *Doctor Who* has, since its premiere, focused on Earth’s history (particularly its western Anglophone history), and has represented many different historical events within its narrative. For example, in the episode ‘Victory of the Daleks’, the Doctor travels to WWII-era England during the Blitz and finds that his arch-nemesis, the emotionless Daleks, are attempting to change Earth history. Like many battles between these two old foes, the Daleks call the Doctor’s emotional core – his empathy – his greatest weakness, yet he consistently demonstrates that it is his greatest strength. Throughout the episode, the ‘emotionless’ Daleks and the ‘emotional’ Doctor are pitted against each other, with the backdrop of WWII and Winston Churchill serving as foils to this conflict. As the show has ideologically linked the Daleks with the Nazis throughout its history, it is not too much of a stretch to see the depiction of the ‘emotionalism’ of Winston Churchill combatting the ‘emotionless’ Nazi soldiers as bolstering the British

sense of national pride (Wood and Miles 2006: 36). *Doctor Who* depicts this thematic conflict through historical appropriation.

The appropriation of history is also at the heart of the functioning of wikis, as these online repositories of historical ‘truth’ attempt to record history through collaborative authorship. Yet, as Bruns points out, it is not reality that is recorded, but rather ‘(interpretations of) reality’ (2008: 119). History on a wiki becomes merely one possibility within a multitude of other possibilities, each presented (or, rather, re-presented) with little to no historical gravitas. While the supposed power of the wiki lies in the fact that anyone can contribute, in reality what is written is always constrained by ideological and social forces. Even though, as Jenkins (2006) illustrates, the ‘collective intelligence’ of humankind *could* be represented on wikis,<sup>10</sup> wikis will always (inadvertently) depict the past as an ideological appropriation of history rather than with historical veracity. History, as the saying goes, is always written by the victors: and mediated history merely makes this literal, as history on wikis can only be written by those with access to a computer. According to data published by Nielsen Online, only 30.2 per cent of the world’s population use the Internet, with the fewest percentage of users residing in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. As a form of this ‘collective intelligence’ of humanity, wikis do not so much represent the collation of humanity’s knowledge as much as they do the western, Euro-centric view of knowledge and history. When one can rewrite anything, the notion of authoritative truth disappears and a culturally specific truth appears.

Ultimately, one way to understand the complex play with historical truth that wikis enact can come from the way television programmes construct the nature of history



within the fictional boundaries of the show. How, for instance, does a fictional account of a factual event factor into our everyday interpretation of that event? As represented in fiction, history as a concept is not only popularized, but is also problematically accepted as truth (see e.g. Rosenstone 1995; Toplin 1996). In fictional programmes, history often becomes subsumed under narrative necessity: events shortened, characters amalgamated, places changed. These are generally accepted as necessary changes for fictional programmes, in order that the narrative be exciting, be involving or be popular. A different set of changes are enacted on wikis, as historical ‘truth’ can be extrapolated to mean any number of versions through the inherent rewritability of the wiki technology. Hutton (1998: 319) argues that memory and history are inexorably intertwined: ‘if living memories are altered through minor revisions that pass unnoticed by the groups that carry them, then the plotting of the process by which mentalities change requires a quantum leap in the conceptualization of historical time’. Wikis illustrate, in the way that fictional narratives portray, an inherent mutability in the historical truth of an event; or, to put it another way, wikis illustrate how ‘narrative [as history] becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult’ (White 1987: 4).

### **Future Code**

The final code that *Doctor Who* makes salient represents future events: that is, it recounts events that *have* previously happened in the future but that *have not* yet happened in the present. As a show that focuses on time travel as a narrative device, *Doctor Who* often deals with causal paradoxes, or the establishment of effects before the causes that have

happened. A recent example of this type of Future Code appears in the aforementioned ‘The big bang’. The Doctor and his companions are running up the stairs of the National History Museum when a time travelling Doctor from the future appears before them and dies, whispering something to the present Doctor. The cause of his ‘death’ is shown later in the episode, when a Dalek exterminates him.

Other types of Future Codes exist in episodes that focus on the future as if it was a historical past. For example, a series of episodes in 2006–2009 have focused on the future history of the planet Earth. When the Doctor and Rose land in New New York City on ‘New Earth’, for example, he explains that this is actually the fifteenth New York City (Hawes 2006). The ‘history’ of the inhabitant of ‘New Earth’ does not end there, however; for in an earlier episode (Collinson 2005) the Doctor takes Rose to see the destruction of Earth in the year five billion. In effect, Rose (and the audience) saw the destruction of Earth before she saw the rebirth of ‘New Earth’, jumbling events as well as causes and effects.

‘Silver nemesis’ (Clough 1988) features another type of Future Code, one where the result of a plot development is revealed before the plot’s setup. In this episode, Ace sees a portrait of herself hanging in a hall in Windsor Castle in 1988, although she had not yet posed for it. Other episodes feature similar time-shifts in causality. Amy Pond leaves the Doctor a note in the past that he tells her to write in the future (Morshead 2010). The Doctor later leaves Amy a note in a similar manner (Haynes 2010a). These relatively minor events form a causality paradox, where no beginning to the event exists: in ‘The big bang’, Amy finds the note, which is how the Doctor knows how and what he has to write – there is no start to this causation cycle. Further, episodes that once took

place in the future but now take place in the past, like 1966's 'The tenth planet', are poignant examples of a Future Code where the future has developed differently than what the narrative would indicate (Martinus 1966).

A more complex play with temporality exists with the Doctor's future companion, River Song. River Song features in the 2008 and 2010 seasons of *Doctor Who* in an opposed time frame as the Doctor's, and thus represents the tension of the irreconcilable with the inevitable. When the audience first meets her in 'Silence in the library' (Lyn 2008), she is an archaeologist who once travelled with the Doctor (although he has yet to travel with her). She dies at the conclusion of that story arc, although she does not disappear from the larger narrative of the show. River Song appears a number of times in the show, each time in an increasingly complex temporality. At times she appears to know nothing about what adventures have come (chronologically) previous to her story, while other times she is much more knowledgeable than the Doctor. As both characters are time travellers, their relationship is a jumbled mix of temporal shifts. The complex interplay of time/temporality and narrative within the time travel structure of *Doctor Who* hearkens to Gendler's (2006: 142–43) analysis of time travel within the film *Primer*: just as the film plays with time, so too *Doctor Who* 'plays with editing patterns to create a fractured experience of time that is potentially analogous to the altering of reality carried out by the characters in the narrative'. For example, in 'The Pandorica opens', this playing with time is at the forefront of the dialogue:

Amy: You told the Doctor you'd see him again when the Pandorica opens.

River: Maybe I did. But I haven't yet. But I will have. (Haynes 2010b)

For wikis, a form of Future Code also exists, but in a slightly different form than with the anti-linear narrative plot of *Doctor Who*. Wikis have another type of Future Code, one built in the system of reputation and reliability of the articles themselves. As articles, wikis should include sources on all facts and cites for all information. Tardis.wikia, for example, follows in the style of Wikipedia to include footnotes for all facts in the article and asserts the canon of the show with hypertextual links to other articles. For instance, the tardis.wikia article on ‘Series 5’ of *Doctor Who* includes fifteen footnotes to various articles, blogs, interviews and documentaries that have discussed the series, and scores of hyperlinks to other episode pages.

Yet, this citation system can be problematic as well, as the *assertion* of reliability rests on the inherent *impunity* of those citations. If a citation exists – even if it is incorrect or inauthentic – it can be attributed and used on wikis with authority. The problem with this reliability is that some wiki entries can be created based solely on the fact that *wiki entries exist based on that fact*. Using the same kind of circular logic that confused the authorship of the note from Amy to the Doctor, Jason Mittell (2009b) offers an example of how his own Wikipedia article was supported through reflexive citations to his own Wikipedia article. Specifically, in an article for *Le Monde Diplomatique* Mittell defended ‘Wikipedia against the charge that it represented a threat to traditional knowledge’ (O’Neil 2009: 10), despite the fact his own entry was scheduled for deletion. But because of the article about his entry’s deletion, his Wikipedia entry actually thrived – as he writes, ‘the article about my Wikipedia entry has become a source to justify my inclusion on Wikipedia’ (Mittell 2009b: 4).

Mittell's experiences with Wikipedia echo with the Future Code on *Doctor Who*. The causality of an event is constantly in question when time travelling, because the effect can happen before the cause. Although such complex temporal mechanics may be confusing, understanding them may help elucidate the very real issue of reliability of citation on wikis. To debate the inclusion of specific events as history on a wiki means necessarily that someone thinks those events are important enough to include – a self-fulfilling prophecy. By paying attention to issues of temporal uncertainty in popular culture can we begin to unravel the complexities of attribution on wikis.

## **Conclusion**

As Tapscott and Williams (2006: 75) state, Wikipedia's 'openness is also the reason why it is constantly growing, adding new entries, covering new niches and always reviewing and updating facts. It taps an almost infinite wealth of talent, energy, and insight'.

Wikipedia is not alone: wikis on the whole adapt to the changing technological landscape with amazing versatility. Yet, some inherent aspects of the technology do remain constant: wikis are always editable, are updatable and reflect a continually changing sense of what is important *now*, at *this* moment in time, in *this* particularly cultural milieu (Beer and Burrow 2007: 4.3–4.7).

I believe that wikis represent a form of historical production that is forward-thinking and useful. At the same time, however, wikis fall prey to the same types of ideological issues present in any form of cultural production. Only by understanding the limitations *as well as* the possibilities can users come to a full understanding of the

capabilities of wikis as new media repositories of cultural history. History, in this cultural sense, is inherently communal. We share history in order to be part of communities, and we use history as a way to barter hierarchies in social status. To control history – to literally write history in your own words – is to represent one particular version of an event, as any history is necessarily a narrativized account of an actual moment in time. Wikis become a way of representing the mutable nature of history.

This fact, that knowledge is inherently narrativized and mutable, can be downright scary. The Orwellian nightmare of a rewritable history is antithetical to a democratic society. Yet the wiki, the most democratic of all new media technologies, allows this very mutability. To engage with new media technology takes knowledge and experience. Often, we look to the familiar to scout out relationships to the new. In this article, I have demonstrated how traditional media texts, like *Doctor Who*, can act as heuristics for understanding new media technologies like wikis. As an epitome of this type of heuristic, the wiki *tardis.wikia* represents a joining of narrative knowledge production and wiki historical knowledge production. Through the four historical codes discussed in this article – the Meta Code, the Diegetic Code, the External Code and the Future Code – we can understand some of the more complex characteristics, including talk and history pages, and the rewritability and credibility of wikis.

If, as Halavais (2009: 111) states, ‘knowledge is a vital part of democratic self-rule’, then it is crucial to maintain a strict understanding of the technologies of knowledge production for a healthy society. To look at the nature of knowledge, of history, of narrative or of the interaction between all three is to focus on central tenets of our society. If, as the Doctor forewarns, that ‘time is being rewritten’, it is imperative to

learn not just who does the rewriting, but also how that rewriting functions in a socio-cultural context (Smith 2010). Although *Doctor Who* and *tardis.wikia* may be fictional texts, the characteristics they describe are applicable in many realms of culture.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> For ease of reference, I will refer to this site as [tardis.wikia](http://tardis.wikia.com). Wikias are ad-supported wikis.
- <sup>2</sup> The show, in fact, was originally intended to be a historically themed children's show, as it features a time-travelling grandfather figure travelling to different time periods in Earth's history. Although the producers did continue to feature historical moments in the show for many years, once the first appearance of dreaded enemy the Daleks occurred, the show's science fiction elements took precedence.
- <sup>3</sup> Although the term 'concrete' is misleading, as wikis can constantly change.
- <sup>4</sup> The difference can best be summed up by examining a television show like *24* (2001–2010) – a real-time action/adventure show that follows a multitude of characters. As viewers, we are shown only snippets of each character's day; what we see on-screen is the *sjuzhet*. However, to reconstruct what happened to the characters in between the moments we see them is to re-create (or imagine) the *fabula*.
- <sup>5</sup> Of course, there is an inherent paradox at the heart of the *fabula*/*sjuzhet* divide, as narrative scholars such as Herman (2002) and Walsh (2001) have described: that is, the *fabula* only exists because it has appeared, however briefly, within the nature of the *sjuzhet*. At the same time, however, there must be an inherent difference, for the *fabula* exists as separated from the *sjuzhet* experientially.
- <sup>6</sup> *Doctor Who* is the longest running science fiction show on television, and one of the longest running shows of all time, having started in 1963 and continuing (with some breaks) until the present.

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<sup>7</sup> As of 28 June 2010, the article is 3300 words long and the talk page is 11,600 words long.

<sup>8</sup> He was wearing a jacket the second time he talked to Amy, but not the first.

<sup>9</sup> A story canon is the complete backstory of a fictional text. It is common to have extensive canons with long-form television shows like *Doctor Who*. Wikis are akin to fan-reproduced canon texts.

<sup>10</sup> The thought is, as more people contribute, the greater the breadth of knowledge that becomes available – ‘No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity’ (Lévy 1997, quoted in Jenkins 2006: 26–27).