

The Death of Doctor Who

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Final author's draft of article for [Visual Imagination Limited](#)

A final edited version appeared in TV Zone Special #36

In the ten or so years since the credits rolled on the last episode of the ironically named *Survival*, members of the viewing public have understandably been of the opinion that **Doctor Who** has died a somewhat ignominious death. It's an opinion that's endorsed by the series' gradual slippage from a primetime family viewing slot into the uncharted void of post-**Wogan** midweek oblivion; to all intents and purposes, vanishing behind television's equivalent of drawn hospital curtains.

But it doesn't take much more than a quick look around to see that there's still a few signs of life, and not just an occasional blip either. There's always a new special or film project around the corner, repeats happily riding through the ether, and a constant stream of books, videos and even DVDs steadily filling up increasing number of shop shelves near you. It seems as though **Doctor Who** is the one programme in British television history that refuses to give up the ghost. But really it's not so much a case of the series that won't, but of the series that *can't*. For many people **Doctor Who** isn't dead, merely sleeping - and it's increasingly likely that it's going to wake up properly sooner or later.

The trouble is that revivals come and go on a frighteningly regular basis. Every once in a while someone decides to resurrect a series' format - be it **The Avengers**, **The Professionals** or **Blake's 7** - and there'll be a brief flurry of excitement, followed by a spate of frenzied indifference. Whatever the series, though, the attitude of today's audience remains constant: after the critical lynch mob moves on, torches and pitchforks in hand, the series is given a less than dignified burial, save for an occasional fond remembrance during a game of Trivial Pursuit.

There are, however, exceptions. Whilst most series seem grateful for the provision of a wooden box and garlic-stuffed teddy-bear, a few manage to sink their talons into the hearts and minds of the audience in such a way that revival is an inevitability. The original **Star Trek** is a perfect example: after its unceremonious junking nothing new was heard for ten years, until the vaguely inappropriately titled 'Motion Picture' came along, followed by a string of box office successes. With interest revived, it made perfect sense for Paramount to bring it back into production, pulling out of the hat what's widely regarded as the definitive **Trek** series in the process.

Obviously there are a few differences between the two models: **Doctor Who** is older and had a far longer run than **Star Trek** did before cancellation but, like its stable-mate, it has for some years found itself just about surviving in the tele-visual wilderness, its endurance not just due to a group of loyal fans but also because of a very real affection for it in the hearts of the television audience.

That affection is a very curious thing, created by the series' ability to both draw together and span the generations. It was always designed as a family series, a genre with more than its fair share of mysterious and eccentric heroes, and certainly with a more than adequate supply of ordinary people caught up in events they don't understand. And it's those ordinary people which are the key to drawing the audience into the show, allowing them someone to ask that all important question: "Just what is going on?" – neatly allowing the Doctor to explain it both to them and the viewers at home. It's important to understanding the series' appeal that it's not entirely lumped with generic Science Fiction. Obviously it has an appeal to fans of that genre, but if it wasn't for the focus on family entertainment then vast quantities of the audience wouldn't even touch it with a freshly sharpened stake.

Watching a family series is a unique experience, even in these days when the ideal of the nuclear family has been somewhat blown apart. But that experience is never the same for anyone, there's a slightly different appeal for each age group. From children, viewing in wide eyed wonder, their imaginations in overdrive at the wonder of a universe blown open for them for 25 minutes a week; through teenagers and students, more worldly wise, but still demanding to be entertained; and adults, intrigued and at the same time reminded of the cosy experience of watching as children. And over time the changing nature of the series appealed to different groups of people, the Doctor's different personae creating different responses in the various strata of its target audience. It's also interesting that despite the dating of many of the programme's visuals as technology advances, **Doctor Who** can still captivate. Whilst the older members of the modern audience will notice the imperfections, the magic and unique appeal of a family show allows them to be easily forgiven.

Despite the diversity of appreciation possible, the series remains a reassuringly familiar icon, allowing

people to return touch base with it when they so desire. If you get a group of people together it doesn't take much to kick-start "oh yeah, do you remember..." conversations on the subject. And at the same time it doesn't take much time for them to get quite animated. **Doctor Who** compartmentalises vast sections of the audience; if you don't have some form of opinion on the series, preferred Doctors, monsters or possibly even stories, then you could end up feeling that you've missed out.

November's BBC **Doctor Who Theme Night** proves an interesting point about the programme's status. Theme nights are usually reserved for special occasions: entire decades, warning us not to get too nostalgic about those hot pants; to capitalise on a programme's sudden success; or else they're given over to some cultural institution or other. Hopefully **Doctor Who** fits neatly into the last category, although the fab and groovy gear of some of the companions makes you wonder, and it's this which has helped its survival to date. It's also vaguely telling that the press went into excited overdrive the minute it was announced, ignoring pretty much everything else that BBC Two's new season promised. Presumably even journalists were kids once.

But the series' entrenchment in popular culture isn't just due to its pitch as a family programme. **The Box of Delights**, for example, whilst an undoubtedly magical piece of family-oriented television, can hardly be regarded as an institution in its own right. Instead, **Doctor Who** also relies on the fact that it skilfully reflected certain aspects of our culture so people would rapidly identify with it. Thus, Tom Baker's early stories referenced the gothic style of the Hammer Horror films; Pertwee's early stories drew their inspiration from the news and other television drama; and the comic-book feel of McCoy's era responded to a resurgence of that art-form in the late 80s. By mirroring such images it became linked with them, at the same time feeding back its innovations: the Daleks, the TARDIS, the Cybermen and the Doctor himself.

And you don't have to go very far to see that feedback in action. Not only has 'Dalek' crept into the OED, but arguably the series' most famous symbol, the TARDIS, has cropped up in songs by Robbie Williams and the Beautiful South (*Life Thru a Lens* and *How Long's a Tear Take to Dry* respectively). Even Ben Elton's managed a lengthy diatribe regarding the dimensions of teapots in motorway service stations.

And he even managed to make it funny.

So, to a certain extent, **Doctor Who** has been sustained by becoming enmeshed in its audience's lives. Whatever the ups and downs of the Doctor's relationship with the viewing public over the years, his firm grip on the nation's consciousness remains unshakeable. Due to its longevity, flexibility and widespread appeal the series firmly placed itself as the biggest cultural icon television the UK has produced. And so far, even if you haven't seen it, you can't really avoid it one way or another.

But then, thousands of children are growing up without ever having seen an episode. Sadly, that's got very little to do with its cancellation since even in the programme's dying days, few people were aware it was still being produced. In terms of its production for television the situation has hardly improved any, and there's only so long the fond memories of a few generations can keep it alive. **Doctor Who** could be living on borrowed time as these new children catch up with the old.

Or at least, that would be the case if the powers at BBC Worldwide hadn't needed a **Trek**-like franchise all of their very own. The Paul McGann TV Movie revived interest in a way that parallels the **Trek** films and despite the relative failure of the pilot in America, the BBC Worldwide stand at the 1996 media fair allegedly found other countries' interest in buying the show outstripping that for **Pride and Prejudice**, despite a lack of brooding men in dripping shirts. It's also worth remembering that the worryingly ill-thought out *Dark Dimensions* project, scheduled for the show's 30th Anniversary, was to be made by Worldwide itself, until the production side of the Corporation got uppity and killed it off.

What this means, though, is that there is a very strong desire to push the series as a product – and Worldwide certainly want to have something new to sell. With the BBC itself apparently only interested in using the programme to fill up gaps in the schedule, Worldwide have found some other way around it. Not only have they attempted to regenerate the programme into books and licensed audio productions, but they continue to pursue film and other production deals. At the same time, the videos adequately cater for those who can't accept anything other than something produced in the series' original medium.

Whilst it's tempting to see the theme night and repeats as a sign of the BBC's commitment to the

series, or else as a cynical piece of advertising to boost Worldwide's sales, both cases are unlikely. It's almost certain that the latter will happen, but the two arms of the BBC function entirely separately. Even so, it's not bad by any means; they serve a purpose, consolidating the series' position as a cultural icon and when coupled with the series' growing strength as a merchandising phenomenon, vampirically draining the life-blood from thousands of overdrafts, it would seem that **Doctor Who**'s profile is on the up. Whilst it's a shame that new adventures haven't yet found their way onto television, the Doctor's travels continue in a format where the sets can wobble to taste – something which DVD hasn't quite caught up with yet. With its constant stream of books and audio adventures, and it's indelible contribution to our cultural make-up, **Doctor Who** is going stronger than it has for a long time, waiting for the moment when it's revival can be completed and it can pounce once again on its audience.

All in all, it seems surprisingly active for a corpse.