

Scooby-Doo and The Unkillable Media Franchise

Hannah Barbera's "Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?" was created in 1969 and was the push that set 50 years of Scooby-Doo content into motion. The show follows four teenagers; Daphne, Fred, Shaggy, Velma, and their dog Scooby-Doo. They are known as the "Mystery Gang" or "Mystery Incorporated." In each episode, the group travels to an undisclosed location to solve a mystery. By the end of the episode, the fivesome have trapped the monster and pulled off the mask to reveal a character they had met earlier in the episode. Over the course of five decades the show has been adapted, but the premise has largely stayed the same. So how is it that such a simplistic storyline became so beloved and managed to survive years longer than its competitors? In this essay, I explore the show's founding, its consistent and inconsistent characters, the importance of readaptations, and how nostalgia affects the human perception of childhood media. Dissecting these elements is essential to understanding the immortality of Scooby-Doo.

"Scooby-Doo, Where Are You" was originally pitched to CBS as "Who's S-s-scared" but was turned down because, as then-CBS president, Frank Staton, said, "We can't put that on the air. That's just too frightening." The show was subsequently altered so the characters were never in real danger. There was no real violence, only logical answers to simple mysteries. The monsters under the bed were just men in masks. This version of the show had a pro-social message: any problem can be solved with teamwork and friendship. This idea is especially important considering "Scooby-Doo" is a kids' show, and as Christopher Orr suggests in his article on [tell us], "As any parent knows, the surest way to comfort kids is to offer them an

alternative explanation for the horrors that go bump in the night: It was the cat, or the wind, or the uncle who forgot where the guest room was.” The heroes of the story are everyday people, which signals to viewers that anyone can save the day. One does not need to have superheroes or be expertly trained to fight in order to help others. Some later adaptations of the show would try to create supernatural explanations for the villains, but even then, at the end of the day, a group of mystery-loving teenagers and a dog were able to solve the mystery at hand.

The mystery gang first graced American television screens during a time of political unrest. With the Vietnam War, the rise in public protests, and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, the 1960s were a time of moral panic. Children’s television shows were filled with superheroes and spies such as “The Herculoids” and “Space Ghost and Dino Boy.” In *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* Kaiser explains, “For the first time since their invention, televised pictures made the possibility of anarchy in America feel real” (Kaiser 21). Still, it was not until the death of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 cemented the need for change in children’s media. RFK, despite his shortcomings, was a strong advocate for children and children’s causes. According to both *CNN* and *The Smithsonian Magazine*, his political identity was also packaged with his fatherhood. One of his primary political goals was to steer children’s television away from violence. According to the novel “Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation before the V-Chip” the betterment of children’s media was passed and claimed to be a tribute to RFK.

To see oneself as a character, one must sympathize with them. In “Engaging Characters, Fiction, Emotion, and The Cinema,” author Murray Smith proposes a system he refers to as “The Structure of Sympathy” that aims to illustrate the multi-level engagement that the audience has

with a character. The structure consists of three parts: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. Recognition refers to how the spectator (audience member) identifies the character as its own entity. The character does not have its own identity at this point, but still allows the opportunity for the character to develop and change. Alignment is meant to represent the relationship between story information and the experience of the character/narrator. Smith states that the purpose of alignment is to put the spectators in similar scenarios to the character relative to their emotions and knowledge. Finally, the process of audiences identifying with the character is followed by allegiance. Smith explains allegiance as follows: “Observing the behavior of a person in a certain situation about which we have limited knowledge—as is often the case with a character in a fiction—we imaginatively project ourselves into their situation and hypothesize as to the emotion(s) they are experiencing” (Smith 97). The spectator has begun building allegiance when they feel that they have evaluated the character’s morals. Having allegiance to a character comes with an understanding of how the character reacts to certain scenarios. Allegiance is strongly associated with POVs (point of view). If one can construct oneself with an understanding of the character's views and beliefs then one has successfully aligned themselves with said character.

The process Smith describes may seem complex for a children’s television show. Can children really put themselves in the shoes of cartoon teen sleuths? What may assist them in doing so with Scooby-Doo is that the characters are in both a literal and metaphorical sense very simple and 2D. That simplicity likely makes them accessible characters for children to project themselves onto. The fact that each character in the Mystery Gang only has one or two personality traits allows children to identify with particular characters and fill in the rest of the

character's traits so they align with the child's own. As a fellow "Scooby-Doo" lover told me, as a child her favorite member of the gang was Velma. When I asked her why she explained that growing up she felt different than other kids because of her love of learning. It was not common in the media for an intelligent character to be a girl and seeing that representation on the screen allowed my friend to see herself in Velma. With this small identifier, it became easier for her to map aspects of her identity with the character.

As various media studies scholars have argued, sometimes viewers do not see the characters as beings (fictional or otherwise), but rather as symbols of the viewer's personal experience. They root for or oppose what the character *represents* rather than the character itself. Professor Edner, a scholar on human nature in media, states, "...one of the essential purposes of scholarly film interpretation often was to recognize the symbolism of the characters, particularly their contribution to film themes. When considering films in the context of cultural criticism, the symptomatic of the characters (aka what made the character who they are and it's effects) again plays a more important role (in the film) because it (the symptom) can elucidate cultural mentalities of the socio-cultural consequences of particular films" (Edner 17). Yet, combining characters to mentalities does not always necessarily mean symbolic characters are modes of propaganda (although that is sometimes the case), they are not always meant to symbolize one exact thing and push the creator's ideals onto others. Rather, symbolism is there for audiences to relate to. Each character has a purpose within the narrative and has an origin story that an audience member can agree with or feel seen from. These characters-as-symbols can create building blocks for identification for the audience or simply serve as a political statement about a character and dismiss it as entertainment. For example, many of my queer friends and

acquaintances see Velma as a reflection of themselves. To them, Velma is a symbol for the LGBTQIA+ experience. Another example of a “Scooby-Doo character becoming well developed is Daphne’s character and her transition from “Danger Prone Daphene” to a sort of femme fatale character. As the feminist movement developed in the ’90s, so did her character. This can be seen in the recreations of her character in “The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo” (1985 “Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island” (1998), and the live-action film “Scooby-Doo” (2002) The symbolism of character complicated because a symbol can mean so many things, but the complexity is what makes the symbolism so intriguing. Seeing something within a character that represents what the spectator is going through can inspire people to watch more. People want to be seen and represented.

In the 50 years that Scooby-Doo has been alive, the characters have retained some of their original identifying features and also kept up with the times in terms of their qualities and commitments. Daphne still loves purple but is much stronger and harder working than she was in 1969. Fred has never been depicted without his ascot, but he has become less passive and more passionate about his friends and hyper-specific items in the last half-century. And the two-dimensional personalities that the audience was initially introduced to have grown more complex and human over time. The characters in the recent adaptations of the show are a collection of add-ons made over the decades of media produced by Hanna-Barbera. With each small change, the characters bring something new to the screen and audience, and thus twists on the old classic.

Although writers likely continue to develop characters to keep up with the times and continue to feel identifiable and relevant to new generations, those in charge of the Scooby-Doo franchise likely push for character changes to contend with the reality that at any given point in their fictional lives, the characters depend on copyright in order to begin character development. Creators must continue making changes to characters, however slight, to the characters to maintain copyright protection. As one tv writer explains, albeit critically, to avoid characters becoming part of the public domain, “You just need to have someone continue to release new works that have some minor change to the character, and they get to pretend you have a new starting point for the public domain ticker. That can’t be what the law intended” (Masnick, 2013). Whether it is what the law intended or not, small character changes have proved wonderful for Scooby-Doo.

With each new media addition to the Doo-verse, the creative team behind the shows have been able to take the original Mystery Gang, virtually blank slates, and slowly but surely flesh out real characters. These expansions of the character come with each new adaptation of the franchise. Over time the audience discovers that Shaggy listens to the band KISS, Fred loves to trap things, and Daphne is highly trained in the martial arts. The addition of such details about the characters’ interests and hobbies has allowed the characters to become the (relatively) unique ones we know today.

Robin Sharma, a best selling author, once said, “You know you’re winning when you see you’re being copied.” and this idea is no different in the world of Scooby-Doo. During its creation in 1969, it inspired 11 other nearly identical series across Boomerang alone. This led to shows such as “Buffy The Vampire Slayer,” “Mike Tyson Mysteries,” and “Saturday Morning

Mystery.” Over the course of its lifetime the original “Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?” has been adapted into 48 movies and 13 series, in addition to dozens of shorts, crossover episodes, comics, video games, and plays. The constant recreation of Scooby-Doo makes it so every generation for fifty years had easy access to the show. Scooby-Doo’s formula, although simplistic, is likable. The predictability has become a staple. The foreseeable plot twists are an essential part of the successful formula, not only because correctly guessing the narrative and/or villain can make an audience member feel smart but because, as one tv writer notes, “having a predictable twist doesn’t mean you’re a bad writer, in fact, it’s the opposite! You have to remember that it’s all about setup and execution. Sometimes it is not that your twist is obvious, but, rather, you’ve got a reader that knows how to pay close attention” (Rodriguez). Because the delivery of the plot supports the reveal, the monotony can become enjoyable.

When considering Scooby-Doo revivals, it is important to mention “Mystery Incorporated” the Scooby-Doo series that ran from 2010 to 2011. The adaption, while unpopular at the time, is now one of the more beloved versions of the series. “Mystery Incorporated” was one of the first in the Doo franchise to have an overarching storyline; besides “Scooby-Doo and the 13 Ghosts,” the overarching plot was thin and undetailed so much so that it got cancelled before the final episode of the first season.. “Mystery Incorporated” has the most character development since the 2002 live action film and had a realistic focus on the gang being teenagers. Though the gang liked solving mysteries, they still had to go to school, expected to spend time with family, and have long-term crushes. “Mystery Incorporated” successfully took the old blueprint of the show and added new exciting concepts. As William Thies (“Scooby-Doo Mystery Incorporated ft. Comic Drake) writes “Serialization totally benefits scooby doo... While

Mystery Incorporated does choose to go with a very easy to guess a formula for the whodunnit aspect, it keeps you engaged over a longer period of time by giving you pieces to the whole puzzle separately.” “Mystery Incorporated” broke out of the normalities of the Scooby-Doo verse by being darker yet more relatable than the original on which it is based without alienating old viewers who loved the original show.

The longevity of Scooby-Doo would be nearly impossible without the reboots. Remakes of Scooby-Doo are marketed to viewers by the simplest advertisement of all, nostalgia. Shows like these (readaptations) feed off of the nostalgia of the audience's love for the original. Producers capitalize off fond feelings that we, the public, already have. What is Scooby-Doo for most of us if not a memory from childhood? It is fair to assume that if one were to approach anyone who grew up or has children in the US and ask them if they know of Scooby-Doo, the answer would be yes. According to the Market Brand research blog, which conducted a poll, “The most nostalgic brand among 25-34-year-olds is Hanna-Barbera. The entertainment company provided many of the cartoons and characters that enriched the childhoods of this group.” and upon further research it was stated that, “Scooby-Doo is the most popular HB character. Topping all HB characters for appeal and the funny attribute, Scooby has been a mainstay of entertainment for decades, across multiple generations” (Market Research E-Poll). This shows that one of the main contributors to the survival of the Scooby-Doo franchise is, in fact, nostalgia. Showrunners and marketers use the audience’s nostalgia for the mystery gang to ensure revenue.

Nostalgia makes the audience think fondly of a piece of media. It makes the audience want to rewatch it, which keeps the franchise alive. Psychologist Pamela Rutledge notes that

rewatching a piece of media you enjoy can be an easy way of controlling your emotions. She states, "It can become really therapeutic, especially if you are feeling anxious. Watching the same piece multiple times reaffirms that there's order in the world and that it can create a sense of safety and comfort on a primal level" (Rutledge, Medium). Rewatching a show that you not only enjoy but makes you nostalgic is a sure-fire way to increase dopamine. Those who fondly remember their personal origins of the show may flock to restart Scooby-Doo when life feels hard.

Scooby-Doo and the rest of the Mystery Gang have been around fifty years for a combination of reasons. The original "Scooby-Doo, Where Are You" provided a safe haven in a time of political unrest that set the path for years of Scooby media to come. Due to the constant enhancements in the Scooby-Doo franchise, especially the remakes and consistent efforts to provide more well-rounded characters, only continue to improve the shows. Marketing nostalgia keeps the franchise alive and reminds audiences that there is always another Scooby revival around the corner. As Hank Stuever wrote in an article on Scooby-Doo the movie in 2002, "The essential Scooby worldview remains pleasantly intact: Kids should meddle, dogs are sweet, life is groovy, and if something scares you, you should confront it." In a world that is constantly changing, Stuevers idea remains true. With new media featuring Scooby and the gang appearing yearly, even in this unpredictable world it seems safe to say that the beloved Mystery Incorporated is not going away, and nor should it.

Citations

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Hey there, I wish you’d edited the final more carefully (both in terms of my comments on rough draft and catching your own punctuation and spelling errors), but the essay makes for a nice read and it’s certainly an accomplishment to meet the goals you set for yourself with an IS. I really, really tried to teach you some grammar, punctuation, and other writing-related rules and tricks, and I’m not sure how successful I was, but if you ever want to revisit this essay, I hope you’ll go back and pay attention to all the explanations I

provide in the comment boxes. I also encourage you to really think about the objections/criticisms one might have for the show, and seek them out with some research (or by applying what you've learned in Loza's classes to SD), and then respond to them. Sometimes authors address those critiques upfront, and use the rest of the essay to respond to them, or they get them out of the way early on by naming those critiques and acknowledging their value but then noting that the focus of their essay is on something different. Sometimes authors present critiques along the way (and respond to them), but I can't see that working with what you have here. Alternatively, if you were writing a position paper (or debating speech) you'd do it near the end ("Some have noted that SD is part of a largely very white universe in which... Indeed, this is unfortunate. However..."). Whatever strategy you employ, you always want to anticipate the best arguments *against* your own (esp in something like this where your essay is so uniformly positive), acknowledge that argument, and respond to it.

Lastly, I enjoyed working with you this semester (even on zoom with you in your car) and I really think it's a great thing to complete an IS in Div II, as Div III is basically a giant IS. Good job working pretty consistently and getting the final in on time (though I wish you'd taken a little more time to work on revisions).

Best wishes,

Viveca

