

**A Train That Went Places: A multimedia study of *Thomas the Tank Engine* as it relates to
Psychology and Fandom**

by

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the value of the show, *Thomas The Tank Engine*, as it has endured over 75 years, in part thanks to its fandom. It does so through the lens of a multimedia study of the psychology of the appeal of anthropomorphic stories, of children on the autism spectrum's connection to the show, as well as a literature review of these stories, comparing the original show's work as compared to the more recent content produced by *Mattel*. Finally, in order to connect this franchise and its history to a broader picture, fandom studies are used to analyze how a fan project such as *Project Tiger Moth* can represent a fandom and their appreciation for the original authors at the same time. The examination of the history of the show as the identity has shifted over time is used to analyze how the franchise has persisted this long and why fans are still appreciating it. It also discusses post-structuralist ideas put forth by Roland Barthes to examine the value of the author's words and how fans have not clung to those words, but have remained passionate for the content because it was the author's passion. While Barthes posits that the author sacrifices themselves when they create a work, this paper puts forth that the author is important in looking at the story of the franchise and the fandom's continued appreciation of it. When looking at fan work, it is clear that they are aware of the authors and make it a point to tribute them because they can appreciate what they have created, while still feeling liberated enough to create their own meanings and connections from it. It is not so much that the authors are completely eradicated by making their stories, but are remembered because their work connected to an audience and inspired their own work. Likewise, it is not that fans are solely attached to what the authors intended so that they can derive their own meanings while also keeping their work in mind when they make their own to feel more connected to the work and immerse themselves.

Introduction:

In a day and age where nostalgia can be a tool used for appeal, it is fascinating to find media that can hold up against the test of time and continue to inspire communities to make content and art in various forms. This paper discusses the value of one such show, *Thomas The Tank Engine*, as it has endured over 75 years, in part thanks to its fandom. It does so through the lens of a multimedia study of the psychology of the appeal of anthropomorphic stories, of children on the autism spectrum's connection to the show, as well as a literature review of these stories, comparing the original show's work as compared to the more recent content produced by *Mattel*. Finally, in order to connect this franchise and its history to a broader picture, fandom studies are used to analyze how a fan project such as *Project Tiger Moth* can represent a fandom and their appreciation for the original authors at the same time. The examination of the history of the show as the identity has shifted over time is used to analyze how the franchise has persisted this long and why fans are still appreciating it.

By using the post-structuralist ideas put forth by Roland Barthes, the value of the author's words becomes clearer as it is not how fans have clung to the words of the author, but have only augmented their passion for the content through the author's own passion (Barthes, 1967). While Barthes posits that the author sacrifices themselves when they create a work, this paper puts forth that the author is important in looking at the story of the franchise and the fandom's continued appreciation of it. When looking at fan work, it is clear that they are aware of the authors and make it a point to tribute them because they can appreciate what they have created, while still feeling liberated enough to create their own meanings and connections from it. It is not so much

that the authors are completely eradicated by making their stories, but are remembered because their work connected to an audience and inspired their own work. Likewise, it is not that fans are solely attached to what the authors intended so that they can derive their own meanings while also keeping their work in mind when they make their own to feel more connected to the work and immerse themselves.

One overlooked fact about the character of *Thomas the tank engine* is that his story began in a book series called *The Railway Series*, conceived in the early forties when the author Reverend Wilbert Awdry's son fell ill with a case of the measles, and he entertained him with these stories that he made up about engines on an imaginary railway. He chose railways since it was something he was very familiar with, and it stuck. The first book of *The Railway Series* (Awdry, 1945-2011) was published on May 12th, 1945, and didn't even feature *Thomas*. This book series began as simple stories based on a hobby Awdry had, but soon developed into work towards creating a fully fleshed imaginary world brimming with character fueled by a passion for railways. By 1972, Awdry had written twenty-six books and retired as the writer, passing the torch on to his son, Christopher Awdry, who would go on to write sixteen more books for the series, before concluding it in 2011, long after the show had reached high popularity, and long after his father's death.

With the success of the book series, there came other parties who wished to adapt it for television. There were two notable attempts before the most recognized version came to be to bring *The Railway Series* to the silver screen, but neither were able to be fully realized for various reasons. However, in the eighties, a woman named Britt Allcroft spearheaded the

production of the final and most successful attempt at a television series after falling in love with the stories. After several years of planning and developing what would be the television show, Allcroft founded *Gullane Entertainment* (formerly *The Britt Allcroft Company*) to produce the show, and would be the owner of the show until the early 2000s. When the television adaptation aired on Oct 9th, 1984, a broader audience was introduced to the world imagined by Awdry, and actualized by Britt Allcroft and David Mitton, the director. They took images from the book and gave them life through the use of large scale models and sets. The show allowed this world and characters to reach a new audience, but gave them new life and expression.

The first era of the show is used for the discussion of the literature review and understanding the fandom's connection to the franchise. This analysis will focus on seasons 1-7 (Mitton et al, 1984-2003), otherwise known to fans of the show as "the classic era." This era will be used to represent meaningful stories and aesthetics that are impactful for fans as it is the most widely favored era of the show by fans. In order to fully understand the journey of the show and the fandom's relationship to it, a comparison with the more recent era of the show produced under Mattel is used to analyze how things have changed in a direction far from the original show to further understand the reaction of fans that also inspires their art as commentary.

Anthropomorphism and psychological appeal

Awdry has said that his inspiration for these stories came from his passion for railways, and how he imagined the engines would talk to each other. Having grown up near a railway, Awdry had a strong connection to use for his stories, and what's more: a strong passion. One of

his first stories he wrote was based on one of these imagined conversations between two engines; one pulling a train up a hill while getting help from another from the back, and would imagine them talking to each other, forming a narrative between the two that would inform the stories he wrote (“1988: Rev W. Awdry on THOMAS THE TANK ENGINE,” (00:02:42- 00:03:27).

Although a simple idea, it is something that many people do. The success of *Thomas the Tank Engine* as well as other famous examples of anthropomorphism such as *Toy Story* (1995), *The little engine that could* (1930), etc., all demonstrate an innate tendency that “humans frequently use fantasy to go beyond sheer facts and include simple objects or images in narrative contexts, which make them appear more appealing and meaningful” (Airenti, 2018). As we see with Awdry and his imagination imbuing character to the engines he lived near, he does it before ever telling the stories for his son, simply because it is something he enjoyed doing.

Although there appears to be no concrete evidence for any benefits to come from anthropomorphizing inanimate objects to help learn morals or understand the world better, it is certainly a natural tendency among children and adults (Severson, Woodard, 2018). The stories themselves center around these anthropomorphized characters simply for the sake of enjoyment and because it is something that the author was connected to. While discussing the fanfiction that is made based off of this world and its stories, it is important to look into what contributes to this desire to imagine this world because upon looking at the origins of this franchise and the ones who remain attached to it, there is the common desire to express themselves through this world and through these characters because of factors like the human tendency to anthropomorphize.

There is no denying that the *Thomas the Tank Engine* as a concept is fantastical in nature, but this does not necessarily mean that the show defies physics or expectations as it was originally conceived. *Thomas* is still grounded by taking place in a world that is almost exactly like ours (even with some overlap as seen by references to real life engines such as Stepney the bluebell engine or The Flying Scotsman, two engines that are still preserved today) and keeps to these rules with how the engines move or their roles on the railway (pulling freight or passengers). It is important to note some findings that suggest that fantastical shows that defy reality can affect children's expectations in life to some extent (Rhodes, Stewart, Kenevski, 2019). This of course does not mean that the classic era is better because of its use of models, but it helps to cement the idea that the Island of Sodor could be a real place for others to imagine, using realistic visuals that don't defy expectations for real railways.

This paper has discussed the human tendency to anthropomorphize despite there being no apparent benefits, but does that necessarily mean shows like *Thomas* don't have any affect on their viewers? One answer to this might be, as Tang suggests, is that when children are immersed in a plot and characters, it helps "them to perform their own stories" (Tang, 2021). Which is also supported by research looking at children and their relationship to *Thomas* toys and how they are used to "articulate personal meaning to the trains that enables them to further interpret their own cultural settings" (Edwards, 2011). In this study, Edwards looked at some content created by a fan of the show where one of the characters is involved in a story about Thanksgiving, and as Edwards points out, the actual show comes from England, which makes the use of the characters in this instance seem more personal. So through the use of anthropomorphization, these objects

that are inanimate, become personal and human-like so that the reader and/or author can ascribe meaning to them, and process their own feelings and cultural settings.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

One particular demographic for the show that not only shows the broad appeal of the franchise, but other ways to appreciate it, is Children with Autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, who have shown to have an attachment to the show due to many many of its elements. Many of these elements relate to the classic era, such as the physical attributes of the models like their wheels and various details. One article written by Javed, they found that children with (ASD) are drawn to *Thomas the Tank Engine* for a variety of reasons that have to do with the fact that the characters are themselves engines. Features like the spinning wheels or intricate details are satisfying, as well as other adjacent traits like schedules or railway tracks that add predictability, which is also satisfying. Another great appeal to these characters is, as the paper states, “the unambiguous behaviors and their clear facial expressions,” as it helps children with ASD better understand emotions (Javed, 2015). The paper puts forth that *Thomas* can act as a comfort character for children with ASD because of these attributes and through the ubiquity of the character in various forms, which creates a feeling of familiarity (Javed, 2015).

Some of these forms that the *Thomas* characters can come in are in the form of toys and merchandise. These also bring satisfaction in their physical traits. It also seems that, while satisfying, “there are even some reports of *Thomas* encouraging symbolic play (children pretending to be different *Thomas* characters and reenacting scenarios), which is otherwise

absent in children with autism” (Javed, 2015). Further showing the connection children may have with this world and their own by using role-play. Similar to the aforementioned case of one content creator using *Thomas* characters to tell a story about thanksgiving, role-play or similar forms of expression can be used to process the world as well as the individual. Role-play is a way of processing for children, and can be a way of learning or engaging in positive behaviors and develop “general tendencies which influence the performance of those acts, such as the capacity for empathy” (Staub, (1971, Mares & Woodard, 2010).

This is especially crucial for those with ASD as some studies suggest that “a child with ASD often has difficulties with perceiving his/her own feelings and experiences.” and that “during art-making, the child may explore and develop preferences and new skills, based on a better processing of feelings and experiences” (Ben Itzchak et al., 2016). What these studies show us is the impact of the franchise on a broader scale, and its capacity to inspire art making and understanding. It is because of the effort made by Awdry to make these engaging characters and stories that they can influence children’s play and use them to make their own meanings.

The classic era

As for the show itself, when looking at themes presented in season three of *Thomas the Tank Engine*, there are multiple episodes that deal with themes, such as fear, hope, or dreams in a less forced way than can be seen in more recent seasons produced by Mattel or Hit Entertainment. This is likely due to the author’s own feelings towards writing for children, being that the material can be enjoyed by both children and adults, so there is no reason to talk down to

them. As George Carlin, one of the many narrators of the show, said in an interview, “The morals of these stories were never... blatant... they were gently massaged into the framework of the show” (00:18:45-00:18:55,). One episode, “Escape” (Mitton, Allcroft), deals with the character Oliver being rescued, and given sanctuary on the island of Sodor, because they face the issue of modernization and steam engines being out of date, another real world influence on Awdry’s stories. So we see a world that isn’t perfect, again bringing back this idea of reality to a fantastical premise and showing depth to this world for the audience while not talking down to them. If meaning is subject to interpretation, then seeing a flawed world leaves more room for interpretation. In these stories, there is struggle and disagreement beyond just the characters themselves, but the world around them, and it is their ability to navigate this world and their problems that makes them all the more appealing.

In another episode “All at sea” (Mitton, Allcroft), the story shows us the character Duck wanting to sail on the ocean, but being teased by his friend Percy because he is an engine and shouldn’t waste time thinking about that, since it is not possible. In the episode, Duck affirms what he appreciates about being an engine, and the episode ends by conveying that despite our identity and whatever limitations those hold, it is still important to have those dreams. These are concepts that relate to children and people as a whole and lead to further meaning making for their audience. Stories like these are able to craft narratives and characters that are believable and relatable while conveying positive messages that as some studies are capable of inspiring positive behavior (Mares & Woodard, 2010). The world and characters shown in Awdry’s books and Allcroft and Mitton’s classic era of the series are given depth to elevate the moral lessons put into the stories that create relatability. So psychologically, it’s not that these stories or characters

objectively change their audience on a chemical or behavioral level, but that they emotionally can resonate with them to create their own meanings and inspire them to create their own stories through fanfiction or otherwise to explore the world the authors have created.

Early 2000s shift in identity

Wilbert Awdry had stopped writing stories well before his death in 1997, and the team working on the show had already been writing original stories for the show, one such story being the aforementioned “All at sea” (Mitton, Allcroft). This however led to Allcroft taking a major step in making a movie for the big screen using *Thomas the tank engine*, and at the start of the 21st century, *Thomas and the Magic Railroad* (2000) made its debut in theaters. This step for the franchise might have been an overstep as the film was a box office failure. This would inevitably affect the show when the company producing the show, *Gullane Entertainment* did not have the budget to keep going, resulting in the company being bought by Hit Entertainment in 2002 (Milmo, 2002).

This would mark a dramatic shift in identity for the franchise as there was a complete change in the production team and direction. Hit Entertainment sought to make the show more simplified for children, as made clear by the “*Thomas & Friends bible*” (2003), that was made for the new writers of the shows to use as a basis for episodes. This guideline was very different from the ideas Awdry and the original showrunners had in mind for the series, working under the maxim “Simplicity is key” (Fehrle, Phil, Grant, Abi, 2003). With other rules in place that directly underestimated the intelligence of children watching, assuming that things like “compound

sentences make a demand that is beyond the reach of a *Thomas* audience” (Fehrle, Phil, Grant, Abi, 2003). This was the start of the series’ path to being simplified with more emphasis on marketing and toys rather than character and stories and unfortunately would set the precedent for how the show is recognized now.

Analysis of Mattel’s Thomas

In 2011, Mattel would buy the *Thomas* franchise from Hit Entertainment (Sweney, 2011), and there would be more changes made to the production crew, direction, etc. once again. This would include a shift to computer generated animation (also known as CGI), which would allow for more fantastical scenarios to take place. The most recent season of *Thomas & Friends*, season 24, is of particular interest for the purpose of this paper as it represents how the show has strayed from what it once was in favor of simpler, more marketable concepts. The stories they have made have less to do with railways, and have become more simplified in nature, in order to become more marketable for a broader audience. These episodes include segments where the characters take part in very fantastical situations, completely removed from reality. The engines themselves become more cartoon-like due in part to the show being computer animated, having them move unnaturally, unlike an actual steam engine would. In an episode like “James, the super engine” (McCue, Blagdon), we see the protagonist imagining himself in a fantastical situation, where he is a flying superhero. He then later pretends to be one while doing illogical things like, mistaking a goat bell as a cry for help. The resolution of the episode sees him partaking in a very unrealistic situation for a railway with cartoonish happenings all played for comedic effect. This new identity for the show completely goes against what the author

originally intended in a way that also disregards the long time fans of the show. This era is necessary for defining what fans value in the show, that being endearing, well-rounded characters who act like real steam engines would despite the added fantasy of anthropomorphism, and what they disassociate with it such as overly simplified stories using gimmicks and exaggerated fantasy. While this era of the show literally takes place after the death of the author, what this new direction shows is the complete loss of identity an intellectual property can have when there is no little to no acknowledgement or engagement with the original intent. What the fandom alternatively shows is the ability to engage with what came before in moderation; taking essential elements and innovating them, and finding creative ways to change others. By going in a completely different direction, *Mattel* creates a completely despondent identity from what was before that lacks that same passion for railways or the characters themselves.

This has led to much backlash from these fans, who decry the ways the new producers would get the characters wrong or the writing taken a significant downgrade compared to the classic era. One such as one content creator “The Unlucky Tug” who is one of the most well known figures in the community would go on to make multiple videos discussing the lacking quality of this content (The Unlucky Tug, YouTube, 2020,). The Fanbase has made it clear how they feel about this era of the show and how it does not represent the show that they have grown to appreciate. However, all of this disdain for the current direction of the show has not deterred *Mattel* from implementing these elements. In these episodes where we see characters in overly fantastic situations, we also see that *Mattel* aims to create work not for the sake of anyone to respond to or become immersed in, but for the sake of profit, in spite of the ones who want to

enjoy it. If there is minimal effort being put into making these stories with disregard for their characters and heart of the franchise, then there is little meaning to be made from it, other than that of criticism. As of the writing of this paper, Mattel has ended the original show to reboot and work on a new show, *All Engines Go!* (Suvalle, Gallo, Sichta, 2021), which abandons any sense of realism for a much more cartoonish aesthetic with even less of a focus on railways, which has received its own form of backlash from fans and even Britt Allcroft herself (Chappell, 2024).

Fandoms and their importance to the franchise

This leads to the final and most important part of this paper: a discussion of the fandom born from *Thomas the Tank Engine* and its appreciation for the original material while still having its own identity. One crucial point of this discussion has looked at how viewers have engaged with the franchise of *Thomas the tank engine* by ways it might help to process the world or emotions, while this section is especially about the relationship fans have with the show and what they make out of that relationship. This can take the form of fanfiction, or academically referred to as fan studies in a broader sense as it applies to many forms of fan appreciation. Many if not all of these forms can be found in the *Thomas* fandom, many of which can be found in the form of writing stories. Fanfiction writing can be thought of “as derivative amateur writing—that is, texts written based on another text, and not for professional publication...” (Hellekson et al, 2014). While there is quite a large fanbase centered around Thomas, and much more fan work made from it, this paper will be looking at one project in particular that is seen as the “peak” of the fandom according to some.

“Project Tiger Moth” (Jarrett, 2022) was formulated and directed by Jacob Jarrett with the help of other fan members with all other aspects of production. The idea of this project was to create an original “episode” in the style of the actual show using models and sets designed to emulate it; the opening credits directly pay tribute to Awdry, Mitton, and Allcroft. The project was a non-profit project developed over the course of 2 and a half years, and it premiered on YouTube on Nov 26, 2022, with the help of many members of the community. The episode’s title “The Good Old Days,” and central plot revolve around nostalgia, something that in relation to fandoms, is “not so much about loss of the past but a tactic for dealing with the present and a celebration of historical texts that no longer disappear thanks to their retelling through new media technologies and the spaces of fan interaction like the convention” (Geraghty, 2018). The episode’s message suggests that nostalgia and history can still have a place after their time has passed when there are those willing to appreciate it.

This fan community has decided that these stories and characters in the classic era are important to them— not how Mattel depicts them. This connects nicely to Jenkins’ idea that fans and, by extension, “fanfiction is a way of the culture repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk.” (Jenkins, In Harmon 1997). And it is due to this community, that this project was made possible at all, coupled with their willingness to recreate this imagined world that they have fallen in love with for a common purpose. This cooperation amongst fans not only creates something that can be appreciated, but “expands social, cooperative, and organizational skills, and develops the individual’s imagination and creativity. [They] establish communities of practice on many levels beyond the control of an official organization” (Vartiainen, 2015). This project is a sort of

milestone for the community as a whole because it took the efforts of various community members to make it happen. The fan community members all willingly took part in this project and other projects like this because they have built this community together, and share their desire to keep making content that encapsulates their own passion for the work that inspired them.

Although there is much diversity in this community, there remains the common appreciation for the show, while leaving room for “an ethos of self-care and community building that makes fandom a unique space for thinking about the pedagogies required to enable open literacy and connected learning within a participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2019). Which leads to the other purpose of this project, which is to serve as a sort of community response to Mattel’s unwillingness to acknowledge them, and acts as a rejection of their creative decisions as it talks down to them and disinterests them. They feel strongly enough about their connections to this as “selective users of a vast media culture whose treasures, though corrupt, hold wealth that can be mined and refined for alternative uses” (Hellekson et al, 2014). Even though *Thomas* has now been corporatized for over two decades, the fans see past this because they continue to appreciate the original passion made from the ones they tribute in the opening credits. They feel connected enough to this world that they can project their own feelings via the characters they are so familiar with, because they have connected to the characters and their own mental states, which can be appealing to fans (Barnes, 2012; Mar and Oatley, 2008).

Project Tiger Moth is a statement for these fans that there is a specific charm to the show that appeals to them because it was made from passion. Awdry had a clear passion for railways,

and for making this world, and Allcroft and Mitton had a passion for making the show. So it is not that the work of the show is separate from the creators and the fans derive their own meanings that is of note, but because of these particular creators putting so much effort into this work that attracts fans and keeps them coming back while leaving room for exploration and innovation in meaning making and creativity. There is certainly value to be gleaned from both the show and fan productions like this without any knowledge of the authors or their intentions, but it is through the acknowledgment of them that fans gain more appreciation for the franchise and become even more connected to it. There is also a niche in this fandom that appreciates these particular points in the franchise's history, and rejects what is here now because of what was before.

When looking at this project as representative of the fandom's own feelings towards the current state of the franchise as well as their appreciation for the classic era, it would seem as though that the authors are crucial to understanding the fandom. However, it is not that the author's own meanings determine what fans derive from these stories, but in a more post-structuralist sense, the fans "are the ones who so willingly take a book's poor words and from them shape a fantasy paradise which the authors themselves don't know anything about, a paradise where they freely and happily socialize with fictional friends just as if they were flesh and blood" (Lindgren, 2017). These fans are not tied down by anything the authors have said about this world, but make it a point to recognize their importance in creating something that they have come to appreciate, using their world as a basis for their stories and meaning making, in this case, intentionally to tribute them. They immerse themselves in the world and the making of it to build their connection to it.

This paper has discussed a lot about the relationship the fans and the authors have as it relates to the content they create, and by extension the meanings they make as well. In Barthes' "Death of the Author," he makes the case that the author cannot produce an absolute meaning for their text, and it is up to the reader (or viewer) to create that meaning. That the "image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author... his passions" (Barthes, 1967). And while it is directly because of those passions, that the show and series came to be, in the case of this franchise, the fandom has perpetuated the love and recognition of this series through their own various meanings and relationships to it. What *Thomas the Tank Engine* proves is that passion begets passion, so when a person sees this world that has clearly been fleshed out, they are drawn to it, and it can inspire them to create their own work. Project tiger moth is a community effort made by various artists to create a piece of art that represents them. It shows us that "fandom is not a religion and does not depend on literal belief, but it recognizes the power of great stories to move hearts and minds" (Jenkins, 2012) and this project shows how passionate they are about something that stuck with them. They use their own creativity to tell stories with characters that mean something to them. So they create based off of their own passion for the world that they can derive their own meanings from while still acknowledging the original authors to add to their work, not take away from it.

Conclusion

Looking through the history of the franchise, and the many changes that have occurred in the *Thomas the Tank Engine* property has gone under many changes in its over 75 years of

existence, it has endured for many reasons that have to do with the human tendency to personify inanimate objects, and the broad appeal of trains themselves, whether that be their physical qualities or adjacent ones. Despite having had several owners who have shifted its identity, it is the fans who are important in understanding why it is remembered since they are the ones who continue to discuss its history and stories. Fans have the power to influence a property's identity because of the connection they have with it, so even when a company like Mattel has diluted the franchise in the hopes of being more marketable, the fans can keep the memory of what once was alive by creating work that honors that original passion. So while this paper takes the stance that the authors are important to the identity of the franchise, and are especially valued by the fans, it is those fans that have maintained and shaped that identity in an attempt to give the passion that has inspired them the appreciation they believe it deserves. When looking at fan studies, the *Thomas* fandom demonstrates its capacity for commentary and community engagement, which happens in spite of a company that does not seem to acknowledge them. Like the show itself, the fandom has gone through many changes, but it remains unified in its desire to keep *Thomas* fresh while still acknowledging its history.

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