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Citation:

Spracklen, K and Lamond, I (2025) The Discworld Mapp'd: Constructing competing narratives of inequality in science-fiction fandom. *Leisure Sciences*. pp. 1-16. ISSN 0149-0400 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2025.2464552>

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Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

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Leisure Sciences

An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ulsc20

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To cite this article: Karl Spracklen & Ian Lamond (14 Feb 2025): The Discworld Mapp'd: Constructing Competing Narratives of Inequality in Science-Fiction Fandom, Leisure Sciences, DOI: [10.1080/01490400.2025.2464552](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2025.2464552)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2025.2464552>



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Published online: 14 Feb 2025.



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The Discworld Mapp'd: Constructing Competing Narratives of Inequality in Science-Fiction Fandom

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ABSTRACT

Terry Pratchett's authorial lens has focussed ever more on the human condition. In 2021, the books known by fans as the City Watch Trilogy, were *adapted* for television and have been attacked by fans for betraying Pratchett's vision. In this paper, we explore how fans have attacked this BBC *adaptation* in public spaces online as part of their communicative leisure performativity. For some, changes in the internal motivations of key characters, plot changes, and the strange re-building of the city of Ankh-Morpork (guarded by Sam Vimes and the City Watch) is enough for them to reject it. For others, though, it is changing characters genders and ethnicities that has driven their refusal to endorse the programme. We show that this criticism is not justified: even though early Pratchett found humor in racial and sexual stereotypes, his later work is driven by a commitment to inclusion and a rejection of hegemony.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 August 2024
Accepted 4 February 2025

KEYWORDS

adaptation; fandom;
identity; leisure;
populism; terry Pratchett

Introduction

Fan communities have provided a source of solidarity and belonging, as well as dissent and contestation, well before the arrival of the internet (see, for example, Lewis, 1992). Being a football fan has long been established as an identity where meaning is found through ritual, the consumption of merchandise, and the exclusion of rival clubs and nations (Brooks, 2019). Popular music fans have worn the right t-shirts, attended gigs and mistrusted the tribes of the Others, whether jazz freaks, teddy boys, hippies, mods, rockers, metalheads, punks, goths, hip-hoppers, or the various permutations of EDM (Miller, 2011). These form communities of practice with their own discursive frameworks for interaction, their own lifeworlds and communicative behaviors (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Fans of popular cultural forms created for television—or other media intended for large-scale consumption such as gaming—have historically played huge roles in shaping that culture, from the fans who wrote letters to the studio executives successfully ensuring the third season of *Star Trek* (Greenberger, 2012) to the fans

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who successfully secured the continuation of *Lucifer* when it was rescued by Netflix (Carter, 2021).

More recently, fandom has grown exponentially alongside the globalization of culture, digitalization, and the importance of leisure spaces in a post-Fordist, post-industrial, liquid modern society (Bauman, 2001). This can be seen in the polyvocality and performativity of late modern leisure spaces. Sports fans might argue with each other about whether there is too much money in football, black metal fans may play at being evil in their bedrooms, and genre fans could find all their favorite properties on streaming sites.¹ Fandom is, however, constrained by the power of hegemony and the performativity of exclusion (Bennett & Booth, 2015). Fandom in liquid modernity often constructs hegemonic masculinity and instrumental whiteness, even if fans increasingly reject these ideologies. And fandom in this performative leisure space is increasingly becoming strident, exclusionary of others and extreme. Fandom, then, like any other part of society in today, has mirrored the populist turn in activism seen since utopian idealism of the Occupy movements was replaced by the white, working-class resentment expressed by the *gilets jaunes* and the Brexiters (Gerbaudo, 2023).

Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels remain hugely popular and widely read, even after the author's death in 2015, with millions of books sold around the world in dozens of languages. Rebecca Ann Bach (2023) shows the continued importance of his texts today, as well as the importance of his progressive voice. From its genesis in the sword-n-sorcery pastiche of *The Color of Magic* (1983), to the sophisticated social critique to the boosterism of nineteenth-century railways in his penultimate novel *Raising Steam* (2013), Pratchett's authorial lens focussed ever more on the human condition. Before his death, Pratchett's novels were transformed into plays, comics, cartoons and television programmes. Recently the books known by fans as the City Watch Trilogy, until they expanded to more books, have been adapted for television and have been attacked by fans for betraying Pratchett's vision. In this paper, we explore how these fans have attacked that BBC production in public spaces online as part of their communicative leisure performativity. We are especially interested in whether the populist trends identified by Gerbaudo (2023) are present in the fandom's online protests. For some, changes in the internal motivations of key characters, plot changes and the strange re-building of the city of Ankh-Morpork—which is guarded by Sam Vimes and the City Watch—is enough for them to reject the *adaptation*. For others, though, it is the fear of progressives changing characters' gender and ethnicity that has driven their refusal to endorse the programme. We show that this criticism is not justified, as even though early Pratchett found humor in racial and sexual stereotypes, all his work—but especially his later work, is driven by a commitment to inclusion and a rejection of hegemony (Bach, 2023).

Before our analysis, we will situate ourselves in the literature on fandom, populism, exclusion, and leisure, to construct our theoretical framework. We then discuss our methodological framing and discuss the ethics of using online comments. Our analysis of the comments online will form the basis of our discussion and conclusion, which will follow a section critically exploring the complexities of identity and exclusion in the books of Pratchett and the BBC production of *The Watch* itself.

Theoretical framework

We align ourselves explicitly with social movement studies, fandom studies, and leisure studies. In its first iteration, social movement studies, as a subject field, was interested in making sense of progressive, radical protest events typified by Occupy and others challenging globalization (Diani, 1992). Then social movement studies highlighted the successes and failures around the world of anti-authoritarian actions such as those that Western Neo-Liberal states initially referred to as the Arab Spring. At the same time, much academic and liberal work has tried to account for the rise of populism on the left and right, though mainly on the nationalist-fascist right (Forgas et al., 2021). Gerbaudo (2023, p. 108) writes:

While in recent years, much has been made of the ‘populist zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004) or ‘populist moment’ (Mouffe 2018), in the context of electoral politics, and the rise of figures as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Jair Bolsonaro and Matteo Salvini on the right, and the left revival seen in candidates as Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom and Bernie Sanders in the United States, and left parties like Podemos and Syriza, relatively little attention has been paid to parallel trends on the terrain of social movements. Building on my previous work on the movements of the squares (Gerbaudo, 2017), and including in the discussion the Yellow Vests movement, in this article I want to clarify what this populist turn in social movements amounts to, and what its implications are ... I outline three component traits: (1) majoritarianism, (2) the appeal to common sense, and (3) the connection between the popular and the national.

Populism is undoubtedly on the rise and shaping all parts of life, including leisure. Although there is left populism, it is right populism that remains a problem in politics and society in the global North, where increasing numbers of working-class white men feel rage at being left marginalized by re-shifting of power (Spracklen, 2020). The incels, racists, fascists, and nationalists have come to dominate the internet, shouting loudly about men’s rights and America and Britain (Laiola, 2018). These racist, sexist, keyboard warriors have already condemned films and television programmes such as *The Rings of Power* for casting black and/or female actors (Rothstein, 2022). There is evidence that white male football fans have become increasingly resistant to any changes to broaden the game’s appeal (Taylor, 2022). Voting for Brexit in the 2016 Referendum in the UK was linked by Conservatives in the towns of the north of England to non-graduates in the “Red Wall” seats, and in particular white male rugby league supporters resentful of years of de-Industrialisation (Spracklen & Spracklen, 2022).

Fan communities and their leisure spaces have been the subject of numerous pieces of theoretical critique and empirical research. For many Marxist and post-Marxist critics, fans are the victims of capitalism, of hegemony, and of the culture industry, spending money to keep the economy turning and to ensure fans’ own agency was constrained. While fandom is indeed a product of modernity and capitalism, and the success of forms of fandom (sports, music, film, books, television, genre, games) is tied to their contested status in the socio-cultural realm of the virtual, fans are not the willing dupes of Adorno (2001). Fandom studies from Jenkins (2012, 2014) all the way to the recent special issue of *American Behavioral Science*, co-edited by Williams and Bennett (Williams & Bennett, 2022), show that fans are not just victims of their

own commodification—rather, they use their own agency and leisure time and space to give meaning to their own fandom (Cho, 2022; Daros, 2023; Hopkins, 2022).

There is a growing body of work in leisure studies and the sociology of leisure that reproduces that contested but sophisticated nature of fandom. Our own work individually (Spracklen, 2015, 2017, 2020), and in the editorial of the special issue of *Journal of Fandom Studies* we wrote together (Lamond & Spracklen, 2020) demonstrates we have been consistent in our socio-cultural critique of fandom in leisure spaces. Much of fandom can be dismissed as instrumental leisure, a product of the colonization of the public sphere (Spracklen, 2017) or imposition of Gramscian hegemony by elites—but some leisure and fandom is counter-hegemonic because of its communicative ontology. In the final role of the dice, listening to unfashionable music might be more communicative than watching football on a big screen in a pub; neither of which are as communicative as walking in the park and sniffing daffodils with a friend. Our theoretical framework on the meaning of fandom is tied to debates around the limits of free choice in leisure (Spracklen, 2015, 2017); whether communicative or instrumental.

In addition, online genre fandom can be seen as a form of communicative leisure, though online spaces are increasingly instrumental as they are controlled by governments and the new trans-national corporations, as well as the ones selling movies before the internet existed (Spracklen, 2015). Lizzo and Liechty (2023: 58) cogent analysis of Harry Potter fandom online, says:

The current findings support research which has claimed that fandom as a leisure pursuit can represent a site for Serious Leisure as it provides a shared focus for social interaction, connection to personal identity, and valued benefits. Similar to Jones (2000) study of sport fandom, the current findings highlight the importance of social identity as an explanation for continued engagement in Serious Leisure despite constraints. Further, the current findings extend existing research on sport fandom by exploring Serious Leisure in a media-based fandom context. Overall, the dataset also supports virtual community participation as a form of Serious Leisure (Holt, 2011; Silverman, 2006; Urban, 2007), adding to the limited research in this area.

So, for these fans, reading each other's posts and writing their own, and spending hours at this serious leisure, of their own free choice, gives them the same intrinsic motivations that Stebbins demonstrates attach to other forms of leisure, which people take part for fun (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). Using our theoretical framework, we can see that these fans are consumers of a product of late modernity and the culture industry. Rowling's first book was an excellent find for her publishers, but it is clear that the industry worked with her to create profit from bigger sequels, film adaptations and merchandise.

Method

The data collection has been purposive and reflexive: we have identified discussion threads below-the-line of a review on *The Guardian* and a discussion thread on Reddit that have allowed people—both fans and non-fans who have made a choice to make comment—to critically discuss the TV series and Pratchett's work. We downloaded the data in October 2021. The series premiered on January 3rd, 2021, and was released on the iPlayer in July of that year. We analyzed our data

through the lens of semiotics, trying to establish what discursive practices and strategies (Fairclough, 2010) were at work when people posted comments. Ethical approval was awarded to the project in June 2021. We follow best ethical practice on usernames from posts online by replacing them with numbers so that individuals could not be easily identified, though of course the comments may still be tracked from anything published here. We did this after applying the questions raised by Gerrard (2021), who suggests sometimes it may be appropriate to use pseudonymised usernames as they are found in the public domain (as done by Spracklen, 2020)—but in this case the duty of care is to provide the best practice of not using usernames unredacted. This means that we cannot use names and avatars that reference Pratchett’s source material, or indeed anything else that might identify someone as a genre fan (or indeed anything that might identify them as a mother, or a lover of cakes, or a Remainer). This means we have lost some data, but it is ethically righter to protect every user in the sample-set of posts. There may be a moral duty to name far-right populists posting racism and sexism online, but again we have chosen to protect everyone whose data we collected.

Pratchett and identity

In *Terry Pratchett: A Life with Footnotes*, the official biography written by his personal assistant and business manager Rob Wilkins (2022), we hear how Pratchett fiercely preserved his books from being transformed into Hollywood movies that destroyed the ethos and the esthetics of Discworld. But he did allow some adaptations to be produced (the Sky movies), and it is clear from the biography that he was disappointed other books had not been transformed into film or television. Pratchett’s early work, *The Color of Magic*, a pastiche of the fantasy genre that made his career as a professional writer, sets-up the Discworld as a place where heroes are men, foreign nations are exotically different, and women are objectified through the male gaze of Rincewind the Wizard (Pratchett, 1983). By the time of the sequel *The Light Fantastic*, Pratchett (1986) introduces Cohen the Barbarian, who is in the twilight of his career, and the ageist puns follow all the way to him running off with Bethan, a young woman. But by *Equal Rites*, Pratchett (1987) starts to get under the steam engine of social identity in Discworld and out here. *Equal Rites* introduces witches and deconstructs the idea that only men can be wizards. Since that book, Pratchett works against essentializing gender identities. But he also started to explore the problematization of racial identities too, though in the Discworld the stereotypes and myths are about dwarfs, trolls, vampires, orcs, and goblins rather than the human communities here in real life. In his later work such as *Raising Steam* (Pratchett, 2013), Pratchett starts to develop sophisticated ideas of how gender, species, “race” and class intersect, and how cities such as Ankh-Morpork serve as a crucible for agency even if social structures continue to limit that freedom (Bach, 2023).

His most celebrated take on racial and gender identity is the dwarf Cheery Longbottom, a woman born to a species where women look and dress like men and do not have any freedom.:

She causes all kinds of grief when she goes back to Überwald as an open female. Imagine shouting obscenities whilst naked in a church during the Victorian times and you have some idea of what wearing a skirt in traditional dwarf areas is like. However, she begins a cultural revolution and introduces two new pronouns—“she” and “her”—to the dwarfish language.

https://wiki.lspace.org/Cheery_Littlebottom, 25 September 2021

Cheery is of course one of the characters commanded by Sam Vimes in the City Watch, the subject of the BBC *adaptation*. Our take on the *adaptation* is that it is an honest but flawed attempt to channel the ethics and the politics and the humor of Discworld, even if some of the design choices and the narrative are odd. Cheery is more gender-fluid here, but it is still an accurate representation. Much of the script is lifted from the books, but there are changes. The Patrician is played by a woman, which seems to be an odd choice from a radical feminist perspective for a character mocking patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). The character is portrayed as non-binary and are referred to using a mixture of pronouns throughout the series, and there are attempts to be color-blind and gender-blind in the casting of actors, which might be a good thing because it is, after all, completely made up. But it could be said to reflect the melting-pot celebrated by Pratchett. The relationship between Vimes and his future wife Sybil is the strangest mis-representation in the series. Neither character is described in flattering terms in the books, but in the series, they are played by beautiful actors, albeit the case that their costumes and make-up is not always flattering.

Findings and discussion

Data below-the line on the guardian

The story about fans complaining about the tone and content of the adaption published on *The Guardian's* website (Flood, 17 January 2020) solicited 358 comments below the line. *The Guardian* is a progressive, liberal bourgeois newspaper, so one can expect three kinds of posters: people who identify with the bourgeois politics of the newspaper; people who want to spend their time having arguments with Guardian readers; and trolls spreading misinformation. All five of the Guardian Picks, chosen as the best (and definitely the most representative) are all profoundly negative. BTL1 comments (17 January 2020, 13:53):

What they end up making might be really good but it's still a shame that they aren't sticking to the source material and people are entitled to be pissed off that they're using Discworld to promote something that isn't actually Discworld. Why wouldn't they just do a normal straight adaptation? Who has an ego so big that when they get access to material that brilliant they decide that the better thing to do would be their own “inspired by” fan fiction?

This poster is very reasonable. They are not passing comment on the entire series, and they accept that what is ultimately broadcast might actually be well-made. But BTL1 then agrees with the fans who are angry that the show is not authentically Discworld in its look, and in the breach with the plotlines and characters. What we do not get from this post is any evidence that the poster has read the books and is

an active fan. BLTL1 then ends with a sniffy dismissal of fan fiction, suggesting that this adaptation might be no better than that highly contested genre. The second picked post is BTL2 (17 January 2020, 14:15, who says):

I've always felt Terry Pratchett similar to PG Wodehouse in that the beauty of the work is in the language and not necessarily in the situations. Neither author has ever been well served with regard to adaptations in my opinion and this seems no different.

P G Wodehouse is the exemplar British middle-class author beloved by his fans but sneeringly dismissed in his life by literary critics. BTL2 compares Pratchett to Wodehouse, showing off their own bourgeois tastes, but the point they make about language is crucial to their criticism of the new adaptation. Reading a book and liking a book is always an act of imagination: we always respond to books we like because the dialogue and the plot and the descriptions all work in harmony to fool us into thinking we are actually in the world of the author. BTL2 does not seem to like the other adaptations of Pratchett's work either; this exasperation is picked up by the third poster BTL3 (17 January 2020, 14:17):

I've always read and loved Discworld because of Pratchett's own voice. Unless you have a really good script and a REALLY good narrator, it's very hard to turn that into a film or TV show. Perhaps that's why there hasn't yet been one as good as the book on which it's based (although Good Omens was solid).

For this poster, the Sky adaptations, despite the involvement and approval of Pratchett himself, and the careful attempt to capture the look of Discworld (and the plotlines and characters of the books) are not authentic because Pratchett's books cannot transfer to visual media (though the poster then contradicts that critical line by admitting that the BBC's Good Omens is solid despite the fact it deviates from the source material). The fourth poster picked.

BTL4 makes a similar strident complaint about adaptations that stray from the original source material (17 January 2020, 15:20):

Oh, dear God, no. Why do people keep doing this sort of thing? I still have mental scars from watching the appalling Dark Is Rising film, and the truly unforgivable Earthsea "adaptation." And now this? A female Vetinari? And the fact that it's Anna Chancellor, good as she is, does NOT make it any better. And Discworld has so few strong female characters, doesn't it? How about you make Susan Sto Helit and all the witches into men then? You know, really fuck the whole thing up. Utterly and completely. Oh, too late by the looks of it. I wouldn't watch this if the only alternative was leaving the Oblong Office by the other door.

BTL4 shows off their wider knowledge of genre fiction by referencing still revered books by Susan Cooper (The Dark Is Rising series) and Ursula K Le Guin (the Earthsea series) that they believe have been ruined by adaptations (which is certainly how those adaptations have been received by fans and critics). This poster then demonstrates they have excellent knowledge about the entire Discworld, not only by showing that Pratchett already has a full range of strong female characters (especially the witches), but also by showing they know what happens when you exit Vetinari the Patrician's Oblong Office by the other door. The final picked poster BTL5 (17 January 2020, 14:33) also performs the role of long-time, dedicated fan perfectly:

I'm in the midst of re-reading Pratchett's "The Truth" for the 20th time (I have all the Discworld novels), and was instantly, and temporarily, enthused by the prospect of the BBC producing a series based on the Watch. Previous attempts to put Pratchett's Discworld on TV, e.g., *Hogfather*, at least tried to convey a sense of the Pratchett creation, but this sounds horrendous. The Watch, or at least Sam Vimes, features heavily in something like 10 of the novels starting with the drunken Captain Vimes, with Fred Colon, Nobby Nobbs and Carrot Ironfounderson, all the way to Sir Samuel Vimes, Duke of Ankh, Commander of the City Watch. To do it justice would require at least some serious intent, and the idea of punk seems on the surface an insult.

This poster tells us immediately that they are in the middle of reading one of the Discworld books for the twentieth time, and that own every one of them. We can imagine BTL5 sitting at home typing furiously as they glance at the collected hard-backs of every Pratchett novel, held in place with Discworld merchandise. This poster knows their Discworld lore and lets us know it (even though Sam Vimes actually features in 13 novels). Unlike some of the other picked posters, BTL5 is happy to watch the Sky adaptations because they are faithful adaptations that did not deviate far from Pratchett's originals ("a sense of the Pratchett creation") and are obviously set in a magical flat place carried around the universe on four elephants atop the turtle that pokes fun at us stupid humans.

These five posts are a fair representation of the debates below-the-line: most posters are suspicious of this particular "adaptation" and the Sky adaptations because all change the essence of the Discworld books and Pratchett's plots, characters and places. A small number of posters are happy to embrace the changes around gender and race of characters: a female Vetinari is championed by two, for example, and one poster even suggests that Vetinari might actually be female in the books. The complaints about the gender and sexuality of Cheery in the adaptation are blunter, as the character has changed completely, as BTL6 (17 January 2020, 15:36) suggests:

They describe Cheery as "non-binary," and she doesn't have a beard. She doesn't appear to be a dwarf at all.

Nearly all express outrage about this crucial change, because Cheery's gender and the dwarfs' reaction to it is central to her evolution through the Discworld books. Pratchett has already demonstrated how hegemony and communities intersect in ways that constrain and construct social identity through the idea that dwarf women hide their gender. Only one poster is sympathetic to the change, BTL7, who writes (17 Jan 18:50):

Not exactly what I had in mind... the change of Cheery from a female dwarf trying to exert her femininity in a culture dominated by an extreme masculinity to someone that's non-binary will take a bit of getting used to (I'm sure it'll effectively use the same themes as the original character).

This sentiment reflects the tension reflected across the posters below-the-line on this story. Fans are fearful of major changes in adaptations, and also believe that Pratchett's progressive politics reflects their own as *Guardian* readers: tolerant of difference; suspicious of power and supportive of marginalized communities of color, of class, of gender, and of sexuality. So they feel angry that the makers of this adaptation seem not to have realized the politics in Pratchett's books.

There are only two comments that suggest the users are shaped by right-wing populism out of the 358 (though one post has been deleted for breaching the rules of the website, which bans abusive language, racism, and sexism)². One poster BTL8 (17 January 14:53) says:

Is it just me or is there an obsession at the moment with shoving identity politics down everyone's throat? The irony here being that Pratchett did a subtle dissection of the issue in these books using fantasy to skewer attitudes and bigotry.

While not racist or sexist, this post echoes the right-wing populist concern that there is a left-wing conspiracy to impose (“down everyone's throat”) a set of contested claims about the world as absolute truths (Main, 2021). BTL9 (17 January 23:24) then responds:

I concur. I don't like buzzwords, but “wokewashing” describes it well. It's something else, actually, in spirit: Tokenism. Just a reworked form of it, but it's similarly without substance as the “we had two minority characters, so people wouldn't whine, then killed them off or underwrote them anyway”. Pure cynicism on part of the producers and screenwriters. The best way to respect and audience is to respect their intelligence. Including by respecting the varied and nuanced characters from the source material.

This might be someone trying to merely critique the adaptation for failing to represent the full diversity of Discworld (the “nuanced characters”), but the use of the phrase “wokewashing” suggests that this poster is unhappy about more than just tokenism.

Data on Reddit

The Data on Reddit comes from the Discworld Reddit and a thread titled The Watch TV series (Reddit 2020), which created 104 comments in the time we collected data, though it has since created more comments following the release of the TV series. Some of the comments by the users are positive, as shown here with a post by R1:

I think I haven't seen it yet and that I will judge it on its merits when I do. I enjoy the BBC radio dramatisations and, in many cases, they differ greatly from the original texts.

Incredibly, R1 is willing to wait to watch the series, and seems to be comfortable with the notion that adaption of authentic texts into different forms of media and culture are acceptable. But most of the users are angry at the way the series is transforming key characters, the plots, and the imagined spaces of Discworld. R2 despairs that the promotional material seems to include a female actor cast in the clothes of a what should be a male wizard:

Not only against the lore, but the dichotomy wizard/witch was wonderful in this world (wow, much w words). The Discworld is the first universe (with enough recognition) that depicts witches are benevolent. More than that: helpful, caring, strong, leading... They can be heroes, and not only side-kick or quest-giver lost in an old shack in the woods. Granny Weatherwax is one of the best characters ever written, and, IMO, the best *female* character ever written. And they were witches: men witch+es don't exist. So the best profession was feminine. It's quite a bold commentary in this time. On the other hand, wizards are pretty much all males (Esk aside). And what are they? Fat, glutton petty men killing each others and interested only in glitters and hierarchy. Now, tell me, who would

you want to be: a strong, respectable witch or a ridiculous wizard? Making a wizard out of a woman is not a *step up* for womenity. In fact, they are putting them down. They *actually* tried to put female in strong position while they are, in fact, making her in a stupid position lore-wise.

R2 shows their critical understanding of gender in Discworld and shows their knowledge of Pratchett's entire portfolio of work. In the heteronormative, hegemonically masculine Discworld, only men (apart from Esk) are allowed to be wizards because that is how Pratchett critiqued the gender order (Joule, 2021). Women assert their agency and power through being witches, even if witches are structurally constrained by the men in Discworld who fear and need them simultaneously. R3 is equally fearful as R2, but for this poster it is the loss of the growth of Sam Vimes and the rest of the Watch characters that is of greatest concern:

This...This feels like a gut punch to be honest. The story of The Watch is all about the topics of race, sexual and culture issues (even a dash of religious stuff). This was the major point, yet it feels like the show creators skimmed through the wiki entries of the books and decided that they can redo the story just for the sake of redoing it. Vimes starts as a cynical racist that doesn't believe in anything or anyone. That was his journey, which culminates in Night Watch with him facing off his past (the other books are a welcome bonus). Carrot is all about his flawed innocent and how his simple ways can and will hurt people he cares about (think mostly Armed Men). Sybil, one of the most bad-ass characters that proves times and time again, that she was right all along to believe in Vimes, is turned into a Batman?! I grew with Pratchett. As a child, as a teen as an adult. I cried without shame when he went to the last journey. This just feels wrong.

R3 does not like anything about the adaption as seen in the promotional material. For this user, Pratchett has already dealt with ideas about structure, agency, identities and hegemonic power in the original books, and is concerned that the creators haven't actually read the books themselves and merely "skimmed through wiki entries." R4 is angry at the changes to the gender and race and species of characters:

I can't. Between Sybil, Cherry, Angua, and CMOT Dibbler. I just can't. BBC did a wonderful job with the movies. Absolutely stunning. And now we have...this. they are taking all the social commentary and political satire and turning it into some watered down, socially trendy buzz word, trying -too- hard -to -be artsy muck.

This user actually refers to the Sky movies. R4 does not like the fact the creators of this adaptation have "watered down" the progressive politics and "social commentary" of Pratchett's books. But R4 then condemns the adaptation for being "socially trendy," a version of the wokeness described earlier in this paper. R5 then makes the right-wing anti-woke populist response more succinctly:

Yeah, no, that's not going to fly for me. If shoving representation for representation's sake down my throat is more important to you than the story, then I don't need to watch your TV series.

Discussion

Following Lizzo and Liechty (2023), we can see that fandom online is serious leisure (Elkington & Stebbins, 2014). Fans want to show off their knowledge of the source

material and have clearly spent enormous amounts of time reading the books over and over again. The fan-users on Reddit have posted hundreds of posts over a sustained period of time and have usernames and avatars that reference Pratchett. The users below-the-line at *The Guardian* seem to be regular posters on other stories, so there is no obvious embrace of the performativity of genre fandom apart from one user. There are no obvious trolls—if someone is pretending to be a fan of Pratchett to complain about wokeness they have performed it so well that they are impossible to distinguish from the authentic fans. Of course, Pratchett's work has been dismissed in the past for being lowbrow and lacking in the genius of true literature (Jones, 2015), and in turn his fans have been mocked for their willingness to buy the books, the video games, the figurines, and the t-shirts.³ Pratchett fandom is a form of instrumental leisure (Spracklen, 2017), as seen in the way fans queued in their millions to get first editions of the books signed by the author. Pratchett fandom is a sub-set of genre fandom, which is sub-set of the popular culture industry. While Pratchett himself had an ambivalent relationship with the instrumentality of the publishing industry, he was driven by it to keep turning out books that sold in their millions, and he was always trying to sell his books to the film industry. He wanted his ideas to be admired, but he also wanted them to make money so he could buy the trappings of wealth: the house in the country, for example (Wilkins, 2022). The fans are also using their instrumental leisure to chat online: all online leisure is mediated by industries and commodification (Spracklen, 2015). Reddit and *The Guardian* are both commercial operations trying to lure viewers and users so they can make a profit. The internet itself only exists through a labyrinth of legal contracts agreeing who pays for what, and every user either accessing the internet through their own agreement to pay money (through my smartphone) or through someone else paying for that access (through my University). But every fan, every user, is concerned about adaptation and the loss of authenticity through the instrumental leisure of the internet (Spracklen, 2015, 2017).

What is adaptation?

Fans online are using their communicative leisure (Spracklen, 2015, 2017) to make sense of their own fandom and engage with other fans in negotiating the boundaries of what constitutes an authentic adaptation of the original source materials. However, this raises concerns around both *authenticity* and *adaptation*. Susanne Greenhalgh, writing about television adaptations of Shakespeare (Greenhalgh, 2022) suggests that the equating of authenticity to some construal of faithfulness to the text is unhelpful. Only the original source can ever come close to staking a claim to authenticity. Any form of adaptation into other media is a distortion. This resonates with the original aura of a work of art, as considered in Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (Benjamin, 2008) where he argues that a work of arts aura, like authenticity, is associated the works "presence to the *here-ness* and *now-ness*, [its decay]... is engendered by the eradication of distance and the reproducibility of the work of art" (Dridi, 2023). So, all *adaptation* is to a greater or lesser extent *inauthentic*.

Importantly, neither the creator of the series, the production team behind it, nor the actors in it, have ever claimed *The Watch* was an adaptation. Terry Pratchett's name never appeared in the broadcast promotion for the series. In interviews Simon Allen

(the series lead-writer) is clear that the series was *inspired by*, and was not *based on*, those of Pratchett's Discworld stories that have a connection to Ankh-Morpork's City Watch. Whilst the series draws on narrative elements from the so-called City Watch trilogy (whose story ultimately unfolds through 8 dedicated novels, and a further 7 that draw on aligned narrative and character elements), it is not a retelling of any of Pratchett's stories. It is not an *adaptation* in the sense of it being an attempt to faithfully translate one storytelling medium to another. As such, *The Watch* is a recent example of a contemporary postmodern trends in *adaptation*, and this may deserve some further reflection.

The Watch is not an adaptation in any sense of the word in its common usage, i.e., the translation of a work in one artform/mix of artforms to another—literature to television/book to film for example. Instead, it forms part of a continuum with alternative visions that build on some aspects of the original articulation of a narrative corpus. Other, recent, examples of such “adaptations” can be drawn into such a continuum, with varying degrees of proximity to what could be considered the *original narrative*—examples on television that come to mind are *Vanity Fair* (2018), which incorporated character re-imaginings and the stylistic tone of soap opera; *Death Comes to Pemberley* (2013)—a close translation of a book narrative, but the book on which it is based is a homage to the characters and selected contexts of both Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice*; *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies* (2015), which is ultimately a fan-fic mash up made mainstream; *Dickensian* (2015–2016), a melange of characters from Dickens in a new narrative which brings those characters into a shared universe facilitating back story and character depth, *The Private Life of Samuel Pepys* (2003), and the Netflix character reimaging of their recent version of *Persuasion* (2022). This is a small number of such *adaptations* that do not fit a more familiar take on their source material from those that might be considered as adopting a more post-modernist stance on approaching the *translation* of the source. These film and televisual products draw a line of flight from the original source, as inspiration, but they are not attempts to trans-literate one creative medium into another.

The Watch fits into such a mold as the examples we have covered. As such *The Watch* draws on themes in the mid and later Pratchett—it is a love letter, fanfic, derived from the “Watch Trilogy”. In this sense the detractors were—in a loose sense—right to be critical because they were, in a way, not given an adaptation in the form they were seeking. This is apparent from the main Pratchett Discworld fan site at the time of the series' production. Despite acknowledging that *The Watch* would be *inspired by* rather than being *based on* Pratchett's work, their commentary was still very much anticipating an old-style translation form of *adaptation* (Discworldmonthly.co.uk, 2020). What they got was something so more nuanced, and closer to the spirit of the mature Pratchett than the original Watch Trilogy, because of its temporal situatedness, could have achieved, but it was not—strictly—an adaptation, as outlined earlier.

Adaptation and populism

Right-wing populism is clearly influencing these fans online (Gerbaudo, 2023). Many of the fans who do not like this adaptation make it clear that they are not part of the wider right-wing anti-woke reaction. It is not surprising that users below-the-line of the progressive bourgeois newspaper *The Guardian* want to show that they are not racist or sexist, but it is interesting that Reddit users also made sophisticated,

progressive, anti-populist critiques of the adaptation. Most of these Pratchett fans across both online spaces knew that Pratchett's own radical critiques of race, gender, and sexuality had grown from *Equal Rites* (Pratchett, 1987), where the witches and Esk first appeared to shake up the gender order, all the way to the emancipation of goblins in *Snuff* (Pratchett, 2011). So for these fans, their communicative leisure performs three roles: protecting the left-wing credentials of Pratchett; critiquing the adaptation for failing to recognize his progressive politics as well as his authorial vision (such as critiquing hegemonic masculinity); and distancing themselves from the anti-woke populists.

Those populists themselves are a product of our times and the culture war that has led from Gamergate (Laiola, 2018), through the angry white boys and men who follow Jordan Petersen, to the people who voted for Trump and Brexit (Featherstone, 2022). Unfortunately, they are all using their communicative leisure to argue their reactionary cases, but the internet is still used in a hegemonic way to reproduce inequality. In the online spaces we have analyzed here, it is on Reddit where the angry sneering rejection of progressive politics is the loudest. It is here that they reject the notion that Pratchett's books spoke about the abuse of power and the social construction of race, gender, and sexuality (Bach, 2023). It is here that populism emerges as a rejection of any idea that representation in popular culture of different forms of identity and community be updated in newer adaptations. These populists imagine that the streets of Ankh-Morpork are filled only with the faces of white people and resent anyone trying to create a more diverse imagined world, even if Pratchett tells us that the city is a melting-pot. These populists' rail against Cheery and Vetinari being non-binary—but fail to notice that Pratchett spent his entire life as a writer rejecting the problematic representations of race and sex in his first two novels.

Conclusion

Right-wing populism inflects everyday discourse and is only increasing its grip in the Habermasian public sphere and lifeworld, as mainstream Conservative parties adopt populist, far-right policies (Main, 2021). Leisure is part of the public sphere that has been contested since the rise of the modern nation-state and instrumentality (Spracklen, 2011). Fandom is, following Bauman (2001), part of the lifeworld in what we might call late modernity. Our research has shown how Pratchett fans use their leisure time to perform serious leisure but also communicative leisure—even if fandom is still highly commodified and instrumentalised. For some of our fans, changes in the internal motivations of key characters, plot changes, and the strange re-building of the city of Ankh-Morpork—which is guarded by Sam Vimes and the City Watch—is enough for them to reject the *adaptation*, and their commitment to progressive politics is clear. Others are concerned that the critique of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) has been lost. For others, though, it is the wokishness, the “political correctness,” of changing characters genders and ethnicities that has driven their refusal to endorse the series. We have shown that such criticism is not justified, as even though early Pratchett found humor in racial and sexual stereotypes, his later work is driven by a commitment to inclusion and a rejection of hegemony (Bach, 2023). All of our fans, however, are writing and debating with each other in online spaces

that are constrained by populist ideology. That is, all are involved in the work of debating identity and community in the world in which we live, as well as the Discworld. So all the fans reflect on the hermetic relationship between the heavens above and the world below, and how much freedom we have to change the real world.

Notes

1. The web facilitates the possibility of securing detailed information about fan interests, making it possible for anyone with a bit of spare time to establish a rich web of ‘understanding’ a series, rather than the detailed research individuals needed to have in the past—and direct contact with much of the original material.
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/help/terms-of-service>, accessed 12 November 2023.
3. Though Bach (2023) makes a persuasive case for Pratchett’s genius.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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