Title of Paper: *Sherlock Holmes, Tech-Geek: Uncovering New Media's Significance in "Sherlock," the BBC's Modern Adaptation of Conan Doyle's Stories*
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Abstract:

Among the recent proliferation of Sherlock Holmes adaptations, the BBC’s televised series, *Sherlock*, stands out in its portrayal of a modern Holmes, residing in contemporary London. The choices this new adaptation makes regarding what nuances of Holmes to express tell readers of Conan Doyle’s texts much about Holmes’s technocratic, rationalist intelligence and the shift in popular cultural reception of such intelligence over time. The most striking aspect of this new adaptation is an updated appropriation of technology. In this series, Sherlock reveals his tech-geek qualities in his obsession with obscure technical knowledge, which he enjoys showing off.

Comparing the changes the character of Sherlock Holmes undergoes over time is crucial because these point to a popular cultural reception shift with regard to tech-geeks such as Holmes. The shift occurs from Victorian literary audiences’ relative ease with the technologically adept detective to modern television audiences’ discomfort with the same detective’s geekiness and expertise with new media technology.

Keywords: Sherlock Holmes; BBC Sherlock, Victorian, House, Tech-Geek, Freak

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Among the recent proliferation of Sherlock Holmes adaptations, the BBC’s televised series, entitled *Sherlock*, stands out in its portrayal of a modern Holmes, residing at 221b Baker Street in contemporary London. The series, co-created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, is released by Hartswood Films. It features Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as John Watson.\(^1\) Gatiss also directed the series, which consists of six 90 minute episodes in the crime drama genre. The choices this new adaptation makes regarding what nuances of Holmes to express tell readers of Conan Doyle’s texts much about Holmes’s technocratic, rationalist intelligence and the shift in popular cultural reception of such intelligence over time.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this new adaptation is an updated appropriation of technology: Sherlock uses smartphones to text and look up facts online, and laptops to perform online research, update his website, and read Watson’s blog.\(^2\) In this series, Sherlock reveals his tech-geek qualities in his obsession with obscure technical knowledge, which he enjoys showing off, often incognizant of the fact that non-geeks find this type of display uninteresting, annoying, or even threatening. In this respect both Victorian Holmes and modern Sherlock epitomize

\(^1\) For the sake of clarity I will use “Holmes” and “Watson” to refer to Conan Doyle’s original creations and “Sherlock” and “John” to refer to the BBC’s new characters.

\(^2\) Sherlock’s website, [www.thescienceofdeduction.co.uk](http://www.thescienceofdeduction.co.uk) is named for Victorian Holmes’s monograph in *Study in Scarlet*. John’s blog, entitled *The Personal Blog of Dr. John H. Watson* [www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk](http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk) is a play on Victorian Watson’s continuous publication of Holmes’s cases.
the definition of “tech-geek.” In both Conan Doyle’s stories and *Sherlock*, the
classic definition of “tech-geek.” In both Conan Doyle’s stories and *Sherlock*, the character’s intelligence is conveyed through his use of the scientific method,
specifically forensic science combined with the latest medical instruments and
technology, revealing that audiences of both eras perceive technocratic ease as a sign of intelligence. Comparing the changes the character undergoes over time is crucial because these point to a popular cultural reception shift with regard to tech-geeks such as Holmes. The shift occurs from Victorian literary audiences’ relative ease with the technologically adept detective to modern television audiences’ discomfort with the same detective’s tech-geekiness and expertise with new media technology.
Notwithstanding the great advancements made by technology from the nineteenth century to the present, modern television audiences, as represented by the characters in *Sherlock*, seem to have less tolerance for the title character’s technocratic ease, less so than the literary audiences of Conan Doyle’s texts. This is evident in the uneasiness that Sherlock’s exceptional grasp of New Media causes the characters on the series, while Victorian popular cultural reception of Holmes’s technocratic intelligence can be read in the way that the characters in Conan Doyle’s stories react to the great detective’s technical knowledge. In fact, Sherlock Holmes’s unusual technocratic intelligence produces much greater discomfort in modern audiences than it did in nineteenth-century readers. There has long been a close connection between “freaks” or “geeks” and new media technology and Sherlock Holmes’s cultural icon status derives in part from his tech-geekishness. The difference is that Victorian Holmes, while technologically adept, was not considered a “freak” in popular culture, this appellation was bestowed upon him in the modern *Sherlock* series. And
because extreme intelligence and extremely intelligent people, specifically those who
are highly adept technologically, have usually been portrayed as “freaks” in popular
culture, film, and television, it is not surprising that Sherlock Holmes has even been
“played by” an android. On Star Trek: The Next Generation, Lt. Commander Data
played Holmes in “Elementary, Dear Data” (Season 2, Episode 3).³

Although both Victorian literary and modern television audiences expect
solitary detectives like Holmes to be friendless, loveless, and unaltruistic, the concept
of “tech-geek” was not existent in Victorian times; persons who possessed specialized
technological knowledge were not looked upon as “freaks” by popular culture,
instead, Holmes, so technologically at ease, so unencumbered by romantic or family
ties, was seen as a manly figure. For example, in The Adventures of Sherlock
Holmes: Detecting Social Order, Rosemary Jann sees Holmes’s power as a
representation of Victorian Britain’s empirical and industrial strength, combined with
its revolutionary advancements in biology. For over a century, so long as Holmes has
been a popular cultural phenomenon, he has been linked to science and technology.
According the Jann, in the character of Holmes, the scientist transforms into a heroic
figure (3-4). James Maertens even conceives technologically adept Holmes as a
“Technician-Hero” (“Masculine Power,” 296). Meanwhile modern Sherlock is
looked upon as a “freak” by others of his profession. For example, when Lestrade
asks Sherlock to view the crime scene in Series 1, Episode 1, the sergeant on duty is
disgusted by his presence. “Hello freak” says Sergeant Sally Donovan, and later,

³ For interesting research on Holmes in this role, see F. and W. Erisman.
“Freak’s here - bringing him in” (“A Study in Pink”). She cannot believe that John is Sherlock’s “colleague” and asks John “Did he follow you home?” (Ibid). Donovan warns John that Sherlock is dangerous, and predicts that one day, Sherlock will no longer be satisfied by simply appearing at murder scenes, but will take to committing them himself. In Series 2, Episode 3, when Sherlock appears to be a charlatan and criminal, Donovan is glad to tell John, “I told you so” (“The Reichenbach Fall”).

In “Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind,” Christopher Clauson famously argues that Holmes represented social order to Conan Doyle’s literary audience (66). Paula Reitner takes this argument further, positing that Victorian Holmes represented an ideal type professionally (“Doctors, Detectives” 57). Therefore, while Scotland Yard sometimes viewed Victorian Holmes as an eccentric amateur or at worst, a meddler, they would never have called Holmes a “psychopath,” as modern Sherlock is termed. “I am not a psychopath Anderson,” he explains to the investigator, “I am a high-functioning sociopath. Do your research” (“A Study in Pink”). This exchange, prominently featured on the series’ PBS Masterpiece Theatre website, is also how Sherlock is introduced to viewers: he lacks empathy; he sees crimes as intellectual puzzles. On the other hand Sherlock, by naming himself a “sociopath,” also shows a greater self-awareness of his otherness than his Victorian

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4 The title of the first episode is based upon “A Study in Scarlet,” Conan Doyle’s first work featuring Sherlock Holmes.

5 This “final” Sherlock episode is based upon “The Adventure of the Final Problem,” which Conan Doyle also meant to be his final Holmes story.
The Victorian counterpart, who was often puzzled when his considerable eccentricities were pointed out.

Tech-geeks are also seen by audiences as loveless or sexless and Sherlock’s lack of love interest is made much more of than Victorian Holmes’s; many a sly remark regarding homosexuality, specifically between Sherlock and John Watson is made in the series. Gatiss and Moffat choose to retain the character’s lack of interest in romance and like his Victorian counterpart, Sherlock believes love would interfere with his rational judgment. For example, he ignores Molly Hooper’s obvious interest, only calling upon her expertise when he needs favors at the lab. Molly, with her work at the morgue, knowledge of technology, and social awkwardness, is also a tech-geek. She is attracted to the detective because she perceives a kindred spirit, one of an even higher level of tech-geekiness. Though Sherlock disregards Molly’s advances, he is intrigued by Irene Adler, a modern iteration of “The Woman,” who like her Victorian predecessor is sexually alluring and an intellectual match for Sherlock Holmes. In Series 2, Episode 1, “A Scandal in Belgravia,” a re-envisioning of Conan Doyle’s “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Irene Adler is also tech-savvy, hacking into John’s blog, rigging her cellphone to explode if tampered with, and stumping Sherlock himself with difficult electronic passwords. Though Irene is attracted to Sherlock, he makes a great effort to appear indifferent, even when she removes her clothes.

Just as audiences view tech-geeks as sexless, audiences also see them as lacking in empathy; Gatiss and Moffat choose to initially suppress Sherlock’s altruism. In this they follow Conan Doyle’s example, as Holmes, initially cold, becomes more soft-hearted in the later stories, allowing criminals with benevolent
The Victorian motives to go free. Victorian Holmes becomes heroic in later stories, saying that he would give his life to prevent Moriarty’s criminal network from victimizing innocent people. Sherlock is also initially cold, but becomes a more loyal friend to Watson, risking his life for him in Series 1, Episode 3 (“The Great Game”) and staging his own death to save Watson and others in Series 2, Episode 3 (“The Reichenbach Fall”). Both Victorian and modern versions of the character eventually willingly endanger their lives for others.

Relevant Settings: *Sherlock* and Guy Ritchie’s *Holmes* movies

In choosing to concentrate on Sherlock’s tech-geekiness, Gatiss and Moffat made the appropriate adaptational choice in portraying the character in a technologically contemporary setting. This is especially evident in Series 1, Episode 2 (“The Blind Banker”), which is primarily set in London’s business district. Gatiss admits that though our [his and Moffat’s] favourite Sherlock Holmes is still the Basil Rathbone/Nigel Bruce movies of the thirties and forties” they wished “to ‘fetishise’ modern London in the way, I suppose, that the period versions fetishise Victorian London. Episode two, which is largely set in the City: we wanted to capture the look of, like, the Gherkin and all those kind of big glass and steel cathedrals of finance. (“Unlocking Sherlock”).

Gatiss’s use of “fetish” is especially apt because popular culture has fetishized Sherlock Holmes since his creation in 1887. By that token, a twenty-first century Holmes requires an updated fetishization, hence the contemporary setting. The series

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6 “The Great Game” is based in part upon Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans.”
The Victorian creators’ admiration of the Twentieth Century Fox/Universal film series starring Rathbone as Holmes and Bruce as Watson is understandable, given that this adaptation was also set in the then present-day world of World War II. In describing the modern technology used in *Sherlock*, Moffat explains that “it allows you to see the original stories the way the original reader would have read them...exciting, cutting-edge, contemporary stories as opposed to these relics that they’ve become” (Ibid).

The crime in “The Blind Banker” occurs at Shad Sanderson Bank. In explaining the difference between *Sherlock* and other adaptations, producer Sue Vertue asserts that “this is our Shad Sanderson Bank. Everyone’s seen a Sherlock Holmes [but]...you’ve never seen Sherlock Holmes in this scenario with escalators, with modern technology” (Ibid).

While Moffat wishes audiences to “know in every shot that this is a modern-day Sherlock Holmes...” (ibid), Guy Ritchie sets his recent Holmes adaptations firmly in the Victorian period. Ritchie directed *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and its sequel, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011); both films star Robert Downey Jr. as Holmes and Jude Law as Watson. Although many critics complain about casting in these films, “Ironman” Robert Downey Jr. is a strangely appropriate choice, because in Victorian times, Holmes was seen as a much more masculine character than in his current Masterpiece Theatre iterations. By the same token, Watson is referred to as “one for the ladies” several times in the original stories, and so the choice of Jude Law is also oddly appropriate. And despite many deviations from the canon, Ritchie’s films achieve something most Sherlock Holmes adaptations do not - they have brought Holmes back into mainstream popular culture, where he had been firmly
established in Victorian times. While middle-class nineteenth-century commuters avidly read Conan Doyle’s stories on their way home from work, most present-day film and television adaptations, including *Sherlock*, are aimed at “highbrow” audiences who are cognizant of and appreciate Conan Doyle’s original works. Ritchie’s films, on the other hand, have made Conan Doyle’s characters relevant to Saturday night movie goers.

**Dr. Gregory House - Another Eccentric Tech-Geek in [the] *House***

There have been numerous critical comparisons between the brilliant, but eccentric Dr. Gregory House on the television series *House* and Sherlock Holmes, though there is room for scholarly inquiry into House’s portrayal as a tech-geek. *House*, a medical drama, is a popular cultural phenomenon in its own right, cited by the Guinness World Records as the world’s most popular currently broadcast television program. Creator and Executive Producer David Shore won an Emmy for Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series. Hugh Laurie plays Dr. House and also serves as an Executive Producer of the program. House is an infectious disease specialist and a brilliant, if unorthodox, diagnostician, which is appropriate, because the original Holmes was based upon an eccentric, though excellent diagnostician - Conan Doyle’s medical school instructor, Dr. Joseph Bell. Of course, House is more loosely based upon Holmes than is Sherlock, yet both Sherlock and House are tech-geeks, and therefore portrayed as completely devoted to solving technical problems, possessing a dearth of empathy, and lacking a love life.
The series themselves have several points in common. For example, *House* and *Sherlock* have similar opening sequences, showing close-up and microscopic views of drops of blood. The names “House” and “Holmes” even sound similar and both series are named for the title character. A difference between Sherlock and House’s technology use is that in *House*, medical tests, even when performed by the master diagnostician himself, often provide misleading information and cannot always be relied upon. Sherlock’s forensic tests on the other hand almost always aid in his investigation, showing a greater reliance on technology in the program.

Contemporary Sherlock has even more in common with House than his Victorian predecessor. Our first introduction to Sherlock is also our first introduction to his superior technocratic skill: at the beginning of “A Study in Pink,” Sherlock shows off his technological prowess by texting every reporter at a press conference almost simultaneously, antagonizing the press and the police. After Lestrade asserts that there must be a link between three apparent suicides, Sherlock the text reads “Wrong!” to everyone at the press conference (“A Study in Pink”). Similarly, House, often gleefully yells “Wrong!” when his medical team members do not guess the appropriate diagnosis. If the “villain” in *Sherlock* is crime, with Moriarty representing the master criminal, the culprit in *House* is illness. Like Sherlock, House is anti-social, seeing illnesses as Sherlock views crimes - as puzzles to be solved.

Neither generally see the people who need assistance, the human beings behind the puzzles. In Series 1, Episode 1 for example, Sherlock claps his hands with glee when he finds out there is potentially a fourth murder/suicide in what appears to be a pattern of crimes. “Don’t act so happy,” chides Mrs. Hudson (“A Study in Pink”).
Both Sherlock and House do not concern themselves regarding people’s feelings, although they are able to mimic compassion when necessary to get the job done. As a doctor, House possess very little bed-side manner; he prefers not to interact with patients, often sending his team members to run tests and gather information from patients and their families. Like Sherlock, House chafes at authority, represented by Dr. Lisa Cuddy, the hospital’s administrator. He is openly misogynistic towards women, while Sherlock is merely indifferent. And as Sherlock has Watson, House has his own, more conventional, “straight man,” Dr. James Wilson (played by Sean Leonard), who like Watson, is a medical man who exhibits more empathy towards clients than his more famous colleague. Wilson is an oncologist who sees his patients for long-term care, unlike the urgent, short-term care necessitated from House.

House’s character is based upon the Sherlock Holmes stories, and since his profession is doctor rather than detective, he is given both Watson’s painful leg and Holmes’s drug addiction; like Victorian Holmes, House denies he has a drug problem. Moffat-Gattiss on the other hand, choose to suppress Holmes’s drug use and pipe smoking, providing him with nicotine patches instead, perhaps believing that tobacco and cocaine use would not serve to display Sherlock’s rationalist intelligence.

Sherlock Holmes, Alternative Detective

There is also another naming similarity, in this case between “Wilson” and “Watson.”
Like much of New Media, which is often viewed as “alternative,” “unofficial” and therefore not as authoritative as more traditional media, Sherlock Holmes the detective, in both his Victorian and contemporary guises, is seen as “unofficial,” by the “establishment” of Scotland Yard. He is viewed as an unwelcome though necessary alternative to official detectives, forensic scientists, and ballistics experts. The character’s interaction with the official police is often filled with tension, both in Conan Doyle’s stories and *Sherlock*. Sargent Donovan’s discomfort with Sherlock’s presence at crime scenes has to do with him acting as unprofessionally: he is unpaid for his services. Donovan also implies that Sherlock enjoys dead victims. Victorian police officials did not see nineteenth-century Holmes this way. One reason is that the *Sherlock* series portrays much more violent crime than Conan Doyle’s stories. Another reason is that Victorian detective and police forces were themselves not yet professionalized. In his “Introduction” to *The Complete Works of Sherlock Holmes*, Kyle Freeman explains that at the time *Study in Scarlet* was written, Scotland Yard “had not yet gained its reputation for crime investigation. That came later, partly as a result of adopting the scientific techniques of Sherlock Holmes” (697, Note 3). The process of professionalization of forensics and ballistics fields was also only beginning during this period. Meanwhile, twenty-first century audience expectations of the detective genre have shifted to one of greater formality regarding a detective’s payment and professionalization: those who work without pay are considered “freaks.”

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8 For further research on Victorian Holmes’s potential earnings from various cases, see Leavitt and McQueen.
9 See Rye for research on Victorian Holmes’s professionalization and work ethic.
Conclusion - The Connection Between Detective Freaks and New Media Technology

Referring to Watson’s traditional values, Holmes calls him “the one fixed point in a changing age” (Klinger 491), but it is Holmes himself who is timeless. The original stories have never gone out of print since they were first published and there are numerous Holmes societies around the world. There has been tremendous popular cultural response to this new adaptation. *Sherlock* received high ratings when broadcast in the UK, US, Australia and Europe in late 2010, later winning the BAFTA and Peabody awards. Publishers received a 180% increase in sales in Holmes-related works during its initial three-episode broadcast. The next three episodes were broadcast in early 2012; a third series was commissioned together with Season 2. In the meantime, a myriad of fan sites were created. And though both Holmes and *Sherlock* are products of British popular culture, these products have essentially gone global. With regard to his significance for literary audiences, Freeman attempts to explain Holmes’s enduring popularity. From the Sherlock Holmes stories there is:

that sense of solidness we get from this world in which logic triumphs over superstition, and where justice in one form or another is meted out to violators of the social order. The sense of order that runs through this world is one of the great satisfactions of these stories. No matter how bizarre the circumstances, Holmes will tender a rational explanation for everything. Criminals are caught not because they make a fatal error, but because all human actions, good and bad, leave traces behind. If you pay close enough attention to the causative chain

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10 [www.sherlockology.com](http://www.sherlockology.com) is an example of one such.

11 For a list of film and television adaptations of Holmes from around the world, see Barnes. For a scholarly list of Holmes-related websites world-wide, including those on television adaptations, see Klinger.
of events in everyday life, and you’ve trained yourself to think logically, you’ll be able to follow that chain when someone has committed a crime (xxii).

In *Sherlock* these “traces” are often left behind through technology: email passwords, GPS directions, website posts. Yet in portraying Sherlock as a tech-geek, Gatiss and Moffat also continue in the tradition of the “Technician-Hero” when they create a Holmes who is also heroic. On the one hand, he is a “geek” because of his unusual mastery of technology, specifically new media, and others consider him a “freak” because of his unusual interest in forensics, superior problem-solving skills and inability to maintain most social relationships. But on the other hand, unlike stereotypical freaks/geeks portrayed in popular culture, Sherlock does not become flustered during social interaction, but usually takes the upper hand; he does back down when confronted with opposition, but pushes forward to save his friends. He is intimidated neither by Irene Adler’s nudity (Season 2, Episode 1), nor by Moriarty’s blustering and threats (Season 1, Episode 3 and Season 2, Episode 3). In fact, Sherlock is portrayed as quite powerful when interacting with others on a face-to-face level.

Sherlock Holmes has evolved with technology and has been modernized and updated from the first silent film adaptations to radio, movies, TV and video games. Any new adaptation of the Sherlockian canon must choose which parts of the character to build upon and which to gloss over. In recognizing these choices, it is possible for modern readers of Conan Doyle’s texts to compare the cultural significance of late-Victorian society’s perception of unusual technocratic intelligence with our own and to conclude that although audiences of both eras perceive
The Victorian
technocratic ease as a sign of intelligence, Sherlock Holmes’ tech-geekiness causes more discomfort to those around him in the twenty-first century than it does in the Victorian period.


Reitner, Paula J. “Doctors, Detectives, and the Professional Ideal: The Trial of Thomas Neil Cream and the Mastery of Sherlock Holmes.” College Literature. 35.3 (Summer 2008) pg. 57-95.


Sherlockology: A Fan Site Dedicated to the BBC Drama Sherlock. <http://www.sherlockology.com>
