

Bailor TransXFiles (Homework-For-Pigeons)
For that one homie in the tags
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An Undeveloped Fred Jones & The Fall of the Scooby-Doo Renaissance

Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island and its sister films, *Scooby-Doo! and the Witch's Ghost* as well as *Scooby-Doo and the Alien Invaders* are widely regarded as the best animated Scooby-Doo films of all time, by both children and critics alike.¹ All three score high on the tomatometer and high with critics of the time. But the final film in the set, *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase*, is not so fondly remembered - or even remembered at all. Despite being included in this grouping of films, united by time period, cast, crew, and quality, *Cyber Chase* is frequently forgotten, and ended Hanna-Barbera's last successful stint before its absorption into Warner Brothers. The cause of this last-minute flop? Despite all their commonalities, *Cyber Chase* lacked one thing all of the other films possessed: a storyline focused on Fred Jones.²

Let's go back in time to 1985, thirteen years before *Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island* is even released. New Coke's just been released, everyone's hair is at its most gigantic, and the Hanna-Barbera company is stuck in a rut of failure with no clue to how they can escape it. They have just released the animated television series *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo*, only for the show to be canceled before it can even finish its first season. They never even track down the infamous thirteenth ghost - a feat that left eight-year-old me sobbing for years. It wasn't a bad show, after all. Shaggy Rogers, Daphne Blake, Scrappy-Doo, and, of course, his uncle Scooby-Doo get lost on their way to vacation and end up stuck in the Himalayas, staying with the kind (if vampiric)

¹ Alas, I must use the modifier "animated" ever since James Gunn released his cinematic masterpiece *Scooby-Doo* in 2002, shocking audiences (and me) with its dedication to the franchise.

² The truth of the matter is that each prior film focused on one of the other key members of Mystery Inc, but we'll get to that, later.

Vincent Van Ghoul (voiced by the fabulous Vincent Price). Through a wacky and colorful series of events, Scooby-Doo ends up accidentally opening the infamous Chest of Demons, releasing thirteen of the most dangerous ghouls upon the face of the Earth. Now, with the help of Vincent Van Ghoul and the wacky 80s kid Flim-Flam, the crew sets off to track down these ghosts and return them to their prison, to save the Earth (and so on, and so forth).

Not a bad plot, right? Sure, the writing's awful and the animators had a budget of elbow grease and chewing gum, but they make it work. It's a fun premise. It's also one of the first pieces of Scooby-Doo media to really push the idea of the supernatural being *real*.³ And that's where things start to go wrong. It's 1985. This is the *height* of the Satanic Panic in the United States. Parents have read *Michelle Remembers* and they're already fighting to take Dungeons & Dragons off shelves, to shelter their children from heavy-metal music and other such alleged weapons of Satanic worshippers. *13 Ghosts* is a perfect next target. Parents fight Hanna-Barbera and the company shuts it down. Starting in 1988, they return to what they know; light and fluffy kids' cartoons that will sell without question. They crank out four seasons of *A Pup Named Scooby-Doo* until the show ends a success (at least in terms of money made) in 1991. And then, the Scooby-Doo property lays dormant for seven years. Seven years until Hanna-Barbera makes a bold, risky move.

³ Dedicated fans will tell me this is at worst a lie, at best hyperbole. I was aiming for the latter. It is true that Scooby-Doo interacts with the supernatural before this point; not only in one-off jokes in the original show, but also in direct-to-video films such as *Scooby-Doo and the Ghoul School*, *Scooby-Doo Meets The Boo Brothers*, and *Scooby-Doo and the Reluctant Werewolf*, as well as a few stray episodes of *The Scooby-Doo and Scrappy-Doo* show where the mutt meddles with aliens and other supernatural forces. But that is irrelevant to my thesis; the point of this statement is that *The 13 Ghosts* directly centers Scooby in a narrative of, not just mystery solving, but ghost hunting. And as the dog has no ghost hunted until this point, my statement stands (mostly) true.

Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island is released in 1998 with a promotional budget of fifty million dollars. Even the tape is pricey – it’s sold at just under twenty dollars,⁴ expensive for direct-to-video tapes of the time, but sold is the right word. This thing sells like hotcakes, and once you get a look at it, it’s not hard to understand why. Now, while I couldn’t find any reliable sources that told me exactly what the animation budget for this film was, it’s clear just from a few shots that this thing’s beautiful to look at. Masterfully crafted at every level, especially when you compare it to not only its predecessors in the franchise, but also other animated films of the time. In 1998, just looking at Disney we’re seeing *Mulan* and *Pocahontas II* released around this time. We’ve also got *The Black Cauldron* from Warner Brothers, and *The Prince of Egypt* coming from DreamWorks, so all in all, it’s a pretty good year for animation. That’s not really surprising. What’s impressive is that the animation in *Zombie Island* is just as good as, if not better, than all of the aforementioned films.

But it’s not just the art that’s selling this thing. The story is new, it’s fresh, it’s interesting. We buy this nineteen-dollars-and-something-cents tape expecting another cheap mystery solving flick. Instead, we get the illusion of that – and below it, character study, horror, and so much more. This is a movie about Daphne Blake. That much is evident from the first musical sequence and the first voice over that shows us that these meddling kids aren’t really kids anymore – they’re adults, with jobs, in professions outside of mystery solving and cop-bothering. Shaggy and Scooby work in airport security, Velma runs her own mystery-themed independent bookstore, Freddie is a cameraman, and he works with Daphne Blake, a name known all across America due to the success of her television presence and talk show.

⁴ \$19.95 for you curious cats out there. Most direct-to-video films were about \$10 to \$15, not counting those fuckers at Disney who made you pay \$25. Bastards.

On their journey in search of real ghosts and monsters, Mystery Inc. meets the fabulous Lena, a young woman who works with the mysterious lady Simone, both living on a large estate on an island known as Moonscar Island. Just a short way into their stay on the grounds, the gang begins to realize that things are not quite what they seem... and not everything that goes bump in the night is a man to be unmasked. In the hopes of not going so far as to spoil the film for those of you who have yet to see it, I will tell you just this: This is a film about Daphne. It's about how she longs to be greater and do more. It's about her curious, fierce spirit. It's about her biting off more than she can chew, and saving the day just in time. And it's a film that incorporates an endless set of supernatural villains, one after the other after the other. And it's a film that's *successful*. So they make another.

Before *Zombie Island*, Scooby-Doo films were made quick and cheap for kids to consume while their parents groaned. Often, the films included fewer main characters, frequently just settling for Shaggy Rogers and Scooby-Doo to save money, relying on a cast of goofy, poorly-written background characters to fill the void left by the other members of Mystery Inc.⁵ Most of these films, though incorporating supernatural elements, only did so for comic relief. *Zombie Island* raised the bar in every sense of the phrase. The supernatural horrors (the layers and layers of them) present in the film are not just mysterious... they're downright scary. And by 1999 the same team that had put together the zombie-filled masterpiece was ready with their second Magnum Opus, if such a thing is possible: *Scooby-Doo! and the Witch's Ghost*.

Scooby-Doo! and the Witch's Ghost was released in 1999, direct-to-video and with less fame and flourish than its zombie-centric sister. It because of this that there is less available

⁵ As *The New Scooby-Doo Movies* were television specials and not exclusively direct-to-video films, they are not relevant to this synopsis. These specials often did include the full cast of Scooby-Doo characters solving mysteries as usual as they followed plots more similar to the original formula of the show.

information as to the conditions surrounding its exact development and release. There are rumors that the script underwent multiple revisions and that there was some disconnect and even possible infighting amongst the cast and crew, particularly concerning the writers - however, as there are few sources pertaining to this information, and even fewer reliable, the truth within it is questionable at best. So let's focus on what we know: the information within the film.

Following suite, this film opens in a similar style to the first in its set. We see the members of Mystery Inc. investigating a supposed haunting at a museum, only to unmask a couple of guilty security guards and call it a day. Velma is at the forefront of every shot, Velma unmasks the faux-monster foes - and Velma encounters a man known as Ben Ravencroft, her favorite author of all time and a lifelong hero of hers. This is a story about *Velma*. And so Hanna-Barbera establishes a pattern; it becomes clear that within their current trend of Scooby-Doo films, each will be centered around one of our beloved meddling kids. This character will undergo a complete arc, like Daphne's in her 1998 film, like Velma's arc in this 1999 movie where she learns that her hero isn't quite what he seems, and must come to terms with what that means for her.⁶ Additionally, this brings back another element that made *Zombie Island* successful - monsters are real, and in this case, it is the titular *Witch's Ghost*. Combine that with our newly introduced memorable side characters and we've established a brand new formula for the perfect Scooby film:

⁶ There is also, if you're asking me, a fair amount of queer (specifically sapphic / lesbian) subtext within this film that is also important to a complete analysis of the subject matter. However, I am not here to analyze that now; that will have to be an essay for another time. For now, I'll leave you with three words: The Hex Girls.

Storytelling focus on full arc of protagonist + monsters are real + compelling supporting cast = successful Scooby-Doo film.⁷

And so the next film follows the same formula. Assisted by brand-new 2000s animation techniques, *Scooby-Doo! and the Alien Invaders* begins with a shot of Shaggy and Scooby-Doo cruising through the desert South West of America, listening to music a bit too loudly and Velma asking if Shaggy could turn it down just a bit. Our beloved Mystery Machine breaks down, our protagonists split up, and Shaggy is left all alone with his dog in the middle of nowhere in New Mexico. This story is about Shaggy and his interactions with a woman named Crystal, who he feels is the first person he's ever known who actually understands him. We have our protagonist and his arc. We learn that there are rumors of alien ships flying over the small town Mystery Incorporated stays in as their van gets fixed up, and we learn that not all is as it seems. Monsters, we learn, are real. We have our compelling supporting cast - a woman named Crystal, and her dog, Amber, as well as various other residents of Roswell. And so the third direct-to-video film does well in sales, though again, exact figures are hard to come by.⁸ But it's not all alien ships on the horizon - there's a storm brewing out to the West, coming from a storm that will be known as a film called *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase*.

Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase is released in 2001 to the dismay of everyone who has ever loved Scooby-Doo. We get a brief taste of a plot - the film opens on a group of unnamed scientists in a generic lab setting when something goes terribly wrong. We understand that they are video game developers - or maybe coders? The lines are blurry, as if the writers and

⁷ It is also important to note that at least partial contribution to the success of these films is that they are all implied or even explicitly stated to take place within the same universe. Though the lines are a bit blurry between *Zombie Island* and *Witch's Ghost*, the characters are voiced by the same actors and wear the same outfits, indicative of these films all occurring in the same universe. Furthermore, in *Alien Invaders*, there is a scene where Shaggy can be overheard outright telling his new girlfriend Crystal about events that took place in *Witch's Ghost*.

⁸ Give me the fucking numbers Hanna Barbera department in Warner Brothers. Give me. The numbers.

animators didn't have the time or care to explain much of anything to us. We haphazardly learn that our beloved meddling kids are visiting... some coders they have a connection to? At a university lab, I think? It's poorly written. I don't know who this story is about. You don't know who this story is about. There's one thing I can tell you, though, through all of the chases through video game environments and unstable virus personifications: this is not a story about Fred Jones. And that is the problem here. There are, of course, a few things that make *Cyber Chase* an outlier, that differentiate it from its three sister movies. You could attribute its failure to the fact that it is the only film in this set without an exclamation mark in the title, or perhaps to its overuse of new CGI technology. You could point out that this is the first film to have been made after the death of Daphne's voice actor in the previous three films, a woman named Mary Kay Bergman. But if we look at our other films, they had similar flaws - *Zombie Island* was overpriced, and logically should not have sold. *Witch's Ghost* saw backlash against the writers, if the stories are to be believed, and outrage at outsourced scripts. *Alien Invaders* was frankly of lower animation quality (though not as low quality as *Cyber Chase*) despite being created by the same animation studio.⁹ So I propose that the most prominent reason for the downfall of the fourth and final film in this set is as simple as this: it did not tell the story of Fred Jones.

Cyber Chase is the final film William Hanna produces before his death on March 22, 2001. And it's a sorry thing to say, because *Cyber Chase* is not a successful film. It is the film that flops enough to allow the once more weakened Hanna-Barbera properties to fall low enough for Warner Brothers to fully acquire the rights to Scooby-Doo, and then to never make a Scooby film of *Zombie Island* quality ever again. Of course, William Hanna's death is one we cannot ignore while examining the reason Hanna-Barbera sold out to Warner Brothers. Without Hanna

⁹ Mook Animation studios my beloved.

at his side, Barbera likely felt out of place in the company. However, if the last movie produced by the duo had been more of a success, more like its three predecessors, could this have changed? Would Hanna-Barbera still be around and independent today? I cannot be certain. No one can. But I'm pretty sure a Fred Jones based film could have saved them, or at least kept them going a bit longer, putting out more and more dynamic and show-stopping films, even into the DVD and streaming eras.

So why didn't they focus their story on Fred Jones? What changed between *Alien Invaders* and *Cyber Chase*? My mother argues that Fred is simply far less dynamic than the other characters, and many Scooby fans seem to agree with her. But the truth is that all of the other members of Mystery Inc. were equally undeveloped before they each earned their stories in their own films. Daphne was just a young, danger-prone woman before *Zombie Island*. Sure, she entertained the role of ghost-hunting protagonist in *13 Ghosts*, but to what extent? The show was cancelled before it could ever truly begin. In *A Pup Named Scooby-Doo* she gets some time to herself, but only as a spoiled rich girl with minimal development - because how much development can you really pack into a kid's Saturday morning cartoon? It is *Zombie Island* that builds Daphne Blake, that makes her into the entrepreneurial woman we know her as today. *Zombie Island* introduces us to her reporter side, to her determined side, to the part of her that is smart and clever and driven and needs to solve a case just as much as her companions. These are traits that follow her to this day. Though she is still frequently portrayed as the rich girl, she gets to do more. In *Scooby-Doo: The Mystery Begins* and *What's New, Scooby-Doo?* she's the person who always has a plan and is great with disguises. In *Scooby-Doo: Mystery Incorporated* as well as post-2001 Scooby-Doo films she is shown to possess a variety of useful talents and hobbies. Other films, such as *Scooby-Doo! and the Curse of the 13th Ghost*, her work in *Zombie Island* is

even referenced directly (if lazily) as an important part of her past and a defining event in her character's life.

Similarly, Velma Dinkley gains development from *Witch's Ghost*. Now, on top of being the token lesbian of the group and the girl who frequently loses her glasses, she's also a fan of horror fiction, a detective in her own right, her own person. And her later appearances reflect this. In various films and television shows she gets her own arcs and character studies, specifically in movies like *Scooby-Doo: Abracadabra-Doo!* where we meet her sister, and in *Scooby-Doo: Mystery Incorporated* where after being thrown into a love triangle for her entire season one arc, she ends up getting her own arc and character study in season two when she begins working for some shady characters and hanging out with Marcy "Hot Dog Water" Fleach.¹⁰ Shaggy Rogers receives similar treatment after *Alien Invaders*. He's still the boy who likes food and whom most people assume is a stoner, but he's more than that. He gains his own arcs in later shows such as *What's New, Scooby-Doo?* and *Scooby-Doo: Mystery Incorporated*. *Alien Invaders* specifically opens up doors for new romantic arcs between Shaggy and various people from outside of the main cast of characters, a treatment that other members of the gang rarely see.¹¹

Fred Jones is the sole member of Mystery Inc. who never seems to get a story all to himself despite the amount of post-2001 pieces of Scooby-Doo media that have been character studies of his fellow meddling kids. Instead, Fred is there just to be the fifth member of Mystery Inc. The guy who makes traps, the guy who says "Let's split up, gang!" the guy who's always the butt of every joke - despite never suffering this treatment in the original source material,

¹⁰ Yes I know this is also technically a romantic plot, even though it was censored. Bear with me.

¹¹ *Scooby-Doo: Mystery Incorporated*, the show that pairs various members of Mystery Inc. with endless side characters for the inherent drama of love triangles, is an outlier and frankly should never be counted. But I digress.

Scooby-Doo, Where Are You? If anything, in the original show it was always Daphne, Velma, or Shaggy who were our sense of comic relief. But in recent years - specifically, ever since 2001 and the creation of *Cyber Chase* - Fred Jones has been reduced to nothing more than someone we laugh at. Take the live action 2002 film *Scooby-Doo* for example: within the plot of the film, Daphne is a clever and multi-talented young woman in search of real monsters, Velma is nerdy and bookish as ever but prone to solving mysteries on her own, and Shaggy has his own romantic subplot. Sound familiar? Yet Fred Jones is no one. He's there to be dumb and vaguely misogynistic. Fred Jones has no arc. Even jumping ahead to the infamous¹² *Scooby-Doo: Mystery Incorporated* of 2010, a show that prides itself on telling complex and meaningful stories about interpersonal relationships... the Fred plotlines are the weakest and least thought-out of them all. It's clear that the writers tried to make him more than just the guy who sets traps or the guy with the plan, but in doing so they run themselves in circles. His father is the mayor who makes plans - and then his father is evil and was never his father at all. And then he meets his real father and mother, and what do they do for a living? They make traps. And each plotline gets more ridiculous and still he is nothing but the butt of the joke and a sorta-kinda love interest for Daphne Blake.

I propose that not only is the lack of a 2001 Fred-centric film the cause of this continuous lack of Fred Jones character development, but also that this lack of character development is harmful to the Scooby-Doo franchise as a whole. Ever since *Cyber Chase*, Scooby media has continued in its ups and downs - except the downs are becoming more frequent and the ups far less plentiful. After all, there are only so many stories you can tell with only three (perhaps four? Scooby-Doo is there too, after all) developed characters. But with a fully fleshed-out Fred Jones,

¹² You can't fight me on this one. If you canonize the fact that Scooby-Doo is the avatar of an eldritch god on Earth, you go down in infamy. I don't make the rules.

the possibilities would be endless. It's not to say that *Cyber Chase* was a bad film. It wasn't. But it was weak when compared to its predecessors. What if Fred had some sort of emotional connection to the coders, the same way Velma had with Ben Ravencroft or Shaggy had with Crystal? What if Fred had to solve the mystery himself, like Daphne on Moonscar Island? What if we learned more about him beyond just setting traps and watching them work their magic - not erasing this aspect of his character, but building upon it?

I believe we'd live in a different world. A world where Fred, still a himbo, would at least be more respected. Where he wouldn't be called a knockoff Hemsworth brother by movie villains. It is because of *Cyber Chase* that Scooby media's been in a rut since 2001, but it doesn't have to be this way. There's still time. Warner Brothers, if you're reading this, hire me as a scriptwriter- [a large bus drives by, flattening me cartoonishly onto the pavement of the busy road I was standing in the middle of for no reason].

Bibliography

Dude, trust me.

(No seriously I spent like three days typing this up and can't do sources right now, lmao).

Sorry for not using footnotes for actual citations purposes btw. But this is a paper about Scooby-Doo that someone on Tumblr asked me to write so really, professionalism is *not* at the forefront of my mind with this.

Further Reading

(This segment formally added 4/19/2022)

Technically, it's listening, but I audio-recorded myself discussing what I like to call "The Fred Jones Problem. You can access it on [AO3](#), [Tumblr](#), and [Internet Archive](#).