

THE DATING GAME (PART 2)

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The chronological setting of Thunderbirds is at issue once again - this time Chris Bentley places the series in chronological context with the other Supermarionation series and lights a fuse under the unified Anderson universe theory.

In my first article about chronological issues in the Gerry Anderson television series and films (FAB 25), I offered five individual incidences of on-screen evidence which indicate that the writers and producers of Thunderbirds had conceived the series as being set 100 years in the future- i.e. the period 2065 (first season) to 2068 (Thunderbird 6). I also established that it is more than evident that this chronological setting of the series formed part of the information about the series' format that was distributed throughout the Century 21 Organisation to all arms of its merchandising operation, including licensees, as the mid-2060s dating for Thunderbirds also appears on the Century 21 Mini- Albums, in the annuals, the Armada/World Distributors novels and, of course, in "TV Century 21/TV21" magazine.

It seems clear enough to me that this all outweighs any evidence to the contrary - namely, a single calendar page in *Give Or Take A Million* which gives the year as 2026 - particularly when that evidence has already been dismissed as a mistake by Thunderbirds' production designer Bob Bell. After all, if it had been the intention of the producers that the programme be set in the earlier time frame, why would they then distribute material that contradicted that intent?

However, there are two main arguments that are often put forward to suggest that the earlier setting for Thunderbirds is 'true'. The first of these is the reference that Kyrano makes in *Trapped In The Sky* to Jeff Tracy having been one of the first men on the Moon ("You must be proud to have been one of the world's first men to land on the Moon." "It's all a long time ago, Kyrano. A long time ago." This, the argument goes, must surely indicate that the date of the series is the mid-2020s: Jeff is in his mid-50s and would, therefore, have been stepping onto the Moon some twenty or thirty years before. In order to be described as one of the first men on the Moon, Jeff would have had to have been there at some point in the last three decades of the 20th century.

Well, this is a logical enough point of view, but doesn't really hold much water. In 1964, when *Trapped In The Sky* was written and produced, the AP Films production team could only speculate that the first manned Moon landing might occur within the next decade (on July 20th, 1969), and they could never have guessed that after the initial flurry of lunar activity in the early Seventies, further trips to the Moon would be abandoned by the world's space programmes. Man has not stood on the surface of the Moon since 1973 (Apollo 17) and, to date, only 12 men have ever done so. If Jeff is to be taken to have been one of these, then the setting of the series must be much earlier than 2026 - around the year 2000 in fact.

Of course, we all know that Jeff Tracy wasn't the name of one of those twelve men in our reality, but in the Thunderbirds universe, it might well have been. For that matter, in the Thunderbirds universe, the first manned Moon landings might not have taken place until much later: not until the year 2000 maybe - or perhaps not even until the 2040s! Man's history in space, according to the Thunderbirds universe, is never established in the series, so we just don't know.

Consider also that Thunderbirds and Captain Scarlet are undoubtedly set in the same reality (the Zero X connection). At the time of Captain Scarlet, the Moon is revealed to be quite heavily populated with some 4,000 men and women living and working on the surface (*Lunarville 7*). In the knowledge that *at least* that number of people have set foot on the Moon, any of the first 20, 50 or 100 men to have landed there could reasonably be described as being "one of the first" - and they could have done so at any point over the previous ten to fifty years. Therefore, as an indicator of chronological setting, Kyrano's statement is pretty much worthless.

The second argument which suggests a 2020s setting for Thunderbirds goes that the comparative technologies, societies and political/military organisations seen in the various Supermarionation series point to a development over many decades: for example, the state of the technology in Fireball XL5 (interstellar travel) is so far in advance of anything in Thunderbirds that the two series could not possibly be set even within the same decade, never mind Fireball preceding Thunderbirds by some three years! How can we possibly accept the Zero X mission in Thunderbirds Are Go - the first manned flight to Mars - as taking place in 2067 when we have already seen space ships in Fireball XL5 with the ability to reach other star systems within a matter of days?

To accept this argument, you really have to accept the supposition that the Supermarionation series all take place in the same universe (the "TV21" principle) which, as I mentioned last time, is a nice idea that is very appealing to many fans. Unfortunately, to follow this line of thinking requires one to dismiss too many discrepancies between the shows.

We have no choice but to accept the link between Thunderbirds and Captain Scarlet, but where and how do the rest of the series fit in?

Let us deal first with Supercar, The Secret Service and Joe 90 as all three are clearly set in a much earlier time frame than the other series. On-screen evidence in Supercar (*A Little Art*, *Phantom Piper* and *The Day That Time Stood Still*, for example) indicates a setting between 1959 and 1962, and the appearance of present day (i.e. 1960s) vehicles, technology and fashions in both Supercar and The Secret Service suggest that the two series take place during the years that they were originally broadcast or thereabouts: 1961/62 and 1969 respectively. On-screen evidence in Joe 90 (*The Unorthodox Shepherd*) points towards a 2012/13 setting.*

Stylistically, Joe 90 and The Secret Service would both appear to share the same universe, but whether they do or not is up to the preference of the individual. It makes sense to me to imagine that they are, as there is no reason why they should not. Given the stylistic similarity, it would also be easy to imagine that both series share the same universe as Captain Scarlet were it not for the fact that Joe McClaine can be seen reading issue 183 of "TV21" (presumably a rare back-issue that he picked up at a comic-mart or a Fanderson convention!) in Ralph Clayton's office at the start of *See You Down There*. This would indicate that all of the Supermarionation series appearing as comic strips in that issue of the magazine (Stingray, Thunderbirds and, in particular, Captain Scarlet which can be seen on the cover) and also, by implication, those that appeared in earlier issues of the magazine (Supercar and Fireball XL5) are merely fictional elements in the Joe 90 universe - assuming that the contents of "TV21" in that universe are the same as in ours.**

Of the four remaining series, three are clearly and consistently date-referenced within the episodes. In Fireball XL5, the first astronauts and the year 1962 are both referred to as having been "100 years ago" (in *Space Magnet* and *Flight To Danger* respectively) and the television announcer in *The Forbidden Planet* gives the date as "Universal Astronomic Year 2062". In Stingray, the plaque at the Arago Rock Lighthouse in *The Lighthouse Dwellers* gives the closure date of the lighthouse as 2065, and the events of *Star Of The East* are described as having taken place one year ago (i.e. 2064) in *Eastern Eclipse*. Captain Scarlet is captioned on-screen as being set in 2068 A.D. at the start of *The Mysterons* and this is later confirmed in *Expo 2068*.

An argument can be made for Supercar occupying the same universe as Fireball XL5, as a "Supercar" storybook can be seen on a shelf in Jonathan Zero's bedroom in *Space Pirates*. This book could be viewed as either fiction (i.e. Supercar is a television series in the Fireball XL5 universe, just as Four Feather Falls is seen to be in *The Forbidden Planet*) or non-fiction (i.e. the events of Supercar actually took place 100 years prior to those seen in Fireball XL5) - either way the two series share the same universe, but do not necessarily share the same 'reality'.

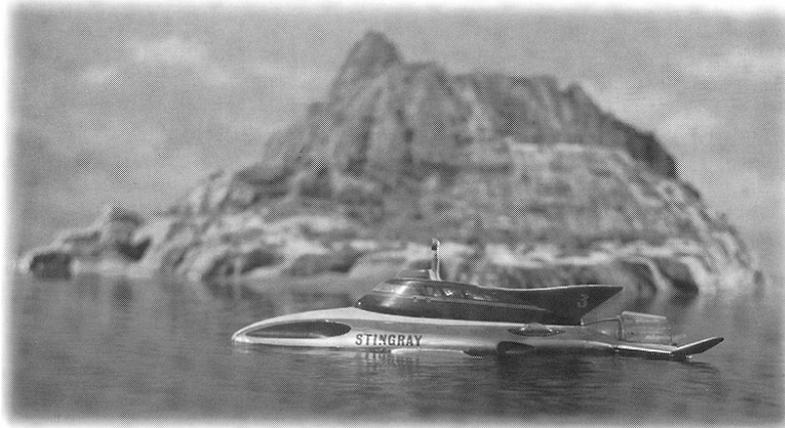
However, it seems very unlikely that Fireball co-exists with Stingray and Captain Scarlet. Although there are technological similarities between Fireball and Stingray (many of the Earth-based aircraft share similar designs), it stretches credulity that the 2060s of Fireball XL5, in which contact with alien cultures from the depths of space is commonplace and Earth is part of a United Planets Organisation, are the same 2060s in which the crew of Stingray are seen arguing about the existence of any alien species prior to man's first contact with the undersea races. Stingray *could* be part of the Thunderbirds universe, though: there are no links between the two series to suggest that they *are* part of same reality, but then, by the same token, nor is there anything to suggest that they *aren't*.

Quite clearly, Fireball's 2060s have nothing in common with Scarlet's: in *Fireball* it is established that there is some form of thriving colony on Mars as there is an overnight ferry run to the planet (*Prisoner On The Lost Planet*) and the Earth television services regularly receive "canned programmes from Mars" (*The Forbidden Planet*), all at odds with Captain Black's Zero X mission to Mars at the start of *The Mysterons* (described by Colonel White to the Mysterons in *Dangerous Rendezvous* as "Man's first survey expedition on the surface of your planet) and Spectrum's attempts to obtain the first close-up pictures of Mars in *Shadow Of Fear*.

If Fireball XL5 cannot share the same 'reality' as Captain Scarlet, then there is no reason to suppose that the series has any real link with Thunderbirds either, rendering the argument about comparative technologies and societies completely pointless - the 2060s of Fireball XL5 cannot be part of the same timeline that is seen in Thunderbirds, whether Thunderbirds is set in 2026 or the mid-2060s.

So, the "TV21" principle of the unified Anderson universe doesn't work - not because the dating of Thunderbirds is wrong, but because certain of the series are incompatible with each other, and what we are looking at with the Supermarionation shows are *at least* three different 'realities': the Supercar/Fireball XL5 universe (if Supercar is seen in a historical, rather than fictional, context in Fireball XL5), the Stingray/ Thunderbirds/Captain Scarlet universe and the Joe 90/The Secret Service universe (in which all of the other Supermarionation series only co-exist in a fictional context, just as they do in our universe).

The upshot of all this is that the matter of the chronological placement of Thunderbirds still comes down to the viewer's personal preference as to which line of thought on the subject he/she chooses to accept as canon: a three-second cutaway shot of a calendar in the very last episode, or the intentions of the series' creators as indicated elsewhere in the same episode, one earlier episode (*30 Minutes After Noon*), both feature films and an array of officially authorised and licensed merchandise



*The Century 21 Joe 90 Annuals, incidentally, set the series in 1993/94 - whichever date is 'true' for Joe is perhaps the subject for another discussion, but it isn't important to this one.

** This is not necessarily a safe assumption to make - after all, the later issues of "TV21" in Joe's universe couldn't have incorporated "Joe 90 Top Secret" after issue 242 to become "TV21 And Joe 90", could they?

My thanks to Stephen Le Vesconte and Keith Ansell for presenting me with their thoughts on the topics covered in this column - although I disagreed with them in some areas, they were very helpful in crystallising my own thoughts.