

The History of Star Trek

The original *Star Trek* was the brainchild of Gene Roddenberry (1921-1991), a US TV producer and scriptwriter. His idea was to make a TV series that combined the futuristic possibilities of science fiction with the drama and excitement of TV westerns (his original title for the series was 'Wagon Train to the Stars'). *Star Trek* was first aired on American TV in 1966, and ran for three series. Each episode was a self-contained adventure/mystery, but they were all linked together by the premise of a gigantic spaceship, crewed by a diverse range of people, travelling about the galaxy on a five-year mission 'to explore new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no man has gone before'. Although not especially successful it attracted a loyal fan-base, partly male fans that liked the technological and special effects elements of the show. But the show also attracted a large number of female fans, many of whom were drawn to the complex interaction and dynamic between the three main characters, the charismatic but impetuous Captain Kirk (William Shatner), the crotchety old doctor McCoy (DeForest Kelley) and the coldly logical Vulcan science officer Spock (Leonard Nimoy). After the show was cancelled in 1969 the fans conducted a lengthy and ultimately successful campaign to resurrect the franchise. Roddenberry enjoyed success with several motion pictures, including *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979); action-thriller *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982); *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984) and the more comic *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986). Two further 'original series' movies were made: *Star Trek V: the Final Frontier* (1989) and *Star Trek VI: the Undiscovered Country* (1991). The success of these films enabled Roddenberry to set-up a spin-off TV series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which began broadcasting in 1987.

'Next Gen', as the new TV series became known, was set in the same universe as the original *Star Trek*, but 80 years further on in time. The new *Enterprise* was much bigger than the original ship, and included populations of civilians and scientists alongside its 'Star Fleet' crew. The Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) was a more rational, considered and diplomatic figure than the impulsive Kirk. Some of Kirk's qualities were assumed by First Officer Will Riker (Jonathan Frakes), some of Spock's by the android bridge officer Data (Brent Spiner), some of McCoy's crossness by the sole Klingon officer in Star Fleet Worf (Michael Dorn); but the much larger ensemble cast brought many new inflections to the format, including a deliberately enhanced role for female characters (including Marina Sirtis as the empathetic ship's counsellor Deanna Troi, Gates McFadden as the ship's Doctor Crusher, and Whoopi Goldberg as a bartender from an ancient race called Guinan. Other characters included the blind ship's engineer Geordi LaForge (Levar Burton) who constantly wore an artificial sight-band, and the teenage ensign Wesley Crusher (Wil Wheaton). The TV show ran very successfully for seven series before being wound up in 1994, in which year it followed its precursor in moving to the Big Screen.

The first *Next Generation* movie, *Star Trek: Generations* (1994) was a linking exercise, passing the torch from the characters from the original *Star Trek* (Kirk and some minor characters, but not Spock or McCoy appeared in this movie) to the characters of the *Next Generation*. It was followed by *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) a darker and more exciting movie that brought back one of the most successful 'baddies' from the TV show, the ruthless cybernetic alien race known as 'the Borg'. The success of this film led to a third 'Next Gen' movie *Star Trek: Insurrection* (1998).

The Star Trek franchise on TV has, meanwhile, gone from strength to strength. A second spin-off series, *Deep Space Nine* ran for seven series from 1993 to 1999. Set on a stationary space station rather than a roving spaceship, it nevertheless managed to siphon a deal of variety and action through its portion of space. The station of the title, 'Deep Space Nine' with its Captain Sisko (played by Avery Brooks), was located near a wormhole in space. A third spin-off series, *Star Trek: Voyager* (which ran from 1995 to 2001) was a return to the principles of the first two series. The spaceship *Voyager*, captained by Kate Mulgrew's Captain Janeway, was thrown clean across the galaxy by mischance, and spent many years travelling through entirely new cultures and races on its long journey home. A fourth spin-off series, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, has recently begun broadcasting. It is a prequel to the original series; its Starship *Enterprise* the earliest model, and its captain Archer (Scott Bakula) venturing out into the galaxy for the first time.

The History of Star Trek Discussion Topics

[A discussion of the various forms in which *Star Trek* has appeared can be a preliminary to a discussion of **genre** and **fans** more generally. Possible discussion questions might include:]

1. What are the advantages in watching 'Star Trek' as a **movie rather than a TV** episode? What are the disadvantages? Which format is better suited to the show?

[Advantages might include: cinema films make more money, and so attract bigger budgets, so the films tend to look better and have better special effects than the series. Disadvantages include: the multi-episode format of the TV series allows a more measured development of plot and character, both of which tend to be squashed so as to fit inside a two-hour movie. The movies are less intimate, and follow the conventions of action-blockbuster-SF cinema to the detriment of the more considered plots and premises from the TV.]

(Alternatively, a more general discussion might be appropriate: 'Star Trek', in its various incarnations, has appeared in a great many **forms**: the original TV series, movies, animated cartoons, novelisations, comic-books, role-playing

games, computer games, spin-off merchandise and fan communities. How many other 'authors' are represented in so many forms? Shakespeare? Dickens? Generally we think of a film or a book as being secondary to the original book; in *Star Trek* do we think of the novelisations as being secondary to the TV series? Why is this?)

2. The **genre** to which *Star Trek* belongs is often divided in two: science fiction on the one hand, and 'Fantasy' on the other—the difference between, for instance, *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings*. What is the difference?

*[If we say 'science fiction involves technology and Fantasy involves magic', then would *The Lord of the Rings* be a quite different book/film if Gandalf carried a laser rifle instead of a wizard's staff? It might be argued that the similarities between 'SF' and 'Fantasy' are more important than the differences: both tend to involve impossible feats in a battle of good versus evil. Isn't the *Star Trek* 'transporter' a form of 'magic device'? Is 'firing a stasis field' at an enemy any different from casting a spell at them?]*