



RISE OF THE TREKKER

THE ORIGINAL SERIES WAS CANCELED AFTER THREE SEASONS, BUT IT CREATED A LEGION OF PASSIONATE FANS WHO HAVE RESHAPED POPULAR CULTURE

BY REED TUCKER

“GET A LIFE!” WILLIAM SHATNER FAMOUSLY ADMONISHED A stunned group of *Star Trek* fans in a 1986 *Saturday Night Live* sketch. “You’ve turned an enjoyable little job that I did as a lark for a few years into a colossal waste of time.” The skit hit the cultural bull’s-eye—Shatner even called his 1999 memoir *Get a Life!*—because it perfectly played into the pervasive stereotype of *Trek* fans as antisocial losers living in their mothers’ basements.

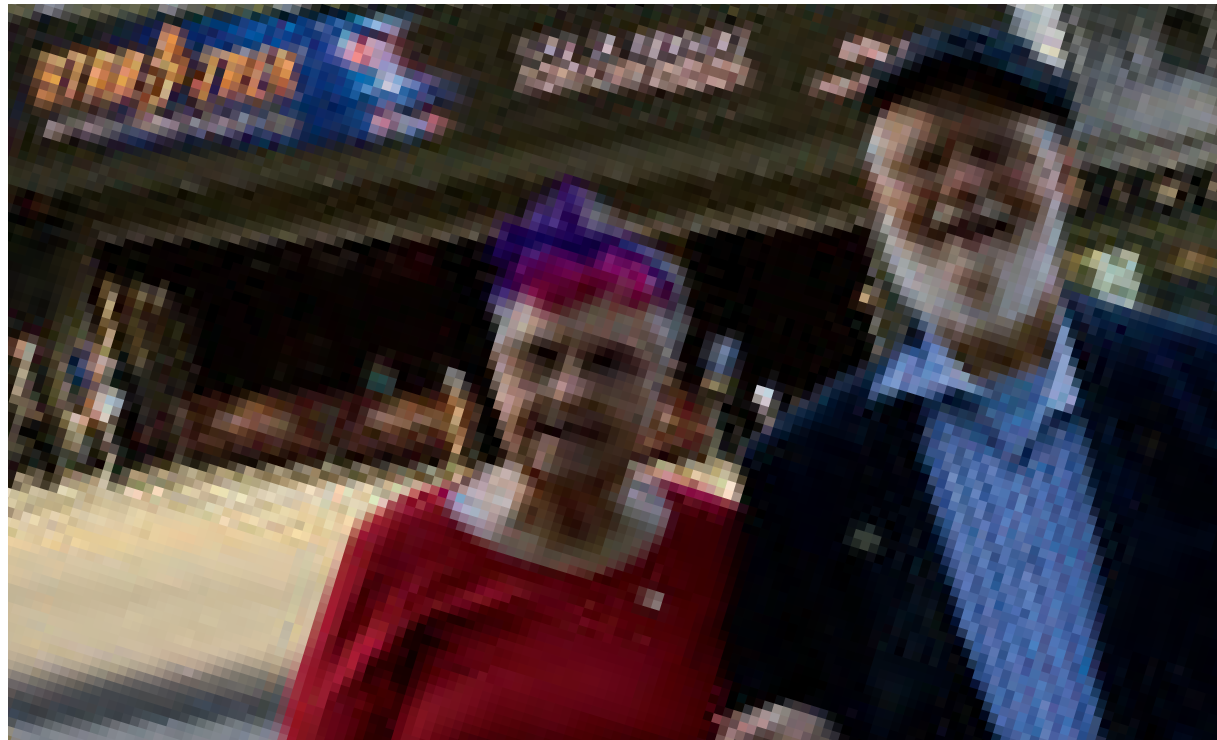
“It’s just a TV show, damn it,” Shatner pleaded. “It’s just a TV show.”

Turns out it wasn’t, and it isn’t.

It has now become clear that those long-mocked Trekkers are among the most influential groups in entertainment history. That tight little band of fanatics who rallied around the original series starting back in 1966 basically paved the way for so much of what we see in pop culture today as well as pioneered the manner in which so many of us consume it. That guy wearing the plastic ears and phaser holster? He’s now the mainstream.

“*Star Trek* really started it all,” says Daryl Frazetti, a Western Nevada College anthropology professor who’s taught classes on the franchise. “They were the first to bring the mythology to the fans and allow them to participate in parts of that myth.”

Fans of the series from Long Island, N.Y., sport homemade headgear at a 1976 convention at the Statler Hilton Hotel in Manhattan.



When *Trek* premiered on Sept. 8, 1966, on NBC, viewers could sense they had something different. Networks had aired science-fiction shows before, but many, such as *Lost in Space* and *Captain Video and His Video Rangers*, were aimed at younger viewers. With *Star Trek*, creator Gene Roddenberry offered a more intelligent spin on the future. Here was a series that often subordinated action and explosions in favor of character-driven stories that provided veiled commentary on the touchiest social issues of '60s-era America, including racism, religion and militarism.

"In the mid-'60s, prime-time TV was coming out of this western phase and transitioning into the escapist sitcom era, where you get *Mr. Ed* and *I Dream of Jeannie*," says Arthur Smith, an assistant curator at the Paley Center for Media. "*Star Trek* looked like a juvenile serial, but it was very adult and serious in its aims. It was absolutely different for that time."

Viewers noticed, and a fan base quickly grew around the show. With just three networks on the dial in that era, programming was designed to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, and in that respect, *Star Trek* failed. The series sputtered in the ratings and

↑ .Inatur addum dent. Ili postorum inamporei praesenam oposulocchum etimus acchus Marit, neque nia? Aximmores ius; nonlost publitem publiu coer id

was canceled after just three seasons. Back then, TV ratings and viewing demographics weren't nearly as sophisticated as they are today, but it was clear from the limited data gathered that what the *Trek* audience lacked in size, it made up for in passion. "The audience was small, but it was incredibly consistent," Smith says. "It was a dedicated audience."

At the time, no one could have guessed how dedicated. Through the series's run and in the years following the show's cancellation, Trekkers pioneered a more active and extreme type of participation with the franchise they loved. Fan fiction? Conventions? Dressing in costumes for "cosplay"? Sound familiar?

"It really set the stage for everything that's happening now in fandom," says Marc Cushman, a former *Star Trek: The Next Generation* writer and the author of *These Are the Voyages*, a close look at the original series. "The networks and the studios didn't think anyone took shows seriously. They viewed TV as disposable."



↑ College students demonstrate outside NBC Studios in Burbank, Calif., in response to rumors of the show's cancellation in early 1968.

At the time, television was generally a passive activity. Programs were things to be received while sitting on the couch, and that's where the interaction generally began and ended. *Star Trek* watchers, however, wanted more from the experience—a stronger, deeper interaction with the franchise. They wanted more ownership, and that same desire forms the basis for hard-core fandom today, whether it's Pottermaniacs, Twihards or Marvel zombies.

The Trekkers grew out of the disparate print science-fiction community that had existed since the 1930s, borrowing some of its practices and traditions. When the show was threatened with cancellation after its second season, fans mobilized to save it. Two avid viewers, husband and wife John and Bjo Trimble, heard a rumor while on a set visit that *Trek* was getting axed. On the way home, they formulated a plan to change the network's mind by rallying thousands of fans to write letters in support. A group of science-fiction writers led

by Harlan Ellison had deployed a similar tactic following season one.

"It was entirely a grassroots thing," says Bjo Trimble, now 82. "We did this all by mail. We contacted fans from all over the United States."

The couple got in touch with Roddenberry, and he provided addresses from fans who had written to the show. The Trimbles also procured a sci-fi-convention mailing list and a list from a book dealer. (Despite rumors, the Trimbles insist Roddenberry was not behind the Save Trek campaign.) It wasn't the first TV letter-writing campaign, but it's arguably the best-known, and it cemented the idea in viewers' heads that their voices mattered.

"If thousands of fans just sit around moaning about the death of *Star Trek*, they will get exactly what they deserve: *GOMER PYLE!* (Yetch!)," the Trimbles wrote in 1967. "So pass the word, and write some letters, people; it's up to us fans to keep *Star Trek* on TV."

NBC was reportedly deluged with some 100,000 missives. The flood of mail was so deep, the network apparently had trouble dealing with it all. It later took the unusual step of announcing on air that *Trek* would "continue

to be seen on NBC Television.” In other words: if you would be so kind, stop writing us these letters.

Besides the fan base’s passion, the letters also proved something else. “The network had told Roddenberry that *Star Trek* viewers were a bunch of sci-fi kooks and kids,” Cushman says. “Then they found out, no, these people worked for NASA. They were college students and professors. The fans crossed all avenues.”

Such an educated audience knew its stuff, so the makers of *Star Trek* vetted scripts with real-world science experts to ensure that the technology and scenarios were plausible (if not probable). Compare that with today, when noted astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson takes to Twitter to point out inconsistencies in the film *Interstellar* and dozens of publications present fact checks of Sandra Bullock’s *Gravity*.

Viewers of *Trek* did seem to take the show more seriously than those of, say, *The Hollywood Squares*. One trivial innovation Trekkers can claim is the first use of the now-ubiquitous term “spoiler alert.” The expression initially cropped up in a 1982 Usenet newsgroup discussion of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, and was designed to shield the uninformed from the potentially life-altering revelation that (spoiler alert) Spock dies.

Another advance the franchise made was in merchandising. Do you know a child clamoring for a \$150 *Lego Millennium Falcon*? You can probably thank—or curse—*Star Trek*.

In 1967, with the help of the Trimbles, Roddenberry launched Lincoln Enterprises, a mail-order company selling show merch.

“The fans wanted just about anything with *Star Trek*,” John Trimble says. “Gene had been noodling about in his mind about doing a merchandise company, but he knew nothing about running a mail-order company. Bjo and I had run a few.”

Some tie-ins, including a comic book and a board game, were already in stores, but the idea that fans would want (and pay) more was novel at the time. “Paramount [the studio] had no clue what they were doing with *Star Trek*,” Bjo Trimble says. “They put out a chalkboard for kids with the *Enterprise* upside down. It



New York, 1974



San Diego, 2013



London, 1994



Frankfurt, 2014



Atlanta, 2002

Ibus ma dolorio berios dollate
 moluptatia parit eaquo blat
 aliquam ex explatur? Que plaut ut
 et verum iliquas periae eosandi
 intis aliquasinus et eatis moluptae
 esequodis re, temquid usandi rem

was just stuff they slapped STAR TREK on.” Paramount was so lukewarm on the prospect of merchandising that the studio allowed David Gerrold, the writer behind the episode “The Trouble With Tribbles,” to sell replicas of the furry creatures.

Lincoln was set up to offer an insider merchandise experience. The company began offering shirt insignias, scripts and bits of discarded film from the show. Fans could literally own a piece of *Trek*. “No other show has ever made an offer like this!!!” the catalog trumpeted.

“Roddenberry was making a lot of money,” Cushman says. “That woke the industry up. They realized these people love the show and it’s a way of life for them. This changed everything as far as how studios saw the fans.”

In one shrewd bit of product placement, Roddenberry rewrote a script to include a “pointless” speech praising a medallion so that a replica could later be sold, according to Shatner’s autobiography. “If you’re looking around for more things to merchandise and you have the right to write it into a script, why not?” asks Bjo Trimble.

What was also novel about *Trek*’s merchandise empire is that most of it was built after the show went off the air. The series famously found a second wind in reruns, becoming one of the first shows to have a life beyond its initial prime-time slot. According to legend, it has run continuously on some station in the world ever since it was canned in 1969. Modern Hollywood, where no franchise ever goes away and no pre-sold property, no matter how dusty, is unfit for exploitation (*A-Team* movie, anyone?), owes plenty to *Trek*.

The series was an unusual candidate for syndication, in part because it was never a ratings hit, but also because it produced only 79 episodes, not the 100 traditionally required for reruns. In the end, that limited number might have been a boon to fans and helped usher in another facet of modern pop culture: Ph.D.-thesis-level immersion.

“A smaller number of episodes meant the episodes were rerun more frequently,” Smith says. “You’d think viewers would get burned out. Counterintuitively, it became this almost Talmudic study of the *Star Trek* universe. On



the ninth time around, you've parsed every line of dialogue, analyzed every behind-the-scenes political situation. It was an opportunity to amass this lore and really become an expert on this thing." A few years later, the success of *Star Wars*—and so many of the blockbusters that followed—would be driven largely by repeat viewings. Three months after *A New Hope* opened, 4 in 10 viewers had already seen it twice or more.

Perhaps the only drawback to having just 79 *Trek* episodes was that it left some viewers wanting more. Desperate for new material, they ultimately took matters into their hands and began exploring their beloved series in more personal ways. The first *Trek*-focused fanzine, *Spockanalia*, appeared in 1967. It was 90 pages, mimeographed and produced by fans Devra Langsam and Sherna Comerford. It contained a letter from Leonard Nimoy and various articles, as well as a poem by Dorothy Jones titled "The Territory of Rigel." It read, in part, "On the bridge am I, silence upon silence, as quiet as memory, and dark as death." *Spockanalia* is also notable for containing several amateur-written *Trek* stories; it's considered the birthplace of fan fiction.

"Fan fiction introduced the idea that a TV series was not the definitive text in a franchise," Smith says. "It's a rich enough world to transcend its original TV setting. We've seen

↑ Teri et it; etilict atifex nit cotil
virmantrum remus, noximorte quit
ad facchil icaetique inam patua
nondiis ad cae, senium intiaeto
vicastret voctum vid re hocaperi pecri

that with *The X-Files* and other shows."

For the first time, a fan's contribution to a show's canon was seen as worthwhile and as valid as what was on the air, and that revolutionary idea has transformed entertainment. The superhero movies that now dominate the multiplexes, for example, owe a debt to this blurring of the line between fan and professional. Some of these films are based on stories written by former "letterhacks"—fans known for writing in to letters columns of fanzines—who broke into Marvel and DC in the 1970s, and they're directed by former fanboys, such as Zack Snyder. And what was *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* besides expensive fan fiction bankrolled by Disney?

One particular strain of *Trek* fan-fic proved especially influential: slash. The genre grew out of viewers' imaginings of what would happen if Spock beamed into Kirk's bedroom. The first of these romantic tales, "A Fragment out of Time," by Diane Marchant, appeared in 1974, and the practice soon spread to other fandoms. Slash was written almost exclusively by women, for women.

Today, the Internet is awash in massive slash depositories fantasizing about the bedroom habits of everyone from *Game of Thrones* wildlings to, disturbingly, Bambi. The genre has also earned millions for *Fifty Shades of Grey* creator E.L. James and turned other armchair authors into hot publishing commodities.

Not that we're judging. In fact, one of the hallmarks of a *Trek* fan is that he or she is accepting of all kinds of people, no matter the race, gender or ear shape. The program posited a future in which a starship would be staffed by a diverse crew, and it famously presented one of TV's first interracial kisses.

"The show set a tone and appealed to the

A TREK FAN IS ACCEPTING OF ALL KINDS, NO MATTER THE RACE, GENDER OR EAR SHAPE.

kind of people who were willing to accept 'infinite diversity in infinite combinations,'" says John Trimble, referring to a Vulcan philosophy featured on the show. "That was implicit in the show. Fans picked up on that and acted on it."

The world is only now catching up with that attitude, and inclusiveness is becoming a priority in pop culture. Fans demand a gay *Star Wars* character and lament the lack of woman-led superhero flicks. The original series fandom was unusually diverse, welcoming women, people of color and the physically challenged, helping to lay the groundwork for a world in which someone can attend the midnight premiere of *The Hobbit* dressed in a homemade, \$3,000 orc costume and fellow ticket buyers barely look up from their iPhones.

Or a world where 100,000-plus can gather at San Diego Comic-Con with nary a harsh word said nor phaser drawn. That proliferation of pop-culture conventions today

partly traces its roots to Kirk and company. The first *Star Trek* convention opened its doors on Jan. 21, 1972, in New York City. Enthusiasts had organized generalized science-fiction and comic-book conventions before, but that con is considered the first dedicated to a specific media property. It drew some 3,000 Trekkers.

"Without the influence of *Star Trek*, we wouldn't have this industry," says Zachery McGinnis, an appearance agent who books talent at genre conventions. He's worked with George Takei and Walter Koenig. "Every weekend there are multiple events around the world—Guatemala, Australia, Peru. There are endless amounts of events now."

Not to mention seemingly endless ways to commune with the franchise. *Trek*'s modern-day resurrection began back in the 1970s when an executive at Paramount's parent company saw the success of *Star Wars* and phoned another suit, asking, "Don't we own something like that?" *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, released in 1979, became one of the first TV programs adapted for the big screen, demonstrating once again that defunct franchises could live on in other ways. Critics weren't kind, but the movie was successful enough to spawn multiple sequels and four spinoff TV series.

A rebooted *Star Trek*, directed by J.J. Abrams, warped into theaters in 2009. The film edged closer to traditional summer blockbusters in its tone, and to many *Trek* purists, it felt like a betrayal of the property's roots. Two sequels followed, including the summer 2016 film *Star Trek Beyond*. And while some superfans are not impressed ("We thought the movies were very disappointing," Bjo Trimble says), others are happy to keep *Star Trek*'s mission going.

"The good thing about the [2009] film, it revitalized the franchise and brought in a lot of new fans," says the anthropologist Frazetti, who saw it seven times in the theater. "You had people who'd never even looked at *Star Trek* and thought we [Trekkers] were crazy, who saw these films and loved them and have now entered into fandom."

Shatner was wrong. These people don't need to get a life. The rest of us have gotten theirs.

Reed Tucker is a New York City journalist who writes about culture and entertainment.