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To Boldly Go

The End of Star Trek and Star Wars

Within days of each other in May, two major science fiction franchises came to an end. The final Star Wars movie, *Revenge of the Sith*, opened on May 19, less than a week after the TV show *Star Trek: Enterprise* went off the air. For the first time in a decade, George Lucas is not working on a Star Wars movie; for the first time in 18 years, there are no new Star Trek shows on television.

The two terminating franchises have made enormous contributions to pop culture, including iconic characters and memorable quotations. (Strangely, the most famous lines from each franchise—"Luke, I am your father" from Star Wars and "Beam me up, Scotty" from Star Trek—weren't actually uttered on screen.) Both franchises have connections to real-life technology. The first space shuttle was named *Enterprise* after the ship used in the original Star Trek series, and many of the tools used on the 1960s show presaged today's high-tech gadgets. "Star Wars" became the nickname, originally intended as an insult, for the missile defense system proposed by Ronald Reagan. And, of course, George Lucas has done pioneering work in special effects, movie audio, and digital production. As a technician, Lucas has often been ahead of his time, sometimes too far ahead. Take the case of digital projection, which Lucas has been pushing for years. According to the official StarWars.com website, "moviegoers are encouraged to seek out a digital screening of *Revenge of the Sith*" so they can "see the movie as George Lucas intended it"—even though there are fewer than 75 theaters with digital projectors in all of North America.

Both franchises have proven enormously lucrative over the years, although Star Wars has surely been the bigger earner. As of this writing,

the six Star Wars movies have raked in more than $2.1 billion at the box office ($3.6 billion if you adjust for inflation, according to the Box Office Mojo website). That figure does not count the sales of videotapes and DVDs, video games, or the many books in the Star Wars "Extended Universe." Nor does it count "the toys, the t-shirts, the cookies, and all the other claptrap Lucas used Star Wars to sell," as Jonathan V. Last put it in the *Weekly Standard* last year. Thanks to Star Wars, George Lucas has a personal net worth of $3 billion, putting him at number 194 on the 2005 *Forbes* list of the world's wealthiest people.

No individual has made billions off Star Trek—although that franchise, too, has its own mountains of merchandise, including toys, video games, and hundreds of books. More impressive than its merchandise and its profits, though, is its monumental amount of screen-time. Since the first broadcast of the first episode on September 8, 1966, there have been more than 700 hour-long episodes of Star Trek incarnated in five different series—plus ten movies and an animated show that lasted for 22 episodes. With the exception of soap operas, no other product of Hollywood rivals that considerable corpus. By this measure, the Star Wars franchise seems puny: For all its popularity, its on-screen time consists of only six movies, a few obscure TV spin-offs involving Ewoks, and a truly atrocious two-hour holiday special. (It was so unbelievably wretched that it aired only once, and George Lucas is reported to have said that he wished he could "track down every copy of that program and smash it." It was listed as the #1 item in last year's book *What Were They Thinking?: The 100 Dumbest Events in Television History*.)

The most important difference between Star Trek and Star Wars, though, is the place each holds in the halls of science fiction. Some of the genre's aficionados like to distinguish between *serious* science fiction (which they call "s.f.") and the lighter "Hollywoodized" fare that has the trappings of science fiction but lacks the substance (called "sci-fi," a name based on the old audio term "hi-fi"). This distinction has shortcomings, but it does make it easier to explain the main difference between Star Wars and Star Trek, even to someone who can't tell a Wookie from a Klingon: Star Trek is s.f., because it regularly speculates about scientific and technological possibilities. Star Wars is sci-fi, because it is an epic story that could take place anywhere but just happens to be set in space. For example, *Revenge of the Sith* involves aliens and robots, a dozen planets, and tremendous battles between hundreds of spaceships—but none of those matter to the fundamental story, which is about universal themes: love and hate, war and peace, good and evil. All six Star Wars films could have been slightly rewritten to take place in a more mundane setting with only human characters.

Star Trek, on the other hand, was television's answer to the science fic-

tion that began to flourish in the United States in the 1920s. In books and short stories, science fiction authors can create wholly novel worlds and futures, which they use as literary laboratories to explore questions of science and human character. If we could bring a Neanderthal boy from the past and study him in the modern world, how would he turn out? What might life be like on a planet with six suns that sees dark only once every 2,049 years? How might robots be made to think creatively? Classic science fiction was filled with speculative stories like these, and the original *Star Trek* was an attempt to bring them to television. The limitations of the medium and the budget required certain sacrifices—so instead of creating an entirely fresh universe with each new episode, as literary science fiction could, episodes of *Star Trek* take place within a single universe, and we watch as familiar characters "explore strange new worlds." This was a sufficiently simple premise that it allowed the original *Star Trek*, and most of the series that succeeded it, to visit hundreds of hypothetical worlds and civilizations and to pose and essay at answering many classic questions of science fiction.

This is a point wholly lost on some critics of the Star Trek franchise, including some who should know better. Prominent science fiction author Orson Scott Card, for instance, wrote a biting obituary for Star Trek in the *Los Angeles Times* in May. "The original *Star Trek*... was, with a few exceptions, bad in every way that a science fiction television show could be bad," Card wrote. "This was in the days before series characters were allowed to grow and change, before episodic television was allowed to have a through line. So it didn't matter which episode you might be watching, from which year—the characters were exactly the same.... [The show had] little regard for science or deeper ideas."

Card thoroughly misses the point: The original *Star Trek* frequently did explore science and "deeper ideas," and it was precisely the show's unchanging characters that made such exploration possible. The later Star Trek series all had more developed characters that evolved over time—but in concentrating more on the characters themselves, those later series lost some of the purity of the original, and some of the flexibility of speculative science fiction.

Somehow, Card fails to notice the sort of engagement with ideas that Diana Schaub described in the Winter 2004 edition of *The New Atlantis*. A professor at Loyola College and a member of the President's Council on Bioethics, Schaub discussed some of the deeper ideas she found in the original *Star Trek*. "Many episodes of the show dealt with issues of mortality and immortality," she wrote, citing two episodes in particular. "My years watching *Star Trek* have left me receptive to the view that mortality is, if not precisely a good thing, then at least the necessary foundation of other very good things, and that there is something misguided about the attempt to

overcome mortality." Other episodes of the different Star Trek series dealt with the scientific impulse; the power of addiction; the foolishness of xenophobia; the rights of intelligent machines; the limits of medicine; the temptations of virtual reality; the dangers of cloning, environmental devastation, genetic manipulation, and weapons of mass destruction; the paradoxes of time travel; the mysteries of emotion and sexuality; the challenges of communication and diplomacy among species; the contingency of history; the responsibility that comes with exploration; and the morality of unlimited power. These are the sorts of deep subjects that s.f. is *supposed* to tackle, and Star Trek often did so admirably. But the last few years brought slipping viewership—perhaps because fans disliked the prequel premise of the latest Star Trek series, or because the quality of the writing and acting had declined, or because of a general feeling of "franchise fatigue"—and the axe finally fell.

Even though no new Star Trek episodes are on the air, die-hard fans can get their fix from the new books and video games still being produced. Some ambitious fans have even taken it upon themselves to make their own new Trek episodes and distribute them online. And it's always possible that Star Trek will return in a few years, as a sixth television series or an eleventh movie or some other reincarnation. If Star Trek is eventually resurrected, fans of the past series will watch closely to see whether it returns as serious science fiction or just empty Hollywood storytelling—that is, whether it comes back as s.f. or sci-fi. But even if we have seen the last of Captains Kirk, Picard, Sisko, Janeway, and Archer, the Star Trek legacy in American culture is sure to be a lasting one.