

# Star Trek Warps to an End

By James Lileks

Forty-one years after they filmed the pilot, “Star Trek” went off the air for good this spring. Five series. Hundreds of episodes. Ten movies. Pulpy novels, video games, fan fiction that had Spock falling madly in love with Kirk. Model kits, barware, conventions packed with eager geeks. Done. Over. I have a friend who has the insignia of the Klingon Empire tattooed on his substantial bicep. How will these people deal with the end of sci-fi’s most successful franchise?

Reruns, of course. But they’ve already adjusted. True fans already know the last shot of the last episode: The ship slowly sails into the inky beyond, engines thrumming, ending the show as it began: by violating the laws of science. Spacecraft don’t make noise in a vacuum.

But we’ve granted that point since the show was born in the LBJ years. Fans have cut “Trek” so much slack the shears are dull. They accept that the communicators of the future are larger than modern cell phones. They accept that most species in the galaxy speak English and look like us, aside from odd nasal prostheses. They accept almost anything—even the decision to let William Shatner direct the fifth movie.

And most accept the end. Perhaps it’s time to set it aside for a while. “Star Trek” has always mirrored the era in which it was made, and perhaps we live in times whose stark fears don’t really translate well to metaphor. But before the *Enterprise* charges up its dilithium crystals and warps off for good, let’s



recap four decades of space-opera TV, and see what each series says about the zeitgeist that produced it.

**The Original Series.** The gold standard. It was a perfect sixties show—New Frontier optimism, Klingons as Commie analogues, go-go boots, undiluted Shatner in his prime, pointy-sideburn manliness. Zeitgeist giveaway: the first interracial kiss, the TV equivalent of a lunch counter sit-in, even though people forget it was performed under duress. (Super-fabulous, powerful aliens forced Captain Kirk and Uhura to mash faces for their own amusement.) But it was

the first nevertheless, and that counts for something. Overall grade: A. To say otherwise would be like critiquing the Old Testament for narrative flow.

**“The Next Generation.”** The post-Reagan years. The *Enterprise* was no longer a lone vanguard making its way through realms unknown; now it was like a grand Hilton in space, complete with spa, psychiatric counselor, accommodations for kids, and a French captain who could sometimes be mistaken for a cranky sommelier. Whoopi Goldberg was the ship’s bartender, which, in retrospect, really tells you all you need

to know. Patrick Stewart's Captain Jean-Luc Picard was much-beloved, and for good reason: His stentorian acting style gave the show a dramatic heft it otherwise didn't always deserve.

The Federation, in this iteration, was like a liberal dream of the U.N.: diplomacy first, multicultural understanding above all, but if need be, a gigantic armada could be summoned to fight off whatever evil leather-clad empire had decided to mess with the goodfolk of Earth. Zeitgeist giveaway: The Klingons became allies, sort of, after the Berlin Wall fell. Grade: B+, not so much for overall quality, but because it relaunched the franchise with a broad-based appeal no subsequent version would match.

**"Deep Space Nine."** This is where the casual fans peeled away. "DS9," as it's called, was set in a space station on the edge of a defeated empire (cough... The Balkans...cough) and concerned the affairs of the Federation and the Bajorans, a spunky-but-spiritual people recently liberated from the yoke of the Cardassian Empire. (The Bajorans had been set up as a Palestinian analogy in "The Next Generation," but this didn't really work once they got an entire planet of their own.)

The show started slowly, as they all do, partly because the hero—Avery Brooks, as Captain Benjamin Sisko—seemed determined not to act at all. He crawled inside the character and shut the door. The obligatory doctor was whiny and annoying, the requisite alien-who-comments-on-these-strange-humans was a shapeshifting policeman with a sequoia up his fundament, and the station didn't go anywhere.

In the end, however, "DS9" was the best "Trek" to date. Best battles, best characters, best story arcs, best Klingons. TV sci-fi at its best, really. Zeitgeist giveaway: The gravest foes were goo-based aliens from the other side of the galaxy who used a race of drug-addicted warriors to conquer the universe. In other words, it was the '90s, and we didn't have any more enemies—so let's

*The Enterprise is dry-docked, but that can't last—the show is America itself, and we make Captain Kirks like no one else.*

make some up for fun! Grade: A-

**"Voyager."** A ship is stranded halfway across the galaxy; the crew is half Federation, half anti-Federation rebels. They must set aside their partisan differences to get home, a journey expected to take 80 years, or until the Nielsen ratings tank. This was the pure '90s "Trek": Instead of boldly going, the entire point was to retreat and get home. The premise crippled the show, since everyone knew they'd never get back until the last episode of the seventh season.

The characters were thin soup, aside from Tim Russ, who played a Black Vulcan who out-Spocked Leonard Nimoy, and Jeri Ryan's "Seven of Nine," a tall blonde Nordic actress/model/cyborg who provided the fanboy base with cheesecake photos to swap in AOL chat rooms. Some exceptional episodes, yes. But few "Trek" fans got a flutter in the guts over the show, and most suspected the franchise was running on fumes.

Zeitgeist giveaway: a female captain and a Native American First Officer. Grade: C+, which is probably too harsh. Except when you consider that the show's sole Klingon had PMS 24/7.

**"Enterprise."** If this show had come along right after "Next Generation," it would have run for 27 seasons. The premise was the best in decades: the voyages of the first *Enterprise*, before the Federation. Transporters are unreliable and scary, spaceships can't crack Warp 5 and don't have shields, and our interstellar explorations are tolerated and hampered by the twenty-second century version of Old Europe—the Vulcans, a wise race of condescending Frenchmen.

Zeitgeist giveaway: The third season began with a terrorist attack on America.

The only course of action? Send the *Enterprise* into enemy territory, an area of space so strange and illogical it turned even super-rational Vulcans into murderous madmen. The Middle East, in other words.

"Enterprise" had always been American in tone: On an away mission in a shuttle, the Southern-born engineer reminds his British colleague that the Americans invented the warp drive: "Didn't see no Bosnia-Herzegovina names on it," he remarked. But now the metaphor was rather blunt: unilateral Westerners saddling up to head over there, hoping to save the planet (again). Alas, this story failed to garner the numbers UPN hoped for, and the show was moved to the graveyard of Friday night, the same arid expanse where the original "Trek" expired in 1969.

Realizing that the game was over, the producers seem to have decided that the last season would be one long love note to the fans. The fourth season has concerned itself with explaining the history that led to the story lines of the original "Star Trek." It's been bittersweet, really. You can see it winding up for good. Tie up the loose ends. Strike the sets.

But not forever. Give it rest, just as *Star Wars* languished for decades; let it come back when all the accreted expectations have been forgotten and the story feels fresh again. I watched the first "Star Trek" episode as it was broadcast, sitting in my grandfather's living room in Harwood, North Dakota. I will watch the last one in my own home and feel a sense of relief: I don't have to worry whether it's good or bad. Now it's just done.

For the moment. The *Enterprise* is dry-docked, but that can't last; the show is America itself, and we make Captain Kirks like no one else. It's not "The Scarlet Pimpernel in Space" that has lasted for four decades, after all. It's "Star Trek." Space is still the final frontier, and it'll be waiting when we're ready for it again.

