

**“Still So Much to Learn”: *Star Trek* and the Archives**

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The *Star Trek* franchise is not an easy topic to pare down considering its more than 50 years worth of canonical television, movies, comics, novels, and supplemental material to sift through. Academically speaking, there’s no shortage of scholarly papers addressing issues of race, gender, sexuality, technology, ethics, and morality as depicted in all these mediums.<sup>1</sup> And that’s just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how *Star Trek* has been and will continue to be examined as each generation comes to understand the franchise within the context of their reality. The impact and influence of Gene Roddenberry’s creation are vast, and its place in popular culture endures. What started as a hopeful idea of a diverse and prosperous future has become a bold statement of equality across all aspects of identity even if it fumbles the message from time to time. Viewers, for the most part, tune in to get a glimpse of an aspirational future where humans have managed not to destroy one another; where the voyages of starships like the *Enterprise*, *Voyager*, and *Discovery* bring a sense of curiosity, empathy, and adventure as their crews journey into the unknown. So, where do archives fit into the final frontier?

Should you endeavor to do an online search for anything related to *Star Trek*, I’d advise you to hunker down and settle in especially if your interest lies in a niche topic *within* the *Trek* universe. Like, I don’t know, archives. As previously stated, multitudes of articles, books, panel discussions, and podcasts devoted to broad topics ultimately boil down to the issue of representation. What we see on *Star Trek* is a vision of an inclusive future that defies our current circumstances. In the 1960s, the original crew of the *Enterprise* employed Sulu, a Japanese helmsman, Uhura, a female African-American communications specialist, and Chekov, a Russian navigator/science officer at the height of Civil Rights era and Cold War America.<sup>2</sup> Since then, there’s been a range of diversity in command and supporting the Federation and Starfleet. Benjamin Sisko, Kathryn Janeway, Michael Burnham, Philippa Georgiou, B’Elanna Torres, Geordi La Forge, Hoshi Sato, Chakotay, Hugh Culber and Paul Stamets, just to name a few, have all contributed to the visual representation of *Trek*’s diverse cosmos of explorers.<sup>3</sup> With these examples in mind,

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<sup>1</sup> Weldes, Jutta. “Going Cultural: *Star Trek*, State Action, and Popular Culture.” *Millennium* 28, no. 1, (1999): 117–134; Grech, Victor, Mariella Scerri, and David Zammit. “Evil Doctor, ethical android: *Star Trek*’s instantiation of conscience in subroutines.” *MOSF Journal of Science Fiction* 1, no. 3 (2017): 9–23; Ott, Brian L. and Eric Aoki. “Popular Imagination and Identity Politics: Reading the Future in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.” *Western Journal of Communication*, 65, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 392–415.

<sup>2</sup> Characters portrayed by George Takei, Nichelle Nichols, and Walter Koenig, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Characters portrayed by Avery Brooks, Kate Mulgrew, Sonequa Martin-Green, Michell Yeoh, Roxann Dawson, LeVar Burton, Linda Park, Robert Beltran, Wilson Cruz, and Anthony Rapp, respectively.

the depiction of archives becomes clearer because there are a lot of archives and databases in *Star Trek*. A lot. You just might not have noticed.

In addition to social issues, advancements in technology is another enormous topic of interest in *Star Trek*. It's science fiction, of course, there are cool gadgets and significant leaps in faster-than-light travel because that's what sci-fi does. It awes the viewers with the sheer magnitude of what people can create. But when we look at archives as portrayed in *Star Trek*, at first glance it appears as though little has changed for institutions devoted to preserving records of enduring value until the realization hits that there are archives everywhere. The United Federation of Planets—the Federation for short—has a planet, Memory Alpha or Memory Planet, that primarily serves as a central library and archives for the entire Alpha Quadrant.<sup>4</sup> The Vulcans, Bajorans, and the Cardassians also have archives (the Cardassians are particularly detail-oriented and taught the Bajorans record-keeping).<sup>5</sup> Starfleet has archives about previous missions and command databases, and every starship is equipped to access medical databases, historical archives, and the Library Computer Access and Retrieval System (LCARS). There are even archives floating around in space ready to imprint the mythology of their long-lost civilization on unsuspecting ships.<sup>6</sup> And an archives functioned as the cover for a secret military operation to develop weapons and gather intelligence on the Klingons.<sup>7</sup> But the less said about that, the better.

The most important takeaway from all of this is the amount of access available within the *Star Trek* universe. This was likely a plot convenience to provide characters in the television shows and movies with immediate information for exposition, but the optics of it from an outreach point-of-view are incredible. The entire television run of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) alone features at least one use or display of information accessed from archives, databases, or logs that contribute either to the plot exposition or the eureka moment of the story's primary conflict. In this idealized future, having unfettered access to relevant data and information is the norm. An episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* (DS9) featured the station's security chief, Odo, requesting access to the Bajoran Central Archives for investigative purposes, which he receives without delay.<sup>8</sup> It's almost instantaneous, and no one bats an eye at the matter.

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<sup>4</sup> *Star Trek*. "The Lights of Zetar." Season 3, Episode 18. Directed by Herb Kenwith. Written by Jeremy Tarcher and Sheri Lewis. NBC, January 31, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> "Cardassians," *StarTrek.com*, accessed March 15, 2019, [https://www.startrek.com/database\\_article/cardassians](https://www.startrek.com/database_article/cardassians).

<sup>6</sup> *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. "Masks." Season 7, Episode 17. Directed by Robert Wiemer. Written by Joe Menosky. CBS, February 21, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> *Star Trek Into Darkness*. Directed by J. J. Abrams. United States: Paramount Pictures, Skydance Productions, Bad Robot, 2013. Film.

<sup>8</sup> *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*. "The Collaborator." Season 2, Episode 24. Directed by Cliff Bole. Story by Gary Holland. Written by Gary Holland, Ira Steven Behr, and Robert Hewitt Wolfe. CBS, May 22, 1994.

This makes sense when one considers that the inhabitants of the *Star Trek* universe, specifically members of Starfleet, exist within a culture where records are regularly created in the form of logs. Virtually every incarnation of *Star Trek* on television features something like the log-as-framing device. *Star Trek: The Original Series* (TOS), TNG, and *Star Trek: Enterprise* utilized the framing device in nearly every episode via the captain's log while other shows like DS9, *Star Trek: Voyager*, and *Star Trek: Discovery* use logs on occasion but never with the same frequency as the series that made the act of log recording so iconic to the franchise. DS9 even took a shot at the trope during the episode "Necessary Evil" when Odo records the following:

"Commence station security log, stardate 47282.5. At the request of Commander Sisko, I will hereafter be recording a daily log of law enforcement affairs. The reason for this exercise is beyond my comprehension, except perhaps that Humans have a compulsion to keep records and files—so many, in fact, that they have to invent new ways to store them microscopically. Otherwise their records would overrun all known civilization. My own very adequate memory not being good enough for Starfleet, I am pleased to put my voice into this official record of this day. Everything's under control. End log."<sup>9</sup>

The use of logs is very much rooted in Starfleet's conception as a futuristic mirror of the United States Navy, but ships' logs have been in use for as long as ships have been sailing the seven seas. Logs were a means of recording the daily operations of the ship, incidents that occurred, and navigational data. Similarly, the chain-of-command within the Federation and Starfleet habitually record logs for personal and professional use any of which can be utilized as evidence should an investigation arise. In *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, Captain Kirk, and Dr. McCoy are accused of murdering a Klingon ambassador. While appearing before the Klingon court, Kirk's personal log is used as evidence of his hatred towards Klingons for the murder of his son, thus establishing his motive for murder.<sup>10</sup> It proves to be the most damning evidence for the Klingons. Kirk and McCoy are found guilty and sentenced to a Siberia-like prison planet.

It's essential, though, that we understand that despite a culture conditioned to create logs with the knowledge that virtually all information is accessible, we're only getting one perspective of the *Star Trek* universe. Starfleet's mission statement is primarily focused on space exploration and the expansion of human knowledge, but how that knowledge is presented and by whom are relevant when we consider authorial intent and control of the narrative. On TOS and TNG, the captain's log is

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<sup>9</sup> *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. "Necessary Evil." Season 2, Episode 8. Directed by James L. Conway. Written by Peter Allan Fields. CBS, November 14, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. Directed by Nicholas Meyer. United States: Paramount Pictures, 1991. Film.

the anchor into the events of each episode. The log functions as a recollection of events or an ongoing record of current activities, but we're still getting one voice and one perspective. How would the events of the episode look from the perspective of the "antagonists"?

We also don't know how much access is available to civilians not employed by Starfleet. On the Voyager episode "II:59," Captain Janeway and several crew members spend time searching for information on the Millennium Gate and end up cobbling together information from Ferengi databases, historical records, genealogical research, and the personal recordings of Janeway's ancestor accessed through a civilian database.<sup>11</sup> There's plenty of lamenting the destruction and incompleteness of historical records, but how much access would an average civilian have if they were conducting a similar project? And if we must question the origin and completeness of the record, how reliable is the information in these accessible archives and databases? In the DS9 episode "Second Skin," Commander Kira Nerys is contacted by Alenis Grem, an archivist at the Bajoran Central Archives, about information from Cardassian records indicating Kira's presence at the Elemspur Detention Center.<sup>12</sup> Kira doesn't recall being there, and it all ends up being a ruse on the part of the Cardassians to capture her, but the fact of the matter is they were able to place false information into the archives that were then acted upon with some authority. Strangely, the plan required an archivist to be distrusting of the data enough to investigate the fraudulent records. By the way, this is the only instance of an archivist appearing in any of the *Star Trek* properties.

For a positive spin on the reliability of records, we need only look at the technological marvel that is the holodeck. First introduced in live action on TNG, the holodeck's ability to create immersive and interactive environments makes it a valuable tool for entertainment, education, recreation, forensics, and therapy. The crews of TNG and Voyager got a great deal of use out of the holodeck. Both Captain Picard and Commander Data were fond of spending time as detectives of the noir and Sherlock Holmes type, respectively. Captain Janeway enjoyed a pleasant visit with Leonardo da Vinci, and Lt. Tom Paris was a meticulous programmer of 1940s styled black-and-white serial dramas. Data also used a poker program on the deck to play with Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and (the real) Stephen Hawking.<sup>13</sup> To make these accurate environments and historical people of note the holodeck must, presumably, pull information from existing databases and archives though that doesn't appear to hinder the imagination of the holodeck itself since it can intuit

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<sup>11</sup> *Star Trek: Voyager*. "11:59." Season 5, Episode 23. Directed by David Livingston. Story by Brannon Braga and Joe Menosky. Teleplay by Joe Menosky. CBS, May 5, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*. "Second Skin." Season 3, Episode 5. Directed by Les Landau. Written by Robert Hewitt Wolfe. CBS, October 24, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. "Descent." Season 6, Episode 26. Directed by Alexander Singer. Story by Jeri Taylor. Teleplay by Ronald D. Moore. CBS, June 21, 1993.

something not originally in the programmed setting.<sup>14</sup> Without some trust in the accuracy of those records, it's hard to contemplate why such a piece of technology would be installed in the first place. Then again, the frequency with which the holodeck broke down on TNG is some cause for concern.

Even as this review is being written, it feels like we're only scratching the surface of how archives and records can be utilized within the Star Trek universe. Television shows are still airing, comics and novels are still being written, and there's still the possibility of another movie on the horizon. More than any other franchise, *Star Trek* can rewrite and reinterpret its relationship with information and archives in relatively real time. We'll see how bold the future looks, but it's an exciting thing to think about.

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<sup>14</sup> Rick Sternback, Michael Okuda, and Gene Rodenberry, *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Technical Manual* (New York: Pocket Books, 1991), 157.