

**The Fault in Our *Star Trek*:
(Dis)Continuity Mapping, Textual Conservationism, and the Perils of Prequelization**

William Proctor

You want to explore this universe because it's remarkably coherent. Fans are always going on about canon, but when you really look at it, it's pretty amazing that in hundreds and hundreds of episodes, this universe is so coherent and well-plotted out.

—Manny Coto (showrunner on *Enterprise* Season Four).

What I have absolutely no respect for however, is their complete lack of effort to ensure that the story and every other detail remained canon.

—Stephen Willets (*Star Trek* fan and blogger)

As an imaginary world, the *Star Trek* universe is a vast narrative system “more internally complex than that of any other American television show.”¹ Yet *Star Trek* is also much more than the sum of its televisual parts; rather, it is an expansive transmedia empire, comprising seven TV series, including an animated series—with more in the pipeline—thirteen feature films, countless video games, hundreds of novels and comics, and a library of reference books and encyclopedias that have each augmented the world’s fictional architecture considerably over the past five decades. That being said, it is certainly the various television series that form the core, canonical “mothership” of the *Star Trek* “hyperdiegesis,”² the narrative station from which other textual shuttles have been launched across the transmedia frontier. With so much content scaffolding the imaginary world, however, it becomes more difficult for writers to fulfill narrative logics of continuity in order to ensure that coherence between texts is successfully achieved and maintained by editorial oversight. As Mark J. P. Wolf argues, “[t]he likelihood of inconsistencies occurring increases as a world grows in size and complexity.”³ As a consequence, “inconsistencies in the storyline distract and disrupt the audiences’ mental image of the story as they follow it, especially if they occur in the main storyline driving the work.”⁴

Although meticulous devotion to continuity seeks to furnish the imaginary world with narrative coherence, to make the image of the world appear to function as if “real”, continuity also imposes creative limitations on writers who are required to stay within the borderlines established by official canon policy, and not “depict events that would conflict with established [*Star Trek*] history.”⁵ In other words, the concepts of continuity and canon effectively dictate which stories count as “fact”, and which are to be understood as “fiction”. As a general rule of thumb, the official *Star Trek* canon is comprised of the live-action television and film series, which essentially contracts the imaginary world by indicating that hundreds of tie-in novels and comics “never really happened”. Although “the dominant attitude in STAR TREK fandom is that spin-off material does not truly “count” as canon at all; the film and television series are always primary,”⁶ the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes “official” canon is usually “some agent of the intellectual property holder.”⁷ It is true that some fans construct their own versions of canon—often defined as “fanon” or “head canon”—through individual processes of selection, acceptance, and rejection. The fact remains, however, that the term emphasizes that canonicity is strictly determined by corporate authorities rather than fan audiences; by creators and “deliverers”, not consumers and “receivers”.

In 2001, following the conclusion of fourth series, *Star Trek: Voyager* (1994-2001) the next televisual incarnation would go where no *Star Trek* series had gone before: into the future history’s past. Yet the decision to create a prequel to *Star Trek: The Original Series* (*TOS*) (1966-1969) with *Star Trek: Enterprise* (2001-2005) would lead to all sorts of issues with established continuity, leading fans to confront producers Brannon Braga and Rick Berman on a nascent Internet. As *Enterprise* became the first *Star Trek* series to be cancelled since *TOS* in 1969, and the first not to reach the seven-year milestone achieved by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (*TNG*) (1987-1994), *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (*DS9*) (1993-1999), and *Voyager*, the series signified the dying gasp of a franchise that had commanded the science fiction genre on television for eighteen consecutive years, accumulating an impressive 25 seasons totaling 624 episodes. It would be 12 years between the cancellation of *Enterprise* and the launch of *Star Trek: Discovery* in 2017 on the new streaming service, CBS All Access.

In the meantime, *Star Trek*’s next regeneration would occur not on television, but in cinema. As if recognizing the challenges of navigating *Trek*’s dense and baroque narrative continuity, director J. J. Abrams, and co-writers Alex Kurtzman and Robert Orci, orchestrated a new narrative direction for the franchise with 2009’s *Star Trek* (*Trek '09*). Rather than risk contradicting and contaminating extant continuity, the events depicted in the opening of *Trek '09* installs the film not within the “Prime” universe—the universe inhabited by *TOS*, *TNG*, *DS9*, *Voyager*, *Enterprise*, and the canon films from *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) through to *Star Trek: Nemesis*

(2002)—but in a new parallel universe, one inaugurated by events within the story itself. In essence, *Trek '09* mobilizes metafictional devices in order to create a new branch of the imaginary world that ostensibly does not interfere with established continuity, effectively bracketing off the “Prime” universe from what has since become known as “the Kelvin Timeline”, resulting in a new branch of *Star Trek* continuity, or what Matt Hills terms “neo-canon”.⁸ In doing so, Abrams and company orchestrated a narrative space whereby canonical “facts” could be either revised or cast aside entirely, a prophylactic strategy that addressed the concerns of continuity acolytes, while also targeting a new audience for whom the franchise had become far too complex to jump into without the need for expertise. In essence, Abrams’s ploy suggests “the extent to which the runners of the STAR TREK franchise both fear and revile the core *Star Trek* fandom”,⁹ many of whom possess “an often-intimidating grasp of the source material”.¹⁰ Although this narrative sleight-of-hand did not necessarily satisfy older fans, many of whom saw the Kelvin films as “Trek in Name Only”, box-office revenues generated by Abrams’s *Trek '09* and sequel, *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013), demonstrated that regenerating the franchise had been successful, at least commercially. However, the third (and final at the time of writing) Kelvin film, *Star Trek: Beyond* (2016), struggled at the box office, failing to recoup its combined production and marketing budget despite receiving many positive reviews.

With the release of *Star Trek: Discovery* in 2017, the first Trek TV series since 2005 and the first series released on subscription-only streaming channels, the decision to situate the narrative prior to *TOS* risked tampering with canonical continuity like *Enterprise* before it. Despite *Discovery*’s showrunners insisting that the series is set in the “Prime universe”, and not The Kelvin Universe or another parallel rift, ardent Trekkers began flooding discussion boards on the Internet to scrutinize whether or not the imaginary world has become burdened and undermined by “snarls” in continuity. Additionally, numerous entertainment articles focused on potential breaches in canon caused by *Discovery*’s close proximity to *TOS*—the show is set a decade prior to Kirk and Spock’s tenure on the *Enterprise*—indicating that the imaginary world is not only managed by writers, producers, and showrunners, but is also expertly policed by “textual conservationists”, fan audiences for whom adherence to established imaginary history functions to accumulate subcultural capital via displays of expertise, as well as being a key resource for pleasure, play, and critique, each of which support the construction of fannish social identities.

In this essay, I explore both *Enterprise* and *Discovery* to demonstrate the perils associated with prequelization, considering the way in which textual conservationists respond to and criticize producers for introducing new story elements that are not supported by the official history of the *Star Trek* hyperdiegesis. As textual conservationists “expect adherence to established tenets, characterisations, and narrative “back stories,” which production teams thus *revise at their peril*, disrupting the trust which is placed in the continuity of a detailed narrative world,”¹¹ producers who fail to understand the importance of canonical governance and coherence thus run the risk of instigating new discursive conflicts, just as they threaten to destabilize *Star Trek*’s “ontological realm”, that which “determines the parameters of a world’s existence”.¹² From such a vantage point, textual conservationists may see producers less as world-builders than as world-destroyers. In an age where fans are increasingly courted, exploited, and harnessed by corporate entities as “attention-attractor[s], buzz-generator[s], as brand-enricher[s], as community-builder[s],”¹³ it is equally as likely that fans behave in ways that work *against* corporate logics, not as attractors, generators, and enrichers, but as *buzz-killers* and *brand-assassins*. Such a slipshod approach to established canonical continuity not only sabotages hyperdiegetic coherence, but also endangers the critical and economic health of the property if fan audiences cry havoc and let slips the dogs of war. For textual conservationists, *de*-coherence and *dis*-continuity are viewed as problems to be fixed, rationalized, or for the purposes of this essay, exposed, catalogued, and critiqued. Although there are a number of academic studies that have provided important, substantive work on sequels, especially in film,¹⁴ there has been much less focus on prequels, especially concerning the creative difficulties that go along with ensuring that new stories do not conflict with “later” ones. Just as writers of tie-in fiction find themselves constrained by the “creatively crippling strictures”¹⁵ of official canon, the same constraints are certainly at work with prequels. As we shall see, the principles of canonical continuity function to guide authors and producers to ensure, at least theoretically, that the good ship *Star Trek* should not always boldly go where no one has gone before.

Methodologically, I draw from discourses related to continuity and canon articulated within and across on-line territories: in discussion threads located on websites like Quora and Reddit; in fan-oriented entertainment journalism; and on fan wikis such as Memory Alpha—which is dedicated to cataloguing the *Trek* canon—and Memory Beta, the non-canon apocryphon. Although at times I directly quote from fannish “canon discourses”, I anonymize both author and platform for ethical reasons. I begin with *Enterprise* before turning to the re-emergence of *Star Trek* on television with *Discovery*.

“It was always going to be hard doing a prequel when considering continuity”

From the late-1990s to the early 2000s, fan cultures became newly invigorated and emboldened by the affordances of cyberspace, leading to a steady increase in fan-producer conflicts across the on-line frontier. Yet this heightened activity, this “mainstreaming” of fan practices, behaviors, and discourses, did not first emerge with *Enterprise*, but four years or so earlier with Joel Schumacher’s *Batman and Robin* (1997), “perhaps the first film to fully incur the wrath of the digitally connected fan-base”.¹⁶ By the time *Enterprise* was launched in 2001, however, the on-line population continued to rise significantly in numbers due to the introduction of broadband technology, a massive (300x) increase in bandwidth that stimulated the development of social media platforms, fan wikis, and other participatory portals. As Sam Ford argues, “the ability a much wider portion of society now has to share, discuss, debate, and critique texts with various communities constitutes the greatest shift in the media ecology in a digital age”,¹⁷ a shift that has led to producer/fan—and fan-on-fan—conflicts becoming common-place.

As showrunner and “torchbearer” on *Enterprise*, Branon Braga fueled the flames of “fantagonism”¹⁸ by not heeding nor taking seriously criticisms regarding several issues, including what was viewed as a reactionary flouting of Gene Roddenberry’s liberal-humanist ethos;¹⁹ a lack of “visual fidelity” with *TOS* as the “next” series in the timeline; a retrograde shift in gender and sexual politics,²⁰ and breaches in canonical continuity. As such, “*Enterprise* was... at odds with Star Trek’s narrative universe” from the start, as “the executive producers didn’t seem to care about the show, its fans, or the legacy it drew upon, despite their prior involvement in the franchise.”²¹ Rather than placating fans, however, Braga ended up courting “producer/fan wrangling over accurate continuity” by vilifying seasoned textual conservationists as “continuity pornographers”.²² Prior to the first episode’s broadcast, the two-part pilot “Broken Bow”, Braga and Rick Berman emphasized that “changes had to be made to the historical canon”, which immediately set in motion “a growing tension between producers and fans over what is considered important in the Star Trek canon”.²³ This is not to suggest that Star Trek was canonically “pure” before *Enterprise* wrecked it. As Canavan emphasizes, “there is simply too much material produced across too many decades by too many production teams in too many divergent media environments for it to truly cohere in a single, unitary “whole”” (2017, 167). *Star Trek* has been “famously riddled with inconsistencies”²⁴ since inception, mainly due to the fact that “none of the writers could have anticipated that they were laying the foundations for an entertainment franchise that would come to span decades and grow to encompass hundreds of episodes and [over] a dozen films”.²⁵ As George Kovacs states, “[w]riters were only loosely concerned with standards of continuity and consistency of detail — *the obsessive examination of the series’ fans had not yet manifested.*”²⁶

In many ways, Braga and Berman’s frustration is understandable: prequels always-already run the risk of contaminating pre-established narrative facts unless editorially managed with either a modicum of expertise at the helm, or the creative will to do so. On the one hand, it is entirely possible for prequels to follow, obey, and ultimately shore up, extant chronologies, whereas on the other, it becomes difficult to innovate when canonical governance imposes “a limited degree of creative license”,²⁷ to create new worlds and new civilizations that are not supported by future events; or as the case may be, by actively contradicting what has already been established. As prequels are defined by a “narrative sequence element that comes before an already-existing narrative sequence”,²⁸ production teams may feel creatively constrained by canonicity, and as a result, end up in a situation whereby generic and narrative innovation might lead to established facts, histories, and back-stories being contradicted, suggesting that there are perils associated with prequelization. Indeed, prequels like *Enterprise* may operate to provide backstory and augment the imaginary world, but situating texts before an already-existing narrative sequence suggests that care should be taken by producers to align with what we might describe as a variation on backstory, which in the case of prequels becomes the “frontstory”, that is, narrative data that occurs in *Enterprise*’s future—in this case, *TOS*, *TNG*, *DS9*, *Voyager*, and the feature film series.

This is not solely the turf of *Star Trek*, however. George Lucas received a lion’s share of scorn for the Star Wars prequels for a number of reasons,²⁹ one being the introduction of elements not supported by the original trilogy. Likewise, Ridley Scott’s Alien prequels, *Prometheus* (2011) and *Alien: Covenant* (2016) have become grist for the fannish mill, most notably regarding the evolution of the xenomorph, and the way in which the films struggle to build “transfictional bridges” between franchise installments.³⁰ Among other criticisms, J. K. Rowling has come under fire for the Fantastic Beasts films, especially second installment, *The Crimes of Grindelwald* (2018), for revising elements first articulated in the Harry Potter novels and film series. Fans understand these kinds of revisions as forms of “retroactive continuity” (or “retcon”), a concept derived from superhero comic books, which refers to

a narrative process wherein the creator(s) and/ or producer(s) of a fictional narrative/ world... deliberately alter the history of that narrative/ world such that, going forward, future stories reflect this new history, completely ignoring the old as if it never happened.³¹

Unlike rebooting, which wipes the slate clean of continuity in order to “begin again” with a new narrative sequence,³² ret-conning occurs “in continuity”. Whether or not fans accept revisionism of this type depends in large on the narrative rationale explained within the imaginary world itself. For instance, J.R.R Tolkien seemed to be

well aware of this kind of reaction when he retconned *The Hobbit* to bring it in line with *The Lord of the Rings*, doing so quietly, and even finding a way to cleverly make both versions canonical; the older version is said to be the story Bilbo told, but a distortion of the truth, while the “newer” corrected version tells the story as it really was.³³

Conversely, should retconning occur because of editorial mismanagement, whereby extant continuity is ignored or viewed as a constraint to be circumnavigated, then fan audiences have been shown to respond unkindly, and perhaps vehemently. After almost two decades of broadband speeds and band-widths, and with the introduction of even speedier systems like fiber-optic technologies, fan discourses related to what I have termed elsewhere as “canonical fidelity”³⁴ have become quotidian. Besides the participatory affordances of social media platforms, where producer/fan conflicts are played out publicly, other fans, usually continuity acolytes, mobilize textual conservationist discourses by cataloguing, archiving, essaying, and ultimately policing, the ontological health of the imaginary world. As with debates about canon—and by extension, other fannish discourses—on-line “narrativity”³⁵ indicates that displays of expertise are also bids for “subcultural capital”, bids that seek to develop and shore up one’s status as connoisseur and cognoscenti, as the “good” fan in possession of knowledge-as-symbolic-currency. Policing violations in continuity not by correcting them through transformative works like fan fiction, but through indexical labor that doesn’t seek to repair, but rather, to expose and criticize such violations becomes one of the ways that fans deploy their expertise.

Consider Trek fan Bernd Schneider’s website, *Ex Astris Scientia*, which frequently publishes forensic indexes of the *Star Trek* universe: from the “Treknology” Encyclopedia to Starship Databases; from episode synopses and analyses to extensive commentaries centered on matters of canon and continuity (and more besides).³⁶ In a page titled “Enterprise Continuity Problems”, Luther Root exposes significant issues with the first *Star Trek* prequel TV series, focusing on two episodes that introduce elements not supported by the imaginary world’s ontological index.³⁷ In “Acquisition”, for example, the Ferengi are introduced, an alien race that Starfleet did not encounter until over two centuries later, according to *TNG*. “This is a major problem”, complains Root, “regardless of the lame trick not to mention the word “Ferengi” in the whole episode.”³⁸ In the article, Root mobilizes evidence gleaned from other canonical Trek series and films, most notably *TNG*, *DS9*, and the film *Generations* (1995), to emphasize the temporal anomaly set in motion by the episode. By expertly mounting a scholarly rejection of the episode as a “continuity blunder”, much in the same way that academics draw upon textual evidence to support their critical exegesis, Root deploys his expertise by performing indexical labor, by patrolling the hyperdiegesis as textual conservationist and continuity cop, thus bidding for subcultural wages to deposit into his symbolic “bank”. What Root does not do, however, is offer resolutions and hypotheses as to why and how the Ferengi could have logically appeared at this point in the timeline. Instead, Root argues that this is more about roughshod storytelling, which actively works against the fannish tendency to proffer ontological repairs through fan fiction, etc.:

Of course, we may always make up chains of coincidences and oddities to explain inconsistencies, but not mentioning “Ferengi” to the TV viewer does anything but help. Aside from their name, Earth Starfleet and the Vulcan High Command should have at least some basic knowledge about the Ferengi about this incident [depicted in “Acquisition”].

At the heart of Root’s argument is the idea that “Acquisition” fails to meet narrative criteria pertaining to continuity and canon, and consequently, the episode’s status is queried and criticized, regardless of whether or not *Enterprise* as a whole is considered fully canonical according to standard rules of qualification.

Textual conservationists, like Root, shine a light on continuity snarls through close narrative analysis and archiving without seeking to provide rationale explanations for “continuity blunders”; whereas the latter can be understood as authors of transformative works that offer solutions articulated in fan fiction, fan films, etc. in order to rationalize and repair ontological fractures in continuity and canon. For continuity acolytes such as Root, however, “conserving” the *Star Trek* canon arguably means identifying temporal ruptures not as a problem to be fixed, but as a criticism levelled at producers for lacking the necessary expertise to protect canonical continuity from contamination. Fans might very well “do more than merely reproduce official textual material, but instead reorder narrative information to produce expert chronologies, continuities, and encyclopedic fan wikis”,³⁹ but others perform their subcultural expertise by spotlighting continuity glitches, and by critiquing and shaming showrunners

for editorial mishaps and/or mismanagement. Fan practices of this kind do not seem to align with either “transformational” or “affirmational” fandom, both of which are essentially celebratory,⁴⁰ but an associated, parallel mode of engagement and participation. Naturally, fans tend to occupy multiple performative and discursive identities, but textual conservationists of the type I am interested in here tend to focus less on unabashedly celebrating the fan-object than they are in exposing errors in continuity to indicate that their expertise is more advanced than the people making the series; and in many cases, *this may in fact be accurate*.

Perhaps one way of understanding fans of this “expose-and-criticize” bent is to recognize that the binary “fan/anti-fan” is not explicitly an either/or situation, but implies a complex mode of *affective shifting* vacillating between different poles, a performative spectrum that exhibits the complexities of love *and* hate, passion *and* indifference, without negating the middle ground between such polarities. Fans can occupy multiple affective positions simultaneously, such as displaying and possessing characteristics of anti-fandom while also maintaining a positive relationship with the fan-object in general terms, what Vivi Theodoropoulou describes as “the anti-fan within the fan” (2007, 316).⁴¹ Ultimately, “fandom is a precondition of anti-fandom”.⁴² As Henry Jenkins reminds us, fandom “is born of fascination and frustration”, not fascination *or* frustration.⁴³ For instance, anti-fans of *Enterprise* are often already dedicated Trek fans, and their fascination with the core principles of the fan-object can provoke frustration with the way that the franchise is handled by corporate showrunners. In this light, textual conservationists might also be transformational and affirmational fans at one and the same time, but those who deploy their expertise to expose fault-lines in canonical continuity *without proffering resolutions*, can be viewed as, for want of a better term, a specific type of *derogative fandom*, meaning that they discursively hold producers to account for what they see as negligent storytelling. By defaming and shaming producers, showrunners, and writers, fans that bid for subcultural capital through displays and discourses of expertise and connoisseurship implies a conflict whereby textual conservationists jockey for authority by demonstrating that producers’ knowledge is eclipsed by “fandom’s epistemological economy”.⁴⁴

One might be tempted to blame this apparent lackadaisical approach to canon for *Enterprise*’s cancellation. While it certainly didn’t help endear the series to veteran Trekkers, it is more likely that a confluence of forces and factors led to its demise. Executive Producer Rick Berman blamed “franchise fatigue” for *Enterprise*’s ratings decline, suggesting that audiences had had enough of *Star Trek* after 18 consecutive years on network TV and in syndication.⁴⁵ However, such a stance seems to react against claims that the series was simply not good enough. Many fans opined that Berman and Braga were to blame for “the sharp decline in the quality of *Trek* television”,⁴⁶ for “urinating on Roddenberry’s grave and fornicating with his corpse”.⁴⁷ Roberta Pearson and Marie-Messenger Davies argue that *Enterprise* “failed artistically, just as it failed commercially”.⁴⁸ Braga himself has more recently articulated his repentance about the fact that early episodes fell short of the quality expected by audiences for whom *TNG*, *DS9*, and *Voyager* are exemplars of “Golden Age” *Trek* (with the caveat that each series performed less well in ratings compared to their antecedents, suggesting that the series’ popularity also declined respectively with each iteration).

By the time that Braga was replaced as showrunner by *Trek* aficionado Manny Coto for Season Four, the writing was on the wall. Although Coto was praised for at least aiming to connect the series with *TOS* by establishing transfictional bridges between the two programs (and by extension, the rest of the imaginary world), he admitted that “we were mostly gearing episodes towards people who knew the “Star Trek” universe. *We were not worried about people who didn’t. They were gone anyway.*”⁴⁹ What is striking about Coto’s remarks here is that *Enterprise*’s declining ratings could not reasonably have been about continuity issues in the main; continuity is hardly the dominion of casual viewers, but of ardent Trekkers (“people who knew the “Star Trek” universe”). Ultimately, then, *Enterprise* failed to capture the imaginations of “floating voters”, indicating that fans are a minor cluster within the broader “coalition audience”, and as a result, do not generate enough of a viewership to capture healthy enough ratings that would ensure survival in the brutal TV marketplace. It would be four years before the *Enterprise* would fly again in J. J. Abrams’s *Trek ’09*, but televisual *Star Trek* languished in the cultural wilderness for 12 years. Yet as Michael Burnham of the *USS Discovery* sparked war with the Klingons in a new prequel series, fans once again turned to the affordances of cyberspace to make their frustrations known.

“It’s all the changes to the existing timeline that have a lot of people mad.”

Over the past decade or so, continuity has increasingly become part and parcel of corporate logic, one that can be largely accredited to the critical and commercial success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Yet the fact remains that producer/fan quarrels over canonical alignment have continued to accelerate, indicating that corporate logics often fall short of the fannish demand for canonical consistency, especially where prequels are concerned. As Aaron Taylor argues, contemporary transmedia franchises are symptomatic of a shift in corporate logic, one being

“the appropriation of the economics of continuity.”⁵⁰ Although continuity is essentially a narrative conceit, one that directly services textual conservationist/cultish tendencies, it is also dialectically intertwined with commercial impulses, a type of “commodity braiding”⁵¹ that establishes signposts, or “entertainment stepping stones”, that lead towards other texts within the hyperdiegesis. In a sense, fan investment and corporate logics become intrinsically aligned insofar as the principle of continuity is concerned.⁵² Given the array of “user-generated discontent”⁵³ that circulated *Enterprise*, the lessons imparted at the time to Berman and Braga, and the “new” corporate logics that place a high emphasis on continuity, one would imagine that any new *Star Trek* series would involve producers learning from historic producer/fan conflicts in order to defend against similar criticisms in the future. When writing *Trek '09*, it is plausible that Abrams, Orci, and Kurtzman were intimately aware that tampering with established continuity could potentially spark new confrontations from textual conservationists; hence the quantum trickery that narrativized an alternative (Kelvin) timeline within the film itself as a way to strategically protect the Prime universe from contamination, permitting a heightened degree of creative license. Yet this temporal panacea did not necessarily convince fans of its canonical legitimacy, nor did it resolve fannish queries regarding hyperdiegetic “fact”.

In November 2015, CBS announced that a new *Star Trek* TV series, titled *Discovery*, would be entering production. Guided at first by veteran *Trek* writer Bryan Fuller, it later emerged that *Discovery* would not be set in the Kelvin Timeline, but would return to the Prime Universe for the first time since the cancellation of *Enterprise*, insofar as live-action *Trek* is concerned. Although *Discovery*'s producers were initially secretive about when the series would be set, fans began marshalling theories based on early promotional images of the *USS Discovery* that were shown at a San Diego Comic-Con panel in 2016. Most notably, fans forensically analyzed the images, theorizing that the series would be set yet another prequel because of the ship's registry number —NCC-1031— which as one fan argued, “would suggest it is set after *Enterprise* but before *The Original Series*.” As *Discovery*'s status as prequel was confirmed, some fans turned to social media to discuss, debate, and defame the decision, often by invoking *Enterprise* as short-hand for canon/prequel contamination:

The show will have many of the same problems *Enterprise* had —trying to create a show for modern sensibilities that can act as a plausible predecessor to something made in the 60s. This affects everything from aesthetics to storylines to characterization [...] But this show, fitting into the prime universe just ten years before Shatner-Kirk turns up, is going to be a real head-scratcher if it doesn't align neatly with the blinking lights and space Nazis of the original series. Am I the only one who thinks this is a mistake?

For some fans, the notion that a new *Trek* series would again function retroactively —looking backwards rather than into the future— became cause for concern.

I'm not a fan of the decision to go pre TOS either and I just want them to move forward. Many people including myself wanted the series to pick up 50-100 years post *Nemesis* and go from there, but we all know that's not happening now. I'm a lot less excited now that pre TOS is official, but I'm still happy for a new show. We'll see what happens...

It is worth noting that the emergence of textual conservationist discourses centered on *Discovery*'s status as prequel occurred well in advance of the series premiere. “The writers will definitely have to be even more careful than the folks on ENT [*Enterprise*] to avoid causing major backstory problems”, explained one fan.

These anxieties would eventually be realized as additional information came to light, in particular the news that series' protagonist Michael Burnham, played by Sonequa Martin-Green, would in fact be Spock's adopted sister, a new “fact” that isn't supported by the universe's “frontstory”. From a textual conservationist stance, this newly established familial relationship is little more than a cheap, hackneyed retcon, a transparent attempt to address older Trekkers' nostalgia by attempting to shoehorn transfictional bridges between *TOS* and *Discovery*, regardless of whether or not such a maneuver is narratively and canonically warranted. Some textual conservationists drew from established canon to criticize the Spock/Burnham dyad, especially concerning Spock's half-brother, Sybok, who features in *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, but has yet to be mentioned in *Discovery* even though they were “raised as brothers”. (A discussion thread on Quora titled “Where is Sybok in *Star Trek Discovery*?” captures the debate well.)⁵⁴

As the series premiered in November 2017, textual conservationist discourses continued apace, not only on social media platforms but also across fannish entertainment journalism websites that were not active during *Enterprise*'s broadcast. Although the inception of broadband/fiber optic speeds and bandwidths certainly led to fan practices and behaviors becoming publicly visible, the participatory affordances of so-called Web 2.0 also created

space for an armada of websites dedicated to fan journalism to emerge, such as *Den of Geek*, *i09*, and *The Mary Sue*, etc. It is within this discursive universe that producers have also sought to paratextually respond to the complaints of textual conservationists. For example, Aaron Haberts, one of two showrunners on the first season, claimed that: “[t]he aim is not to violate things that are very important to people [and] I think that so far we’ve found a way to balance it. If we sat there and worried about it and studied it every single hour, it’s easy to choke. You have to push through.”⁵⁵ Much to the consternation of *Trek ’09* anti-fans, Alex Kurtzman took over as showrunner for season two (although he has been involved as executive producer and co-creator with Fuller from the start). Like Haberts and Goldsman, Kurtzman has attempted to paratextually rehabilitate the series regarding canon complaints by asking fans to “be patient with us”, implying that the series will eventually align with the rest of the *Trek* hyperdiegesis.⁵⁶ Said Kurtzman: “[t]he show has been made by people who are trying to protect that [canonical] legacy... so it’s a constant debate about where the line is in terms of canon violation, there’s a supreme court of debate that allows us to stay true to canon and also stretches the boundaries of it.”⁵⁷ In the Supreme Court of on-line fan opinion, however, *Discovery* has not only stretched the boundaries of canon, but snapped it irreparably. The criticisms have been varied and multiple: from the design of the Klingons to the lack of visual, costumed, and technological fidelity with *TOS* onwards; from Sarek’s newfound ability to converse with Burnham across great distances; to the implications of spore-drive technology; from Burnham’s status as mutineer to Spock’s comment in *TOS* episode “The Tholian Web”, that there has never been a mutiny in Starfleet (“absolutely no record of such an occurrence”); from advanced hologram and holodeck technology to the temporal coordinates of the Klingon War.

That being said, however, I reject the notion that continuity blunders are part of a nefarious scheme to upset the *Trek* faithful. In fact, *Discovery*’s relationship to canonical continuity is more ambivalent than the majority of textual conservationist discourses have allowed. Rather, it seems that twenty-first century *Star Trek* —or at least *Star Trek* that followed in the wake of *Enterprise*’s cancellation— has been hitherto reluctant to explore new regions of future history in a post-*TNG/DS9/Voyager* temporal locale. Hence, *Discovery*’s status as prequel —or as the case may be, an “interquel”⁵⁸— could be perhaps recognized as “safe harbor” for the producers. Despite seeming to violate the principles of canonical continuity, *Discovery* has also invoked multiple linkages with the imaginary world’s “frontstory”, by establishing connections with canonical events, locations, and characters. From this perspective, the idea that Burnham is Spock’s adopted sister may be strategic for the producers as it immediately pulls one of *Trek*’s formative and famous characters into the orbit of the new series, perhaps in an attempt to justify *Discovery*’s existence as an authentic branch of the hyperdiegesis. Likewise, the inclusion and insertion of Harry “Harcourt Fenton” Mudd —from *TOS* episodes “Mudd’s Women” (1966) and “I, Mudd” (1967)— establishes a canonical relationship between *TOS* and *Discovery*, just as the “Mirror Universe” arc midway through *Discovery*’s first season ricochets across *TOS*, *Enterprise*, and *DS9*, each of which include episodes that feature trips to the alternative universe. Moreover, the appearance of Captain Pike’s *Enterprise* at the close of Season One aims to further weave interconnective tissue between various canonical threads. By the same token, the introduction of Spock himself in Season Two —played by Ethan Peck, the third actor to play the character after Leonard Nimoy and Zachary Quinto— as well as Pike taking command of the *Discovery*, there is an argument to be made that the producers have been anxious to cultivate a canonical “aura” by consistently threading “narrative braids”⁵⁹ onto *Star Trek*’s frontstory, especially *TOS*. Arguably, there doesn’t seem to be a solid rationale for situating *Discovery* before *TOS* rather than after the final *TNG* film, *Nemesis*. In fact, some fans have expressed that they’d be more than satisfied with *Discovery* if it was located in post-*TNG* narrative space. I would argue that the series’ close proximity to *TOS*, and to Kirk and Spock, implies that the producers were not yet confident that *Star Trek*’s televisual renaissance could successfully launch without at least some support from canonical characters and events. Yet instead of servicing fans, *Discovery* seems to promote ““fan disservice,” where continuity is pointedly ignored, revised, or discarded.”⁶⁰

On the one hand, perhaps one could extrapolate that *Discovery*’s showrunners have not yet learned from textual conservationist discourses that surrounded *Enterprise*. On the other, however, it seems that the producers’ various attempts to construct canonical linkages between *Discovery* and *TOS* are viewed as arbitrary by some fans, and lacking the necessary textual support to bulk up the world’s infrastructure, mainly based on the use of retroactive continuity principles that *disassemble* the imaginary world rather than support its augmentation and extension. Writing for *Screen Rant*, John Orquillo explained that “many fans just couldn’t reconcile how *Star Trek: Discovery* could come before the hokier-looking *The Original Series*”;⁶¹ or as one fan put it, “c’mon can’t anybody here be bothered to research and keep true to history?”

It is possible to infer that *Discovery*’s producers might well be observing the concerns of textual conservationists, at least to some extent, by seeking to further develop substantive bridges between series. The introduction of Pike, the *USS Enterprise*, and Spock in Season Two aims to promote such bridge-building, regardless of a lack of visual, narrative and/or generic fidelity with frontstory, with the episode “If Memory Serves”

(2019) proffering a continuation of the original *Star Trek* pilot, “The Cage” (1965, but unaired until 1988), which did not yet feature William Shatner as Captain Kirk, but Jeremy Hunt as Pike). Although “The Cage” was Gene Roddenberry’s first but unsuccessful attempt at launching a *Star Trek* TV series —critics thought the episode was “too cerebral” for 1960s audiences— it was canonized in *TOS* episode “The Menagerie” (1966), an episode that depicted Pike sharing his memories of the episode with Kirk and Spock before his death. Furthermore, “If Memory Serves” opens with a “Previously on *Star Trek*” lead-in, which summarizes “The Cage” by reusing footage from the original pilot, and by extension, “The Menagerie”. In the episode itself, Pike and the *Discovery* return to Talos IV, the planet from “The Cage”, where Pike experiences a vision of the future and learns of his ultimate fate. In essence, “If Memory Serves” operates as a direct sequel to “The Cage”, although visual fidelity between the episodes is sorely lacking, as summed up by one fan’s criticisms:

That “previously on Star Trek” with clips from “The Cage” (1965) and the MTV-like transitions, then the cut to Pike’s face — like, WHUHHH? How are we meant to process the different film quality, costumes, Talosian makeup, and the actors? I mean, audiences are already complaining that we’re supposed to take the aesthetic change on faith, and now it’s rubbed in our collective faces. It would’ve been more consistent (additional cost, but cheap relative to DSC’s movie-quality expenses) to re-shoot with new-Pike, new-Spock and new-Number One in new-quarry.

This commenter’s critical perspective rehearses the perils associated with prequelization related to visual congruence, which we can understand conceptually as being in concert with technological and narrative consistency as sub-elements of canonical fidelity. It seems as if some textual conservationists expect *Discovery* to channel *TOS*’s dated aesthetic, or in this case, to “remake” elements of “The Cage” with “new-Pike, new-Spock”, etc., as a way to avoid juxtaposing radically different televisual contexts.

Based on production discourses for Season One, the introduction of Spock did not seem to be planned for the series’ future. Akiva Goldsman explained that “we are trying to be very gentle about any kind of direct intersection with what we would consider hero components of “TOS” [...] It’s certainly mentioned, but it’s not explored.”⁶² When asked if audiences would eventually find out what Spock thinks of Burnham’s mutiny, Goldsman stated simply: “Nope.” Although Goldsman departed the series as executive producer once the first season ended, there is nothing “gentle” about Season Two’s “intersections” with *TOS*’s “hero components”, with the arrival of the *Enterprise*, Captain Pike, Number One, and Spock being front-and-center. It may be that the inclusion of so many elements pulled from *TOS* and into *Discovery*’s ambit is a direct response to textual conservationist discourses pertaining to the series’ ambivalent relationship to canonical continuity.

As Kurtzman took over as showrunner for Season Two, several changes were made based on fan responses, the largest being the kerfuffle over the design of the Klingons (signified by the Twitter hashtag #NotMyKlingon). But perhaps the most interesting shift comes in the two-part season finale, which ends with the *Discovery* hurtled from the 23rd century and into the 29th. Spock seems to speak directly (and metafictionally) to *Discovery*’s textual conservationist critics, stating that “the very existence of *Discovery* is a problem.” Spock also explains to Starfleet Command that the *Discovery* and its spore-drive technology should be strictly “classified”, and not to be discussed “under penalty of treason”. In doing so, the Season Two finale arguably conducts a kind of *continuity patching* that works to redress narrative “blunders” in one fell swoop: firstly, by demonstrating that *Discovery*’s “very existence” is not necessarily contradicted by pre-existing “frontstory” should it be henceforth contained within the classified vaults; and secondly, that the series’ temporal leap into the 29th century frees the narrative from the constraints of canon; although it would still need to comply with what will now be backstory (as opposed to frontstory).

For some fans, however, this was nothing less than “a kind of sweeping-under-the-carpet move”, “a cheap move”, and “lazy writing to fix lazy writing”:

This “solution” is not credible. It also doesn’t fix lots of stuff, like the wrong insignia, holographic communications, beyond-weird Klingons, non-pregnant tribbles, and an unrecognizable NCC-1701 [the *USS Enterprise*]. Glad they’re outa’ here though. Here’s hoping they’ve traveled into the future just a minute before the sun goes supernova.

For many textual conservationists, *Discovery* simply does not meet the criteria as far as world-building goes, not only related to continuity as a mode of logical and structured storytelling, but also regarding canonical fidelity in its various forms and guises: from the series’ aesthetic, technological, and visual designs (uniforms, Starships, spore-drive) to generic and narrative incongruities (‘beyond-weird Klingons’, ship-to-ship transporting, no ‘blinking lights and space Nazis’).

Conversely, some fans believe that *Discovery* is “obsessed with canon”, as one fan put it. “Discovery is trying to tie in as much old Trek stuff as possible, e.g., Mirror Universe, Spock’s family, the Enterprise and Pike and Number One, Talos IV, Section 31, the Borg (probably) and time travel. Too much!” We could also include the way that *Discovery*’s opening theme music begins and ends with samples lifted from the *TOS* theme, as well as the mobilization of other audio cues and sound effects from *TOS*. We could describe such audio linkages as examples of *sonic fidelity*, a faithfulness that has been tested with the use of audio signifiers from both *TNG* and the Kelvin films (*TNG* is set over a century after *Discovery*, the Kelvin films are located in a parallel universe). “There’s absolutely no continuity in this dang show,” complained one fan, “and they’re just using sonic iconography without any care.”

From both positions, then, *Discovery*’s relationship to canonical continuity is troublesome. Although this essay has focused on textual conservationists’ response to canonical continuity, many fans appear to be satisfied with the series, and embrace it as a welcome addition to the fifty-plus year franchise, illustrating that *Star Trek* fandom, as with other media fan cultures, is neither a “coherent culture or community”, but “a network of networks, or a loose affiliation of sub-subcultures, all specializing in different modes of fan activity”, activities that bring different modes of engagement and affective nodes and nuances.⁶³

Final Thoughts: Prequel Rights?

Unlike *Enterprise*, *Discovery* seems to be in rude health for the time being, with a third season in production as of this writing. Despite mixed reviews, many of which praised the series’ “cinematic” production values while criticizing the quality of writing, *Discovery*’s maiden voyage captured over 9 million viewers in November 2017.⁶⁴ Although these figures did not generate the same quantity as *Enterprise*’s premiere, which garnered over 12 million before steadily declining, in this era of narrowcasting and streaming, 9 million is a respectful number indeed. More than this, the first two episodes of *Discovery* “drove a significant number of single-day sign-ups”⁶⁵ for the subscription-only service, CBS All Access (although the fact that the series was not first aired on network TV or in syndication was also heavily criticized by Trekkers). Perhaps the most profound indicator of CBS’s newfound faith in the *Star Trek* television branch and brand lies with the news that Kurtzman had signed a five-year deal with the studio in 2018 to spearhead the creation of several new series, and expand the franchise considerably. At the Las Vegas *Star Trek* convention, it was announced that Patrick Stewart would be reprising his role as Captain Jean Luc Picard for the first time in almost two decades, legitimating those fans who complained that the franchise should be trekking into uncharted future territories rather than looking backwards like *Enterprise*, the Kelvin films, and *Discovery* before it. Other projects include two animated series, a comedy titled *Lower Decks*—created, written and co-produced by Mike McMahan, the head writer on the popular animated series *Rick and Morty* (2013-present)— and an animated series for children to be aired on Nickelodeon.

This does not mean, however, that prequels are no longer on the production roster. Kurtzman has since green-lit a new series focused on “Section 31”, Starfleet’s “Black Ops” branch, which is set to feature Michelle Yeoh as the alternative Phillipa Georgina from the Mirror Universe; as well as a potential trilogy of TV films featuring classic villain Khan, which may be helmed by Trek alumni Nicolas Meyer, who directed *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1983), a film that many fans consider to be Trek at its finest. (Meyer also served on the production team for *Discovery*’s first season.) In a surprise twist in *Star Trek* prequel discourse, fans petitioned CBS in 2019 to produce a series based on the adventures of Christopher Pike’s *Enterprise*, with Anson Mount from *Discovery* in the Captain’s Chair, indicating that prequels are not necessarily out-of-bounds for the Trek fan-base *per se*, but that prequels should be approached with caution and diligence, especially where canon and continuity are concerned. “The fans have been heard”, stated Kurtzman, “Anything is possible in the world of Trek [and] I would love to bring back that crew more than anything.”⁶⁶

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- 6 Gerry Canavan, "Hokey Religions: Star Wars and Star Trek in the Age of Reboots", *Extrapolation*, Vol. 58, Nos. 2-3, 2017, page 167.
- 7 Adam Kotsko, "The Inertia of Tradition in Star Trek: Case Studies in Neglected Corners of the 'Canon'", *Science Fiction and Television* 9.3, 2016, page 347.
- 8 Matt Hills, "From 'Multiverse' to 'Abramsverse': Blade Runner, Star Trek, Multiplicity, and the Authorizing of Cult/SF Worlds" in J. P. Telotte and Gerard Duchovnay, editors, *Science Fiction Double-Feature: The Science Fiction Film as Cult Text*, Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2017, page 32.
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