

Star Trek Discovery: Boldly Going Where No Series Has Gone Before

A brief glimpse into the world of Star Trek, then Versus now.

By Emma-Ann Cranston

Since it was first aired in 1966, *Star Trek* has been mostly a man's world. Captain Kirk, Captain Picard, and a dozen other white male characters litter the minds of Trekkers, and though the series is one to be reckoned with, it was occasionally behind the times in its diversity. When asking a layman to name a female *Star Trek* character, chances are Lieutenant Uhura is the only one they have heard of. Yet, when asking for a male character, dozens of Captains and Commanders spring to mind.

In the 1995 series *Star Trek Voyager*, Kate Mulgrew plays Captain Kathryn Janeway, the first female Captain to ever enter the *Star Trek* universe, a solid thirty years after the franchise began. Mulgrew herself stated that it was 'remarkable' to be in such a position as *Voyager* scored the highest on the Bechdel test (a test that states two women must be seen to engage in conversation other than one about a romantic attraction to a male character in order to be deemed equal) of all the series prior. However, though the show was rife with female characters and interactions, there was a startling lack of non-white characters, with the highest-ranking character of colour being a Lieutenant; and a Vulcan at that, not even a human being.

The 2017 series *Star Trek Discovery*, however, broke all stigma surrounding the franchise. Not only was the protagonist female, but so was the Captain, giving many female fans a second chance to enjoy a woman in a position of power. Sonequa Martin-Green, an African-American woman, plays the show's protagonist, Michael Burnham. Martin-Green managed to entirely break the mould for protagonists within the *Star Trek* universe. She was not a man, nor was she white.

Furthering the representation of non-white characters in the *Star Trek* universe, Captain Phillipa Georgiou, portrayed by Malaysian actress Michelle Yeoh, plays a large part in Burnham's life. Captain Georgiou is a well-respected and regarded member of the federation and is only the second female Captain to have been a central character in the *Star Trek* universe (a vastly small number compared to the dozen or so male Captains we've encountered). And, to improve female representation even further, many of the background characters, who feature on the bridge in nearly every episode, are women, with the ratio of male-to-female ensigns being average, a first for *Star Trek* as rarely was a woman seen on the bridge in series prior.

Continuing to break the stereotypes surrounding *Star Trek* was Anthony Rapp. Rapp took on the role of Chief Engineer Paul Stamets, a gay man who lives on the ship with his partner. Casting aside the alluded same-sex

marriage of one of the main characters in the 2009 film *Star Trek*, Stamets is the first gay character to be seen serving aboard ship. Rapp stated it was nice to finally see a gay couple in the *Star Trek* universe, 'treated as any other relationship would be treated', and as the series unravelled we were given the opportunity to watch their relationship mould and change as we would any heterosexual relationship. Stamets is a crucial character within the Discovery universe, as without him the entire operation would have failed. Therefore, the decision to have such a focal character be in a committed homosexual relationship is one that was no doubt a risk, due to *Star Trek*, stereotypically, attracting a mainly male heterosexual audience; however, Wilson Cruz, who plays Stamets' partner onboard the ship, said that it 'was a long time coming', and the fans agree.

In terms of representation in the universe, it is not just human diversity that we encounter. Though famously the 'bad guys' we do get an insight into the Klingons, with many scenes taking place on the Klingon warship. Saru, one of the main characters, is also an alien of a type never explored in any previous series.

Though in previous *Star Trek* series' we have been graced with alien Starfleet officers, some even becoming fan favourites, Brian Fuller's decision to have such a large focus on the Klingons, going so far as to spend crucial parts of episodes with only Klingon characters, is a large leap in favour of diversity. Though

part of the science-fiction and fantasy universe, Fuller's willingness to portray alien diversity goes hand in hand with his representation of various human minorities, and therefore breaks the stigma surrounding *Star Trek*.

However, the increase in diversity created controversy amongst some bitter viewers, who claimed the show should be renamed 'Star Trek Diversity' and dared to even call the show 'white genocide' and 'a lady show'. This is absurd, and in fact the most watched episodes on Netflix in the last year were of *Voyager*, the only show, before *Discovery*, to feature a female Captain, and its viewings at the time it was aired were higher than those featuring a male lead. In regards to comments about 'too much diversity', it is crucial to think back to *The Original Series*, where television's first interracial kiss was witnessed between Captain Kirk and Uhura. Though *Star Trek* has not offered much in terms of diversity in its major characters, there has always been the willingness to *attempt* a more diverse pathway through its minors.

In a world where times are changing, and we are so much more aware of a lack of diversity, *Star Trek Discovery* does indeed make a startling discovery and through its successful representation of those lesser represented minorities, the series is instantly more realistic than any of the shows prior. *Discovery* reached 9.6 million views during its premier, placing it as the second most watched *Star Trek* pilot of all time. Is this amount of views because it was more accessible, that more people owned a television or

streaming device? Or is this due to the increase in characters representing the widely diverse fanbase? Despite it being thousands of years into the future, in space, with technology we could never imagine, there is someone for all of us to relate to within *Star Trek Discovery*.

