

Why is Sci-Fi so gay?

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The Matrix is the most optimistic vision of the future ever – it's the end of the world but everyone's wearing Prada! – Paul Rudnick, playwright

"Nerds are my passion," says 21-year-old Brendan Grimaldi, "because they're the most interesting people. Oddly enough, they're the most down-to-earth and intelligent and real, you know?" The young blond twink would look more at home on the cover of glossy gay youth mag XY than here at the worn-in Best Western at the corner of Jarvis and Carlton, but this gay actor-waiter has travelled from San Francisco in support of Pandemonium, his friends' independent sci-fi film.

If he loves gay geeks, he's found Mecca – the 2006 Gaylaxicon convention, a North American gathering of queer (and queer-friendly) science fiction and fantasy fans.

On this sweltering weekend in June, a couple hundred people have gathered to mingle and attend panels on lesbian vampires, adding a fifth gender (forget fifth dimensions), low-budget filmmaking, queer video-game characters and, of course, the "token straight panel." It all peaks with the infamous Masquerade, where the truly devoted get dressed to the Deep Space Nines in their most fantastic outfits.

One could argue that this is just another gay gathering, no different from a gay swim team, providing a social space for a group of queers with a common interest to gather, banter and cruise (if Grimaldi loves the nerds, the feeling is obviously mutual). But as a hot boy in a loincloth feeds cheesecake to paying guys to raise money for AIDS hospice Casey House, and another fellow shows up to the masquerade ball dressed as gay Canadian mutant superhero Northstar, there is something gayer here than the queer soccer league or your average gay book club. With the wild costumes and defiant individuality on display, it feels like a Pride Parade.

"Aren't all sci-fi conventions mostly gay?" asks a character in one volunteer's web comic, Damian's Friends. After all, the Gaylaxicon folk make up a significant chunk of the larger conventions, and it's hard to look straight wearing a unitard. "Maybe," comes the reply, "but this one is super gay!" And it's the culmination of a long process – from queers in the '50s corresponding surreptitiously with each other through sci-fi newsletters like Towards Tomorrow, to Queer as Folk creator Russell T. Davies' re-launch of Doctor Who with a bisexual male character. Sci-fi not only has deep queer roots; it's getting gayer by the nanosecond.

Why is that?

There are the obvious aesthetic reasons. The Space Channel ran a promo for the disco-era cult hit Battlestar Galactica – featuring actors with Bee Gee-esque hairdos running from chrome robots – and asked, "Who knew the future would look so much like the '70s?" Even before that, a lot of early sci-fi,

from *Lost in Space* to the first *Star Trek*, was very campy, from shiny skintight outfits to fey, lisping villains, to rounded phallic spaceships.

“We’re still in love with this art deco, streamlined look of the future,” says Gaylaxicon attendee Kevin Roche, former Leather Emperor of San Jose, California. And that streamlined sexiness extends to clothes. Roche is a physicist, but in a place like Gaylaxicon, it’s not just his science degree that gives him street cred. It’s his love of “the look.” As a co-founder of Costume-Con, a convention exclusively for people who like dressing up – whatever the costume – he’s got more than a passing passion for style, and says the sci-fi look is definitely sexier than in the days of the jumpsuits in *Logan’s Run*. “There are certain lines we look for,” says Roche “That heroic triangle which military style usually gives you – the broad shoulders, the narrow waist. That shape is still a strong cultural icon and a strong power and sexual icon as well.” He points to Ben Browder on *Farscape*, a hunky actor whose popularity among both sexes soon took his character from jeans and T-shirts to combat vests and leather pants.

“Fetish design has crept its way into visual design of TV series,” Roche continues. “It used to be that the ones in fetish wear were the bad guys, but now you find it in the protagonists as well.”

As playwright Paul Rudnick points out, the leather-clad heroes of *The Matrix* couldn’t have looked any sexier. The wildly popular movie’s sleek style translated into real-life trends. Marty Rotman, designer for Canada’s preeminent leather store, Northbound Leather, says sales increased as “a lot of people were wanting that long, black Neo coat with the mandarin collar... We’ve also seen it with the anime people, with the comics and the Japanese cartoons... We’ve had kids come in with pictures of characters from video games, wanting to have the coats and jackets made.”

Fashion, however, was only one aspect of this cultural-appropriation coup d’état. In the same way that gay men lovingly kept the movie memories of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford alive long after straight culture had forgotten them, camp style latched onto the 1950s robotmonster and silver spacesuit silliness. Queer pop band the B-52s used zany outer-space imagery throughout their songs and concerts – no sci-fi could be gayer than Fred Schneider barking, “Get on your laser, daddy, and ride!” – but the epitome of this was *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. While sweet transvestite Dr. Frank-N-Furter builds himself a Charles Atlas hunk “with blond hair and a tan,” the film’s theme song references a flying-saucerful of classic sci-fi flicks, including *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *King Kong* and *Forbidden Planet*.

Sci-fi camp hit the mainstream in the late ’60s with *Barbarella* and *Planet of the Apes*, but it was the TV series *Star Trek* that truly brought it to the masses. “I used to watch the original *Star Trek* with a whole group of queer people, one of whom had the only colour television set on the block,” says venerable gay author Felice Picano, who lives in Los Angeles and was recently in Toronto promoting his collection of sci-fi stories *Tales: From a Distant Planet*. After the “staggering dull” ’50s, Picano says, *Star Trek*’s colourful optimism thrilled him and his friends. “Was it gay?” he asks, “We thought so!”

But as with other genres in the mass media, sci-fi was only gay behind the scenes. Actor George Takei, who played Lt. Sulu on *Star Trek*, came out last year, and star William Shatner then commented that everyone on set knew the actor was gay – “He kept setting his phaser on ‘fabulous!’” he joked. But Sulu (the character) was married with a daughter, and there were no homos on the *Enterprise*. Gay writer

David Gerrold had written one of the most popular Star Trek episodes ever, “The Trouble With Tribbles,” and rejoined the writing staff when Star Trek: The Next Generation debuted in 1986. His attempts to feature a gay couple in an AIDS allegory episode were repeatedly shot down, however, and he left to work on his own novels. As with cop dramas or sports films or westerns, it was clear that gays were not wanted on the voyage, but the difference with Star Trek is that its gay fans refused to settle for invisibility, setting in motion perhaps the most documented and fiercely fought pink war in Hollywood history, one that is slowly being won by dogged guerrilla- style tactics.

Captain Kirk tried to sleep with every woman in sight – black, white or green – while his Casanova successor, Commander Riker on Star Trek: The Next Generation, romanced Deanna Troi in a bubble bath. But if there’s been any homo love on the Enterprise, it’s been strikingly hidden. “It’s disgusting,” says Lyla Miklos, queer activist and former programming supervisor for the Space Channel, “They’re basically saying that, in the future, we don’t exist.”

Homo invisibility is a sad trend throughout the genre. At Gaylaxicon, when a handsome, bearded and ponytailed Masquerade contestant, Thomas Atkinson, turns up in a well-crafted X-Wing pilot uniform from Star Wars, it seems somehow wrong. The recent Star Wars films not only forced viewers to suffer through a horribly written heterosexual romance, there was nothing remotely gay in them either – even R2D2 and prissy queen C3PO had lost their married couple feuding that lightened up Episode IV: A New Hope. Atkinson defends his choice of Star Wars garb. Unlike some franchises, at least it’s not pretending to be something it’s not. “The producers of Star Trek are always patting themselves on the back for how progressive they are,” he says, but where are the gay characters?

The hypocrisy of a 24th-century utopian Earth free from prejudice but obviously filled with homophobia irritated gay sci-fi fans enough to make them launch a rebellion of their own, from within and without the industry. They set their sights on Star Trek as their new hope. The Next Generation’s debut in 1986 coincided with the formation of the Gaylactic Network, and fans began lobbying for a gay Enterprise crew member. The fight took place on a variety of dimensions.

Among fans in Toronto, Lyla Miklos says, “There was a whole group of us that kept agitating...calling ourselves ‘The Q Continuum’ and pushing for more queer content in the [Toronto Trek] convention.” Richard Arnold, a consultant on the show, attended one of those conventions a few years back. He was trying to defend Gene Roddenberry’s vision and, after a series of evasive non-answers, Miklos headed for the door. “Wait!” yelled Arnold, “I care! I’m gay!” He then admitted that “Gene Roddenberry told him, ‘There are two things you can be in Hollywood but you can’t talk about, and that’s Jewish or gay. They will use it against you.’ So I couldn’t say anything while I was there.” When the pair were reunited years later at the Gaylaxicon convention in Toronto, Miklos revealed that when she’d gotten up to leave, it was not in protest but merely because she was late for a panel. “I outed myself for nothing!” laughs Arnold.

But Arnold’s presence behind the scenes affected creator Gene Roddenberry, who made international headlines in 1991 when he finally announced, “In the fifth season of Star Trek: The Next Generation, viewers will see more of shipboard life in some episodes, which will, among other things, include gay crew members in day-to-day circumstances.” But Roddenberry died later that year, before the vision

could be implemented. His day-to-day gay crew members never materialized, and new producer Rick Berman all but declared they never would. Author Felice Picano was not surprised. "A lot of it has to do with television going out to the broadest possible audience. It's all just money!"

While a 2000 Out magazine survey listed Star Trek: Voyager as the third most popular TV show among gay men after Will & Grace and ER, even its captain couldn't influence the producers. "I've approached [Berman] many, many times over the years about getting a gay character on the show," actress Kate Mulgrew told the website Out in America in 2002. Mulgrew played the franchise's first female captain to lead not only a starship, but a series as well. Still, she admitted, "I couldn't get it done... And I am sorry for that."

Toronto actor and writer Scott Thompson did a guest appearance on the show and oddly, says, "It was the only time I was in LA when I was offered a straight character [to play]." Currently working on a proposal for a Journey to the Centre of the Earth-type adventure featuring his Kids in the Hall character Danny Husk, Thompson admits he loves science fiction. "I'm outing myself as a nerd!" he laughs – but not as a Trekkie. He dislikes "the perfection of Star Trek." Still, he enjoyed being on the show, on the sets, and "hitting on [buxom blonde Borg] Seven of Nine." Stories like Arnold's don't surprise him. "Hollywood is run by closet cases addicted to anti-depressants!"

Gay fans were not about to be stonewalled by happy-pill-popping TV and movie execs on the down low. Enthusiasts took it upon themselves to rewrite the future, literally. Where the big and small screen feared to go, literature was already painting the universe pink.

Long before the 1969 Stonewall riots kicked the gay rights movement into overdrive, gays and lesbians were using sci-fi literature to camouflage new discussions about sexuality. One of the earliest serious works depicting the lives and loves of gay men was E. M. Forster's Maurice, but the novel could never be published during his lifetime. Forster also wrote fantasy and ghost stories that discreetly explored themes of emotional disconnection and the cruelty of the Church. The Eternal Moment, was published in 1928. The same year, Virginia Woolf's Orlando featured a centuries-old hero who spontaneously changes his sex and has to adjust to life as a woman in the Victorian era. The fantasy element allowed Woolf to pay secret tribute to her lover, Vita Sackville-West.

As gay author Thomas Disch explained in a 2001 interview for web magazine Strange Horizons, "One of the advantages of being a science fiction writer, in terms of artistic freedom, is that people don't pay attention to what you do, and so you're free to be audacious. That was true for writers in the '50s, when the audacity was of a political sort." Authors Theodore Sturgeon and Marion Zimmer Bradley became pioneers in science fiction literature for regularly introducing homosexual themes in their stories as early as 1952. Disch and his contemporaries excitedly followed their lead, realizing that sci-fi had evolved from low-brow pulp fiction to a brilliant way of discussing cultural possibilities. "You could finally write for grown-ups!" he enthused.

A new era of gay visibility and activism developed from the massive cultural changes of the 1960s and Disch was later asked if all that turmoil influenced the science fiction writers of the time. He replied,

“We were the cultural and social change going on. We were part of it, we reflected it in our own lives, we mirrored it, and we stimulated it by our writings and other vehicles.”

As more and more gay people came out in the '70s, science fiction writers drafted increasingly radical visions of a future that might include them. Harlan Ellison is straight, but his short story “Catman” depicted a bisexual society that has only one taboo: sex with robots. David Gerrold, formerly of Star Trek, wrote *The Man Who Folded Himself*. The title character has travelled in time so much that he now has duplicates of himself in every time period – older and younger versions of himself, with whom he has sex. Scott Thompson says he was particularly blown away by Samuel Delany’s *Dhalgren*: “I was thrilled. No one had ever combined sex and science fiction before,” he says, adding, “The notion of sci-fi as the domain of straight white nerds was shattered by this brilliant gay, black writer and Delany became an icon amongst both fans and literary critics.”

Felice Picano was both a pioneer and publisher of gay fiction at the time, celebrated for his autobiographical work and suspense novels. He loved what was happening in the sci-fi genre and worked on stories of his own (now collected in *Tales: From a Distant Planet*). His own novel, *Dryland’s End*, he explains, “is set in a matriarchy, so the women have been in charge for thousands of years. Nobody works, machines do everything – it’s just very, very different. In a situation like that, where everything has turned around, what’s a gay relationship? How important is that? Who’s going to be upset by that when all marriages consist of two women with a guy on the side?”

Science fiction, Picano argues, had become an integral tool for gay people: “The idea is to put out something so utterly different and yet human and amusing and interesting and involving that it will wipe away old ideas. That’s what science fiction is supposed to do – to wipe away old ideas and give you new ones!” Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* was celebrated in 1961 for merely mentioning homosexuality – “a wrongness in the poor in-betweeners.” The late '70s saw popular books like Samuel Delany’s *Tales of Neveryon*, Thomas Disch’s *On Wings of Song* and Diane Duane’s *The Door Into Fire*, which all feature gay men as main characters and heroes. John Varley’s *Titan* began a series of novels featuring lesbian space captain Cirocco Jones.

“When you think science fiction, you think of the anorak-wearing geek in the basement, right? But it’s much larger than that,” says Chris Szego, 35, manager of Bakka-Phoenix Books, Canada’s oldest sciencefiction bookstore. Founded in 1972, the small shop has been a haven and meeting ground for Toronto sci-fi fans, both amateur and professional. Tanya Huff is the author of dozens of successful novels, many featuring gay characters, and says, “I was the manager and mass-market buyer for Bakka from '84 to '91. The whole joke was, ‘Work at Bakka, sell a book.’” Published Bakka alumni include Michelle Sagara, Hugo and Nebula Award-winner Robert Sawyer, and Cory Doctorow, who also contributes to the website boingboing.net, voted the internet’s “best blog” last year.

Bakka’s newst manager is not surprised by their success. “Science fiction is a brilliant way to talk about things that are going on now without ever making reference to them,” says Szego, “It’s a way to talk about ideas and issues that would otherwise be dangerously politicized. With that one or two steps removed, you can calm down about it... Take *X-Men*, for instance – in that second movie, they’re at Bobby’s house and the mom says, ‘Have you tried not being a mutant?’ Everyone in the audience above

a certain age knows that this is a subtext about homosexuality but because it's not actually about homosexuality, people who might otherwise be uncomfortable hear the message about acceptance and tolerance and find themselves rooting for the Bobby character."

Actress Ellen Muth agrees. She was the guest of honour at this year's Gaylaxicon and former star of the cult hit series *Dead Like Me* (in which she played a neurotic teenage grim reaper coming to terms with her own death, and her new fate harvesting souls). "Dead Like Me deals with death, which is a very tricky subject, but when you put it in a humorous and sympathetic light, it draws more attention and people can relate to it easier," she says.

But for many fans, subtext is not enough, especially when progress is being made elsewhere. In the 1960s, *Star Trek* put a Russian character on the bridge of the Enterprise in the midst of the Cold War, and the current supernatural/sci-fi hit show *Lost* has a sympathetic Iraqi character who once belonged to that country's National Guard. These controversial characters can find a place onscreen, and yet homo characters seem to remain taboo. Once again, literature is allowing gay fans to explicitly claim these characters as their own. Perhaps too explicitly!

Jim lay back, sighing. Spock came into his arms again, the feel of his body strong and hard, and hot, so hot, like embracing fire itself, and he had every intention of letting those shimmering flames consume him this time.

This is one of dozens of X-rated scenes in *Alternative*, the first book-length zine devoted to the torrid secret romance between Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, as conceived by Gerry Downes, a straight woman living in Anchorage, Alaska. In 1976, Downes began distributing her thick tome of photocopied pages and it proved both controversial and surprisingly influential among fans – most of them also heterosexual women – who started adding to the genre. These romances were labelled "Kirk/Spock" stories. Since then, "slash" fiction devoted to gay sex among sci-fi characters has become widespread, especially since the rise of the internet. A Google search displays thousands of websites revealing unofficial stories of Captain Picard teaching Q about sex, Cyclops and Wolverine becoming XXX-Men, the letters S and M being added to the X-Files and hobbits even gayer than the ones seen onscreen.

The creators of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who paid close attention to what fans had to say on the net, seemed to be amused enough eventually to start dropping "slashy" hints in the show. Creator Joss Whedon decided to have Willow – a pivotal and popular character – come out as lesbian, and he teasingly hinted that vampire icons Angel and Spike had indeed had sex at one point. This January, he quashed a debate on the fan website *Whedonesque* (www.whedonesque.com) about whether the hunky vampires hooked up, stating, "In my world, heroes bugger each other senseless. Not all of them, but more than you'd think, and probably not who you're thinking." He continued on his commentary track for an Angel DVD, announcing, "Spike and Angel...they were hanging out for years and years and years. They were all kinds of deviant. Are people thinking they never...? Come on, people! They're opened-minded guys!"

Even *Star Trek* eventually gave in, featuring a same-sex kiss between two female characters. And in print format, homos have made greater strides. Andy Mangels, winner of Mr. Oregon State Leather 2004, is

also a writer of the official “tie-in” books. In his novel Section 31: Rogue, Mangels took Lt. Hawk, a minor (but pretty) character from the movie Star Trek: First Contact, and gave him a back story and a boyfriend – finally giving fans an official gay Enterprise crew member.

Onscreen, sci-fi stories are finally catching up to their literary equivalents, even if it’s at a pace nowhere close to warp speed. And now there’s even a TV equivalent to slash fiction that’s giving new meaning to the infamous command: Engage.

While the Star Trek franchise may be on hiatus, keen fans have picked up the slack, producing surprisingly high-quality shows of their own based on the Federation universe. Home computers have reached a point that allows for accomplished special effects, and the net offers a platform for distribution. One site is Star Trek: Hidden Frontier (www.hiddenfrontier.org), which has been around for six seasons. Filming takes place in a converted green room in the back of executive producer/creator Rob Caves’ home in Los Angeles. “Star Trek has evolved over time,” Caves told fab via email. “I’d like to think that even though we are not official, we’ve contributed just a little bit to that evolution by introducing gay characters” (lovers actually, who make out at every opportunity). So far, as long as no one is making a profit, Star Trek’s owners have not interfered with sites like Caves’.

And even in the mainstream, the pink dollar is helping queer themes gain new ground in old territory. Since Farscape and Buffy, sci-fi television is no longer as hostile to gay writers and characters, because there’s now proof that there’s money in them, as Picano joked. He’s currently working on a potential series based on his work. But the big TV success story for gay sci-fi fans has been Queer as Folk creator Russell T. Davies.

“Russell T. Davies outed himself as a sci-fi geek in Queer as Folk,” says comedy writer and Gaylaxicon panellist Christos Tsirbas. “The Vince character introduced gay geeks to the world” with his love of Doctor Who. After the worldwide success of Queer as Folk, Davies was offered practically any UK television project he wanted, and he announced to BBC News that Doctor Who was “the best idea ever invented in the history of the world!”

“The Doctor’s ongoing battle,” wrote Matt Jones, script editor for numerous British TV shows and columnist for Doctor Who Magazine, “has always been against those who stamp down on unsuitable feelings, who hate people who are different or don’t fit it. Whoever – whatever – they are...that’s a good fight.” The mainstream public agreed – Davies’ new Doctor Who series has been a massive success, capturing the majority of British TV viewers and a whole new generation of kids. “He’s a total geek who loves this stuff and made a career out of it,” says Tsirbas, “To have somebody who is openly gay and in charge of the BBC’s premier family show says a lot about society right now. I thought that was just wonderful.”

The British tabloid press, however, was terrified that Davies’ new version of Doctor Who would be unsuitable for children, or that he might make the Doctor gay. Fans pointed out that the Doctor had never been exactly straight – travelling through space and time with a series of sexy girl companions in whom he had no sexual interest– but Davies tricked everyone by introducing a new companion named Captain Jack Harkness, played by openly gay actor John Barrowman.

“He’s a bisexual con man. Hooray!” said Davies in an interview for the US Sci-Fi Channel, “We need more bisexual con men on our television screens, don’t you think? Bisexual con men from the 53rd century – what could be better?” Chris Szego at Bakka is thrilled: “I love Captain Jack!” she says. The character proved so popular that the BBC and the CBC are coproducing a spinoff series aimed at adults called Torchwood, in which Barrowman’s character will lead a group of cops investigating alien crime. It’ll be “dark, wild and sexy,” promises Davies – three words you don’t often hear in the context of science fiction.

The queer geek outsider is now ready to become the mainstream TV hero.

This is the promise of science fiction – that smart, engaging entertainment will help bring people together to discuss their dreams and how to make them real. Gaylaxicon attendee and costume enthusiast Kevin Roche says, “Science fiction fans are a little bit more accepting. They’re more willing to think about it – because they believe that they’re challenging assumptions in the books they read and the way they live their lives and they’re willing to challenge their own assumptions as well.” The sci-fi convention circuit, he says, “really changed over time and it’s largely because of people who are willing to be out and to be themselves. I am completely out and the only person who ever gave me a problem later came back and said how much he liked my costume work and was a completely different person.”

Of course, some would argue that the quest for utopia can be a trap. Steve Berman, the author of *Vintage*, an upcoming gaythemed ghost story for teens, warns that if “you’re not dealing with the situation in the present locale, you’re not making a change, you’re fleeing elsewhere.” This, of course, has long been a danger for gay men dreaming of going west.

“All fiction is escapism, but it serves different purposes,” says Berman. “Some fiction is just entertainment...I like dystopias myself, to fight the good fight.” And dystopias aren’t so far away these days. We’ve now entered the 21st century – a time of cloning, genetic engineering, weapons of mass destruction, holograms, nanotechnology and the instantaneous, worldwide sharing of information. We have new reproductive technologies and the possibility of extensive body modification through surgery and hormones. We are no longer enjoying science fiction, we are living it, and queers of all stripes have long found themselves in the middle of this ever-shifting body politic. Should we choose to pay attention, the sci-fi genre promises to continue doing what it always has – to expand our minds, warn us of future dangers and create new playgrounds for discovery.

And while sci-fi may be dismissed by some as the realm of escapist nerds, the genre is increasingly accepted in the mainstream, by straights and gays alike. Many a hottie muscle lad doing cardio at the gym has been caught eyeing the hunky Apollo while watching the revamped *Battlestar Galactica*, which *Time* magazine declared “Best TV Series” this year. But for all sci-fi’s growing popularity, Gaylaxicon remains a haven for those who might be classified by more mainstream gays as social misfits. Most attendees are as far removed from the slick world of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* as a crowd can get. “Sci-fi conventions are like circuit parties for geeks,” jokes Tsirbas.

“Outsider” is a word that comes up a lot during the convention, but given the wide variety of races, ages, body types and classes here, who exactly are the outsiders? Berman jokes that it’s the ones “getting waxed and Botoxed. There’s not a cult of youth and beauty among [sci-fi] fandom. The average gay man is more represented here than at a circuit party – they’re judged on their interests and personality rather than their appearance.” While his bio reveals that he’s “slept with one minor porn star and with a guy who later became one,” he seems surprisingly happy amidst those with no visible abs. “It’s so transitory,” he sighs, “I’m sure there are 50-year-old men who are extremely buff but, as an outsider looking into that culture, I don’t see a lot of happy folk. I mean, you just don’t see gay sci-fi crystalmeth addicts. You’re more likely to see them overdosing on cakes and brownies. I only worry for their cholesterol!” The circuit crowd should embrace sci-fi for their own health, he laughs.

“Avoid Tina, embrace Shatner!”