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# Why Trek into Disability?
# Introduction to the Special Issue

# Pourquoi s'aventurer dans le handicap avec Star Trek?
# Introduction au numéro spécial

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It may be difficult for some readers to connect the Star Trek franchise to disability studies. After all, the utopian nature of Trek is predicated on a future that works to eliminate need and to show viewers that humans had found ways around the interior conflicts that separated them. Also, medical advancements would preclude the continued existence of disability, wouldn't they?

The answer to that question depends entirely on perspective.

## Trek and Disability: My Personal Journey

I was a bit too young to watch *Star Trek* during its original run, but *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) premiered when I was a teenager, and that show began a journey with science fiction that continues to shape my understanding of the world today. Week after week, I watched Captain Picard (Sir Patrick Stewart) and the crew of the *Enterprise-D* encounter new challenges. In most cases, those challenges meant interacting with species or cultures that had beliefs different from those of the primary crew. Reliably, these differences would create the narrative tension of the episode as the writers worked

to recontextualize social issues of things like race, religion, economics, care for the elderly, and care for military veterans, among others for a science fiction audience. In terms of disability, I saw a futuristic wheelchair carry an admiral across the bridge,[1] a species governed by addiction,[2] a person who is Deaf teach others to speak,[3] Vulcans lose their logic,[4] J'naii refuse their identities,[5] androids become human, humans become androids,[6] and people without traditional eyesight pilot starships.[7] Each of these episodes showcases an important aspect of personhood, and explores some of the struggles that take place when equilibrium is challenged.

As I think about each of those episodes now, I recognize how my own perspective has shifted. While I was growing up, only some of those episodes were clearly affiliated with disability themes. But, where once there were few, there are now many. Reflection and a deep knowledge of disability studies reminds me that all of the episodes have deeper meanings when disability frameworks and ideas are applied. For that reason, I have spent the better part of the last decade exploring Federation history and analyzing countless episodes with my good friend and co-editor, Craig A. Meyer, to demonstrate how, to paraphrase Kathryn Allan and Rita Cheyene, "disability is absolutely central to the formation and ongoing growth of Star Trek."[8]

When Craig and I were offered the opportunity to compile this special issue, we knew that we needed to go beyond representational concerns and ensure that our choices here reflected truly critical thought and advancement of the field. We also knew that focusing on the *presence* of disability was not enough. Rather, we wanted authors to share

the *meaning* of disability within Star Trek and highlight the ways that it shifted character equilibriums.

## The Pieces in this Collection

In much the same way that Star Trek episodes focus on individual characteristics of alien races to propel stories, the authors included here build their arguments around those same characters, but have a very specific intent: to elaborate theories of disability engagement. For example, Lucas Cober writes about the Pakleds, a species that is often isolated and bullied because of the ways that their body types and cultural intellect is characterized by others. One of Cober’s salient points is that the Pakleds have never been truly accepted as a species, and instead have served as subjects for ridicule because their cultural practices cast them as villains or fools in Federation stories.

Next, Robert Finnigan literally explores the emotional contexts of disability as they exist on Vulcan. He argues that the Vulcan decision to structure their culture around logic at the apparent expense of emotion was a matter of survival (as they split from the overly emotional Romulans.) Their choices allowed the Vulcans to thrive. Mental strength and discipline eventually became the single marker of normality for Vulcans, as well as their curse. Ultimately, cultural expectations for mental discipline were set too high, and anyone who failed them was ostracized.

Sam Brierley redefines normal by adding a third aspect to the accepted binary. By analyzing examples from two Q-centered storylines, Brierley showcases how the omnipotent being who often troubles Captains Picard and Janeway has an elevated

perspective and occupies a space of the “super-abled.” With the bar raised to omnipotence, it’s difficult to understand humans as sitting at the pinnacle of ability. Throughout the analysis, Brierley uses Q’s wit, sarcasm, and simple delivery to reorient our position within the greater universe.

In many ways, the first three pieces focus on the mental acuity of specific people located in the Alpha Quadrant and challenge readers to consider how to reconfigure the boundaries of acceptance. Sid Connor, on the other hand, writes about the presence of disability even farther away in the Gamma Quadrant. Using Dominion species as examples, Connor applies medical, social, and cultural models of disability to the concept of addiction and challenges the traditional binary by demonstrating three unique sets of cultural expectations. Connor shows us that even among the species that are designated (and in one case specifically bred) to be ‘stronger,’ addiction can nonetheless shape experiences and responses from others.

Stuart Read and Anne Parfitt also continue to analyze the presence of disability among several characters across the Star Trek franchise. One of the true strengths of their piece resides in its structure. Grounded in well-tested disability and narrative theory, they use the in-universe concept of logs to offer commentary from characters as well as their own experiences. The use of logs allows them to address their unique responses from within a newly constructed narrative register. While they analyze Trek’s work with the characters of Christopher Pike. Geordi La Forge, Riva, and Melora, they position the importance of viewer and character interactions above that of franchise goals. Additionally, creating a new register that highlighted the needs of both the viewers and the

characters provided a space where the interests of change could come together and be expressed more clearly.

Olivia Johnston Riley focuses on the use of cyborgs as a narrative device within Star Trek. Riley notes that, “virtually all disabled Star Trek characters are cyborgs. In this universe, the normative impulse to “cure” injury and disability is usually answered by medical technology.” Canon examples like Christopher Pike, Geordi La Forge, and Paul Stamets frame the argument while several others sustain it, Overall, Riley contends that Trek avoids more complicated and ‘messy’ representations of disability by also remaining inside curative time and offers some challenging solutions to resolve the issue in the future.

Sara Dorsten and Andrew Hall do what they can to remove the fear of disability as their work highlights one Star Trek entry which does not problematize disability as many of the others. While contrasting *Star Trek: Lower Decks* with some of the disability-oriented episodes done in other series, Dorsten and Hall remind readers that within the mythos of *LD,* science and medicine have learned how to regrow limbs and how to manage a number of other impairments. Dorsten and Hall situate their argument inside *Lower Decks* because, they observe, “Lower Decks [...] explores the full extent of how humanity’s relationship to its own embodiment shifts when fully accounting for the possibilities of advanced and freely available medical care in a post-scarcity society.” While the authors acknowledge that the central episode they review remains entrenched in medical-model thinking, they argue that it likewise remains imperative, even today, to locate the medical aspects of disability in order to receive desired and necessary care.

The article anchoring the end of the issue revolves around the ways that Federation officers view cultures different from what they know. In our analysis of several episodes across the franchise, Craig and I view the Trek franchise through a wide-angle lens. Using episodes from *TOS, TNG, DS9, and DSC,* we note how the application of disability frameworks evolved as the franchise grew over the last six decades, and we wonder how it will continue in the future.

Across all of these articles, there is a deep recognition of community. That community is important because it allows the collaboration that begins progress. Many of us wrote about the same characters and used familiar frameworks; we recognized similar patterns and we called out problematic concerns. Many of us wrote about the ways that Trek has changed, as well as the ways that we hope Trek will change. The theme of this issue was “disability,” but I think what really came through most of all was the desire to make this world -- the planet that we all live on now --as accepting as possible. Star Trek has given us the goal, and through work like this we can continue the mission.

Endnotes

[1] Bowman, “Too Short a Season”

[2] Phelps, “Symbiosis.”

[3] Shaw, “Loud as a Whisper.”

[4] “Sarek,” directed by Les Landau, is the primary example for TNG. There are several others across the franchise.

[5] “Scheerer, The Outcast.”

[6] See Data’s character arc for all of TNG as well as *Star Trek: Picard*. Also of note: TNG “Schizoid Man” (Landau) and “The Offspring.” (Frakes)

[7] Geordi La Forge, who uses specialized technology to complement his vision, serves as the primary conn officer during TNG’S first season.

[8] Allan and Cheyene, 390.

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