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Captain's Log: Counternarratives as a means of exploring representation of disability and impairment in Star Trek

Journal de bord du capitaine : les contrerécits comme moyen d'explorer la représentation du handicap et de la déficience dans *Star Trek*

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Abstract

While diversity and inclusive representation of minority groups is understood to be a central tenet of the Star Trek universe, successive iterations of the franchise have been critiqued for the relative scarcity, and challenging nature, of representation of disability and impairment. In this paper, written collaboratively by two academics with disabilities, we draw upon theories of ableism and interest convergence to argue that problematic representation of disability and impairment within the Star Trek universe can be attributed to ensuring that the stories and characters reflect the attitudes about disability held by its dominant audience. We explore this argument through critically reviewing four assumed characters with disabilities from across the Star Trek franchises: Captain Pike, Geordi La Forge, Melora Pazlar, and Riva. Our critical reviews take the form of counternarratives which document our felt experiences of how each of these characters are portrayed on screen. Through our counternarratives, we present an apparent contradiction between the vision and ethos of the Star Trek franchise being of discovery, exploration and social justice, coupled with the perpetuation of disability stereotypes grounded within ableism. In concluding our paper, we argue that if Star Trek wishes to honour its commitment to social justice and discovery, then providing opportunities for people with disabilities to create stories and characters which authentically showcase disability and impairment presents an important opportunity for audience education in terms of making science fiction accessible for all.

Bien que la diversité et la représentation inclusive des groupes minoritaires soient généralement considérées comme des principes centraux de l'univers *Star Trek*, les

différentes itérations de la franchise ont été critiquées pour la rareté relative et parfois la difficulté des représentations du handicap et de la déficience. Dans cet article, rédigé de manière collaborative par deux universitaires handicapé·es, nous mobilisons les théories du capacitisme et de la convergence d’intérêts afin de montrer que les représentations problématiques du handicap et de la déficience dans *Star Trek* peuvent s’expliquer par la volonté de faire en sorte que les récits et les personnages reflètent les attitudes envers le handicap dominantes au sein de son public dominant. Nous explorons cet argument en proposant une analyse critique de quatre personnages censés être en situation de handicap, issus de différentes séries de la franchise : le capitaine Pike, Geordi La Forge, Melora Pazlar et Riva. Nos analyses prennent la forme de contrerécits qui documentent nos expériences vécues face à la manière dont chacun de ces personnages est représenté à l’écran. À travers ces contrerécits, nous mettons en évidence une contradiction apparente entre la vision et l’éthique de *Star Trek*, fondées sur la découverte, l’exploration et la justice sociale, et la perpétuation de stéréotypes sur le handicap ancrés dans le capacitisme. En conclusion, nous soutenons que si *Star Trek* souhaite réellement honorer son engagement envers la justice sociale et la découverte, il devient essentiel d’offrir aux personnes handicapées des occasions de créer des récits et des personnages qui présentent de manière authentique le handicap et la déficience. Une telle démarche constituerait une occasion importante de sensibiliser le public et contribuerait à rendre la science-fiction véritablement accessible à toutes et tous.

Keywords

Disability, impairment, Star Trek, counternarratives, counter-storytelling, ableism, interest convergence

Mots-clés
Handicap, déficience, *Star Trek*, contrerécits, contrenarration, capacitisme, convergence d’intérêts

Introduction

The reach of Star Trek, in its various iterations, is undeniable, with the franchise attracting millions of fans worldwide, including the authors of this paper. A central theme of science fiction, but particularly within the Star Trek universe, is advocating for curiosity for exploration and discovery of new worlds and races, grounded firmly within

themes of social justice and equality[1]. Selinger argued that '[s]cience fiction provides an opportunity to discuss society's current successes and failings while also being a mechanism to imagine the future.'[2] Because of Star Trek's continued longevity, and recognition, academic research describes the significant impact of the franchise in drawing attention to current and past social inequities, as well as in discussing what a more equal future might look like[3]. In terms of disability representation, the Star Trek franchise seeks to highlight potentially uncomfortable social discourses around what disability is and means, and to what extent people with disabilities can be accepted[4]. Representation of disability, therefore, is 'absolutely central to the genre of science fiction'[5].

Throughout its history, Star Trek has showcased various examples of characters with disabilities, whether their disability be implied or overt. However, concerns have been raised regarding the dominating negative portrayals of these characters[6.] For instance, Meyer and Preston argued that the Star Trek universe experiences 'trouble representing characters with disabilities in non-stereotypical ways, because they fall back on outdated disability tropes when telling stories involving characters with impairments'[7]. Because of this representation, disability scholars have argued that the Star Trek franchise is an ideal space for inquiry in terms of how disability is viewed and portrayed[8]. In this paper, we seek to add to this inquiry from a critical disability studies perspective, incorporating our insights as academics with disabilities, regarding how characters with disabilities from across the Star Trek universe are represented.

Theoretical overview and its application to the representation of disability and impairment in Star Trek

For this paper, we take a critical disability studies perspective and apply the social model of disability from a UK context, to help frame theories of ableism and 'interest convergence'[9]. The social versus medical model of disability distinction has relevance for how characters with disabilities are represented in the Star Trek universe. The medical model problematises disability, which in turn means that people with disabilities are viewed as 'faulty' and must be 'cured' or 'corrected' in order to achieve social inclusion[10]. The social model challenges this perspective, arguing for a distinction between impairment and disability[11]. Impairment describes individual body differences that do not exist in that of a 'typical' person, whereas disability refers to how a person with a particular impairment experiences barriers due to a societal inability to respond effectively to the impairment[12]. In this sense, a social model perspective reinterprets 'disability' not as something contained within the body, but as a process whereby people are disabled by social barriers that particularly disadvantage those with specific impairments[13].

While a social model perspective of disability may be encouraged by disability activists, medical model narratives remain entrenched within societal discourse, and particularly within science fiction[14]. Science fiction as a genre has been critiqued for its undue focus on bodies, or rather, bodies that are considered valid or desirable in imagined futures[15]. Applying the medical versus the social model to contemporary understandings of ableism, in this paper, we interpret ableism as the systemic devaluation of disability and people with disabilities through the overt and covert value

placed on bodies without disabilities[16]. McRuer further argued that structures of ableism are designed to segregate and categorise bodies with and without disabilities, whereby the 'problems' of being disabled and the positive values attributed to non-disability become amplified[17]. In this sense, representation of disability within Star Trek and wider science fiction that focuses on a narrow and ableist view of bodies, risks minimising or ignoring altogether, stories that show authentic lives of people with disabilities[18]. Where disability and impairment are discussed, they are viewed as undesirable in these imagined futures[19]. Storylines and characters are predominantly constructed around medical model assumptions of imagined futures which discover and provide 'innovative' cures, and therefore, are eradicating disability and impairment[20].

Extending the above theoretical contributions further, we wish to make a novel contribution through the application of 'interest convergence'. This concept, underpinned by understandings of ableism, but nonetheless originating in racial equality, assumes that positive change in terms of disability representation and inclusion will only emerge should this change also advantage people without disabilities[21]. Annamma et al provided a straightforward example of interest convergence through the account of 'curb cuts and wider sidewalks, which were useful for parents with baby strollers and people pulling wheeled suitcases, helped to justify the time and expense of making sidewalks accessible for people in wheelchairs.'[22] In other words, the needs of people with disabilities become aligned with the majority of people without disabilities. In relation to Star Trek and broader science fiction, an interest convergence argument regarding equitable and authentic representation of disability and impairment in the genre would imply that such change will only occur

providing that the storytelling and characters portrayed reflect the interests of audiences without disabilities. In the same vein, however, science fiction as a genre not only has the potential to provide an emergent space where interests converge, centred around discovery and innovation, but also as means of education about authentic representation of disability and impairment[23].

Overview of study

The purpose of our research was to elucidate how disability and impairment are represented within the Star Trek universe. The contribution to knowledge generated by our paper is twofold. First, we critically analyse representation of characters with disabilities through lenses of ableism and interest convergence. Second, we argue for the theoretical and methodological potential for using 'counternarratives' to elucidate more authentic and inclusive storytelling within the Star Trek universe. In doing so, we will highlight how development of storylines if they were to be designed by people with disabilities and allies, could act as effective counternarratives to address taken-for-granted ableist framings of disability representation within science fiction.

Methodology: Countering majoritarian ableist perspectives through story

In conducting our work exploring disability representation across the Star Trek universe, we draw on existing research of 'counternarratives' or 'counter-storytelling'. The principle of counter-storytelling provides a theoretical and methodological basis for recognising the validity and legitimacy of marginalised voices through challenging

dominant or 'majoritarian' views which act to suppress such voices through structural inequities[24]. The aim of counter-storytelling, therefore, is about marginalised individuals and communities sharing their lived of experiences to elucidate the forgotten or overlooked 'complex psychological and social realities obscured by dominant ideologies'[25]. By sharing these counternarratives, individuals experiencing oppression can seek to directly challenge normative deficit-focused perspectives, thereby encouraging a more authentic understanding centred on lived experience[26]. As Padilla described, 'counterstories are always embodied, and they're much more than mere narrative exercises. They theorize complex ways to disrupt and resist oppressive modes of domination through alternative knowledges and ways of undoing things that aren't right.'[27] Further, Broderick et al argued that counter-storytelling plays an essential role in drawing attention to ableist practices that affect people with and without disabilities alike[28].

Our intention to use counternarratives is both theoretical and personal. From a theoretical perspective, a central tenet of the science fiction genre is to use 'narratives and stories [to] highlight the uncomfortably familiar through a framing in unfamiliarity'[29]. Said differently, science fiction encourages uncomfortable discussions regarding social inequalities through abstract and imagined fictional stories designed to lessen perceived discomfort[30]. It could be therefore argued that Star Trek episodes are themselves instances of counter-storytelling. Nevertheless, the discussions of ableism within Star Trek, as shared by extant research that we covered in the Introduction, reveal that further exploration of taken-for-granted norms regarding disability representation is needed. In our counternarratives, we wish to both recognise the contributions of Star Trek's history in terms of disability representation, as well as critique these

contributions for the purposes of audience education[31]. Our decision to use counternarratives is more than just theoretical, but personal as well. This methodology allows us to reflect our shared experiences of watching Star Trek episodes, as well as the significance and meaning of the franchise for our sense of identity and belonging.

To construct the counternarratives, the authors first met to discuss which characters would be our focus of inquiry due to the number of characters assumed to have impairments and/or disabilities within the Star Trek universe. We decided on four characters from across the franchise: Captain Pike from Star Trek: The Original Series (TOS), Star Trek: Discovery, and Star Trek: Strange New Worlds (SNW); Geordi La Forge and Riva from Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG); and Melora Pazlar from Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (DSN). These characters were selected for three reasons. First, for the purpose of reflecting disability representation across the history of Star Trek. Second, each character is portrayed as having an overt disability, and as such, embodies an actualised rather than implied disability identity. Third, each chosen character has a particular meaning to our individual sense of self as academics with disabilities. On deciding the focal characters, we discussed the episodes that would be reviewed. For Captain Pike, we focused on *The Menagerie: Part 1 and 2* from Star Trek: TOS, *Through the Valley of Shadows* from Star Trek: Discovery, and *A Quality of Mercy* from Star Trek: SNW[32]. For Riva and Melora Pazlar, we focused on their synonymous episodes *Loud as a Whisper* and *Melora* respectively[33]. As Geordi La Forge is present in several episodes, we decided to focus on *The Masterpiece Society* given its meaning to us and its reference within extant research[34].

Our counternarratives took the form of individual vignettes for each of the four characters. To gather the content for each vignette, we watched the chosen episodes with the intention of documenting our thoughts on how each character was portrayed, through theoretical lenses of the social model of disability and ableism[35]. We then used this data to collaboratively generate content for the vignettes[36]. Content for the vignettes also drew on our discussions about the wider academic literature describing disability representation in Star Trek. Our decision to construct composite vignettes was centred around our desire to ensure that we protected the at times, deeply personal meanings we as individual authors attached to specific characters. The composite vignettes were therefore grounded in our true 'real-life experiences', but were fictionalised to such an extent that the sensitivities evoked by characters could be kept confidential for individual authors[37]. In drawing up these vignettes, we appreciate that our perspectives are subjective. Moreover, we contend that other audiences with and without disabilities should be given a chance to make their own interpretations. It is for this reason that we recognise and welcome the argument that others may have differing viewpoints regarding the representation of disability, specifically the focal characters in our vignettes, owing to different experiences regarding impairments and protected characteristics[38].

In creating each vignette, we drew inspiration from the inclusion of 'Captain's Log' entries, which have become synonymous with the Star Trek universe. Captain's Log entries are passages shared by the narrator throughout episodes as a means of providing a concise understanding of the context for the viewer, such as the characters of relevance and what they are doing[39]. Each entry is typically marked with a 'stardate': a date of recording evidenced by a seemingly random generation of digits[40].

Occasionally, individual episodes include 'Personal Logs', with the purpose of allowing the expression of personal insights regarding the thoughts and feelings of individual characters[41]. As authors, we contend that the adoption of Captain's Logs in the episodes, while providing a gateway for promoting viewer understanding, risks furthering taken-for-granted majoritarian assumptions[42]. Our intention of producing Captain's (Personal) Logs was therefore a deliberate strategy to provide our own (counter)narration of how we understood disability representation within Star Trek.

Findings

The forthcoming Captain's Logs, while fictional, have been created to demonstrate the deep connections that we as individual authors have to Star Trek and the chosen characters of inquiry. It is for this reason that, at times, during our composition of the Captain's Logs, our discussions fluidly moved between representation of specific characters with disabilities, and the discourse of disability appearing within the chosen episodes.

Captain's Log. Stardate 2501.01: Captain Pike

In Star Trek: TOS, Captain Pike is a character who was severely injured due to an exposure to radiation, and consequently, has a visible facial difference and requires use of a wheelchair[43]. Pike is shown as being able to fully understand others around him, but despite being part of a technologically-advanced, interstellar future civilisation, Pike is given a relatively simple augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) solution, whereby he can only communicate through flashing lights from his wheelchair which correspond to 'yes' or 'no'[44]. In

Star Trek: Discovery and SNW, Captain Pike is shown before becoming a person with a disability. Episodes within both of these latter series show Pike seeing the eventual radiation exposure and coming to terms with his future impairment[45]. Extant research regarding the representation of Captain Pike highlights how, while his presence on screen could be celebrated (e.g., by increasing the visibility of characters with disabilities), it risks reinforcing stereotypes and ignorance in terms of evoking audience assumptions of pity, through emphasising his passivity, incompetence and reliance on others[46].

In discussing Captain Pike for our counternarrative, we spoke of our discomfort at the prominence of problematic stereotypes regarding how disability is portrayed and described through this character within more contemporary episodes, but particularly within Star Trek: TOS. For instance, we shared how from a social model perspective, Pike's AAC prevents him from communicating using the whole gamut of human language, and instead, is positioned with only rudimentary symbolic communication skills. Furthermore, physical impairment appears to be conflated with cognitive impairment insofar as the character lacks capacity to communicate in more complex ways. While talking about this discomfort, we shared an unease that given the level of awareness and visibility of Captain Pike throughout Star Trek fandom, audiences may be basing their understanding of people with disabilities through this character and these episodes:

Given how synonymous Captain Pike is with Star Trek, to have him representing disability to audiences is problematic. In The Original Series, we are

told at the beginning of the episode (*The Menagerie: Part 1*) that Pike became paralysed after an accident, but this receives little expansion, and his character isn't really developed across the two episodes either[47] (*The Menagerie: Part 1 and 2*). How Pike is described by others, and how his facial disfigurement is shown, is deeply problematic. There are scenes with him being described as a 'poor devil'. While he clearly has full cognitive functioning, he is 'trapped inside a useless vegetating body' and a 'shell of a man', who is also said to be a 'complete invalid'. Each of these descriptions play on outdated stereotypes of disability, presenting it as something to be pitied and disregarded. Pike's overly simplistic communication extends this negativity. For people with disabilities, particularly those of us with physical impairments, to see and hear this kind of language so overtly expressed, makes the episodes difficult viewing. It means our perceived lack of worth is evident for all to see and hear.

Captain's Log. Supplemental.

The challenge for us is reinforced when we see more modern-day representations of Captain Pike in *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Strange New Worlds* potentially perpetuating the same old narratives of the 1960s. We are shown various moments where Pike is experiencing facial disfigurement and is literally howling with pain, which obviously, viscerally shows disability as being synonymous with pain and 'ugliness'. We are encouraged to believe that Pike should be viewed as a brave hero as he is accepting his future life of disability; a sacrifice made for the benefit of the others. While it is reassuring that the offensive language used to describe Pike in *The Original Series* has been

removed in *Discovery* and *Strange New Worlds*, it is clearly disappointing to us that problematic disability stereotypes are still used as central to the plot.

Captain's Log. Stardate 4763.02: Riva

Riva is introduced in *Loud as a Whisper*[48]. Riva is shown as deaf, but uses a 'chorus' of three interpreters, who are telepathically linked with him in order to verbally communicate his thoughts and wishes[49]. The character and this episode have received praise due to the sensitive portrayal of deafness[50]. However, concerns have been raised with the degree to which Riva's impairment becomes a central element of the character and a plot device for the episode[51]. Our counternarrative for Riva focused on our collective appreciation of his representation as an individual who recognises his needs and values, as well as those of others, including Geordi La Forge. We appreciated how Riva's barriers to communication and understanding were handled sensitively, particularly in showcasing the poignance of Riva's interpreters and the shared empathy they felt with Riva when he found himself in situations when he could not be understood by others. We also appreciated the discussion of how sign language can be used as a means of promoting understanding and togetherness:

> Riva is fully in tune with, and accepting of, his Deafness as what has made him 'special'. His curiosity about the value and worth of other disabilities and people with disabilities was also evident through the scene where Riva is conversing in solidarity with Geordi La Forge about their collective experiences of being 'special'. Riva's 'specialness' appears synonymous with his recognition of

his value and worth, and this is immediately obvious through his insistence that people ‘speak directly to me’ rather than to his chorus. We appreciated how Riva was aware that his journey to acceptance has been long, involving considerable effort and work with his interpreters so that they could get to understand his thoughts and feelings. By doing so, his chorus have become part of him and an essential method of communication: a form of communication that exceeds anything that can be experienced by people without disabilities. Naturally, the frustration he feels when being unable to communicate is evident – he wants people to understand him and value his own words. Riva’s frustration spoke to us deeply as we reflected on our journeys to self-acceptance as people with disabilities. Finding our respective voices, as well as communicating our needs and value in ways that others understand, has been, and continues to be, particularly challenging for us. Our worry is that an audience unfamiliar with disability will equate his difficult journey to acceptance with Riva being someone pitiful – an object of pity. However, this is contrasted against Riva’s positive message that sign language can be used as a medium to help individuals; both with themselves and others. This moment epitomises how people without disabilities can really learn from our experiences of disability.

Captain’s Log. Stardate 8542.03: Geordi La Forge

Geordi La Forge is blind from birth, but within Star Trek: TNG, he is shown to experience his surroundings using his VISOR[52]. Representation of the Geordi La Forge has been critiqued as perpetuating medical model narratives of blindness,

and how his impairment risks becoming his central focus, potentially at the expense of broader character development[53]. Our counternarrative analysed the apparent juxtaposition of his seemingly empowered identity as a blind individual against the backdrop of an episode centred around problematic viewpoints regarding disability and the value of life[54]. The implications of the episode regarding one's value were particularly profound for us, as we noted that we would likely have experienced 'termination' pre-birth. At the same time, we expressed gratitude that Geordi La Forge was willing to resist and even challenge the negative attitudes of others:

Watching The Masterpiece Society is incredibly difficult because of the dominant medical model undertones of eugenics that permeate that society where humans are selectively bred to eradicate the 'abnormalities' of congenital impairments: aiding the collective good of its people, so that they do not have to 'suffer' with disability in their lives. For any person with a disability, but particularly those of us who were born with impairments, it is very difficult not to internalise our own lack of worth: we would likely have suffered the same fate of 'termination' before birth in this society. Geordi's experience epitomises the uncomfortable truth that many people with disabilities have to face, which is overt and covert denials over our right to exist. Despite the discomfort of this message, it is reassuring to note that Geordi understands that his body and VISOR make him valid and valuable as a person. He goes on to challenge the fallacious link between disability and lack of worth through critiquing the right others without disabilities have to determine his worth. This is particularly evident through the irony of his VISOR technology ending up saving the society

from destruction. The positive message of this episode is that different ways of thinking and doing that come about as a result of disability become a catalyst for colony members' curiosity about what is possible outside of the insular world that they know.

Captain's Log. Stardate 9987.04: Melora Pazlar

Finally, Melora Pazlar is a character from Star Trek: DSN who is introduced in the eponymous episode *Melora*[55]. Melora Pazlar experiences barriers to participation due to her body being unable to cope with the gravity on the space station, and as a consequence, must use a 'wheelchair'[56]. Her representation has received attention in research due to her experience being framed as being caused by disabling social environments, rather than her body being problematised. In other words, this is an example of applying the social model of disability[57]. Despite this social model framing of disability, the presentation of Melora Pazlar can be critiqued due to her being exposed to traditional ableist stereotypes of infantilisation and being presented as a burden to other characters without disabilities in the episode[58]. We spoke of Melora Pazlar's similarities to Geordi La Forge in terms of her willingness and ability to 'advocate for herself' and recognise her own value and self-worth. We also expressed enthusiasm at how representation of the barriers she faces appear to align with the social model of disability. However, we also discussed how medical model narratives are expressed throughout the episode, and even through the voice of Melora Pazlar herself:

Melora is someone who knows who she is and her value, and who is willing to advocate for herself, while at the same time, grappling with the lived realities of the medical model in action every day. She is aware that she has to keep apologising for being ‘overly sensitive’ and because she is used to being ‘shut out of conversations’ because of other people’s assumptions about her needs and body. The statement of her ‘simply object[ing] to being treated like someone who is ill’ is a powerful one, and one that we as academics with disabilities can relate to. Her experience of injuring herself by having to navigate physically inaccessible parts of Deep Space Nine and then being blamed for not seeking help, is something we know all too well. We also appreciated her desire for curiosity – to be independent and travel the galaxy – as this wanderlust is something that likely resonates with viewers regardless of whether they have a disability or not. While this curiosity is welcomed, we struggled with her consideration of an experimental treatment which would have allowed her to walk, as this appears out of character for someone who is content with who she is. She ultimately decides not to go ahead with the treatment as she begins to become aware that she is trading apparent independence for her sense of self. We feel that by including this storyline, the writers risk perpetuating medical model assumptions around disability, in various forms, as something that needs to be cured.

Discussion

In this paper we explored representation of disability and impairment from a critical disability studies perspective. That is, we drew on the theoretical lenses of ableism and

interest convergence, as underpinned by understandings of the social model of disability[59]. We elaborated on these through developing four fictionalised Captain's Logs which serve as our approach to express personal connections to the Star Trek universe. Our Captain's Logs demonstrate that we, as individual authors, are able to see ourselves through the meanings that we have attached to specific characters, such as Melora Pazlar. At the same time, the Captain's Logs highlight the problematic majoritarian ableist views incorporated within certain stories. Our Captain's Logs strongly evidence our discomfort regarding the ways in which such meaningful characters are portrayed: we argue that they risk being embedded in ableist, medical model approaches to disability and impairment that see these as faults in need of curing. We are aware, for instance, of how each of the focal characters in our inquiry are treated in problematic and ableist ways, whether it be the overtly hostile and derogatory language attached to Captain Pike within Star Trek: TOS, or the sense of pity emoted for Riva when he loses his chorus. Indeed, storylines around characters needing to be cured, and therefore, by implication, determine which bodies are valued, form part of individual storylines, such as with the eponymous Melora[60]. In other words, individual characters and their impairments have the potential to become objectified as mere plot devices in which to highlight the value of the 'able' body[61].

Notwithstanding, each character that we have described in this paper evidences some form of positive storytelling in terms of shaping audiences' understanding of disability. For Captain Pike, there have been modernising developments in terms of disability language used between *Star Trek: TOS*, and *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Star Trek: SNW* respectively. For Riva, his perspective of 'turning a disadvantage into an advantage', whereby learning sign language not only provides access to a new form of

communication, but also encourages individuals to communicate meaningfully with another. Geordi La Forge’s insights regarding blindness provide a unique perspective on the value of particular impairments, and his VISOR technology results in saving a colony, where, according to local custom, he would have been ‘terminated’. His experiences sow seeds of doubt in the colony individuals, as they begin to recognise that their home is not as perfect as they were led to believe, which in turn, creates desires amongst some to leave. Finally, Melora Pazlar realises that her pursuit of ‘normality’ in being able to walk, means losing elements that make up the fabric of her very self. In other words, acceptance of her body differences means she comes to challenge the desirability of taken-for-granted normalcy. Instances of positive representation of characters who fall outside of the normative body can have the beneficial effect of enhancing a sense of value and meaning for people with disabilities, given the relatability of these experiences in their own lives, as indicated by the meanings we as authors attach to specific characters. Star Trek’s approach, as well as that of science fiction more broadly, of creating and including myriad different races and differently-formed species, has the potential to fuel the creation of safe spaces of belonging for marginalised groups centred around diversity. Further, the characters described in our analyses, particularly, Riva, Geordi La Forge, and Melora Pazlar, each recognised the legitimacy of their own bodies, and how their impairments provide them with embodied knowledge and wisdom. This approach provides a fresh perspective through which to counter powerful underlying assumptions regarding disability and impairment as synonymous with lack of value.

The final part of our paper will apply the above insights to contemporary understandings of interest convergence as a means of promoting positive change in

disability representation. We argue that the significance of the Star Trek universe gives it a strong position from which it could promote positive messages regarding disability and different impairments. Storytelling about discoveries of fictional futures, presenting audiences with powerful challenges about social discourses, which are framed within accessible themes regarding human curiosity and a desire to discover and explore unknown worlds, has come to be expected from the Star Trek universe. We argue that this human curiosity, and a willingness and openness to think while watching Star Trek episodes, represents an interest convergence between people with and without disabilities. This curiosity forms part of the storytelling within the Star Trek episodes chosen for our analyses and is made overt in our Captain's Logs regarding Riva and Melora Pazlar.

It is the presence of these moments of convergence that allow for education and progress regarding the representation of disability and impairment within the Star Trek universe. Indeed, Shepherd noted the significance of the Star Trek videography for moving forward debates on social justice and supporting the role of creative expression in education[62]. Specifically, while science fiction can be critiqued for creating stories and characters that appeal to majoritarian mindsets, also provides a unique context that can allow for the effective challenging of these majoritarian mindsets[63]. From an interest convergence perspective, positive changes in terms of representations of disability in science fiction will only emerge when changes advantage the majoritarian experience alongside the minoritarian[64]. It is reasonable to argue that when stories describing disability and impairment align with the relatable ideals of seeking and discovering fictional new worlds, the majority, namely, audiences without disabilities, are likely to be accepting of plurality, and thus, the barriers to promoting change through

negotiating interest convergence may be lessened. From an educational perspective, these moments of convergence within Star Trek storytelling provide opportune intervals for teaching about disability in ways that are accessible and relatable to a majoritarian audience, but which challenge medical model stereotypes through provoking curiosity. For instance, within *The Masterpiece Society*, Geordi La Forge was poignantly able to showcase that not only that he valued his blindness, but that his VISOR technology was an asset to other individuals without disabilities[65]. We contend that counternarratives about disability proposed by people with disabilities and allies, such as those presented in this paper, promote this accessible teaching and learning.

Overall, the genre of science fiction provides a counternarrative to everyday normative existence. It promotes the seeking of alternatives: discovering futures far removed from contemporary society that are novel in many aspects. Moreover, the artistic expressions and creative platforms that are integral to science fiction storytelling, such as reflective writing, role-playing and scriptwriting, can potentially be deployed for innovative, accessible education for people with and without disabilities alike[66]. However, as shown in our Captain's Logs, it must be acknowledged that science fiction as a form of counternarrative can perpetuate existing inequalities. While the genre encourages us to imagine fictional futures, the characters residing within these, such as those within the Star Trek universe, continue to act out stories concerning present day majoritarian social norms and injustices. We argue that only by ensuring that narratives countering ableist majoritarian views are incorporated in episodes, can authentic disability representation emerge. We propose deploying the insights and knowledge of people with disabilities in order to introduce a socially just

counternarrative that, in turn, can enhance science fiction’s status as an impactful genre.

To conclude, in this paper we have indicated the significant role that the Star Trek universe has, as experienced through its numerous series and episodes, for educating audiences, particularly regarding issues concerning social justice[67]. We urge Star Trek writers to capitalise on the potential powers of its storylines to educate audiences regarding representation of disability and impairment. We encourage representation that focuses on challenging those narratives based on conventional medical model tropes by sensitively portraying the authentic lived experiences of people with disabilities. Moreover, this should include full representation of the myriad attitudinal and physical barriers that may be encountered across societies. Our discussion and subsequent development of Captain’s Logs demonstrates that disability representation can be positive, and that people with disabilities do attach in meaningful ways to Star Trek characters. The Star Trek universe can continue to strive for social justice through sensitively curating its episodes and characters for the inclusion of all people, with and without disabilities.

Endnotes

[1]See Garcia-Siino et al., *The Routledge Handbook of* Star Trek, Gibson, “Graphic Illustration,” and Meyer and Preston, “Cognitive Differences.”
[2] Selinger, 355
[3] See Maxwell, “To Boldly Go,” and Meyer and Preston, “Seeing Past the VISOR.”
[4] See Shepherd, “Infinite Diversity.”
[5] Allan and Cheyne, 389
[6] Abercrombie-Winstanley and Callus, “Disability in Intergalactic Environments,” and Lehmann, *All You Need to Know About Disability is on Star Trek*.
[7] Meyer and Preston, “Seeing Past the VISOR,” 174
[8] Selinger, ““Where No (Disabled) Person has Gone Before .”

[9] Oliver, “The Social Model,” Campbell , *Contours of Ableism,* and Dolmage, *Academic Ableism,* respectively
[10] Oliver, “The Social Model”
[11] Oliver, “The Social Model”
[12] Oliver, “The Social Model”
[13] Oliver, “The Social Model”
[14] Allan and Cheyne, “Science Fiction, Disability, Disability Studies.”
[15] Allan and Cheyne, “Science Fiction, Disability, Disability Studies.”
[16] Campbell, *Contours of Ableism*.
[17] McRuer, *Crip Theory.*
[18] Selinger, “Where No (Disabled) Person has Gone Before.”
[19] Wälivaara, “Marginalized Bodies of Imagined Futurescapes.”
[20]See Allan and Cheyne, ““Science Fiction, Disability, Disability Studies,”, Maxwell, “To Boldly Go,” and Meyer and Preston, “Cognitive Differences.”
[21] See Annamma et al. “(DisCrit),” Bell, “Brown v. Board of Education,” and Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*
[22] Annamma et al., 17
[23] See Bennett, ““Scientific Eventuality,” and Shepherd, “Infinite Diversity.”
[24] Solorzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology.”
[25] Rosiek and Snyder, 1156-1157.
[26] Annamma et al. “(DisCrit),” Lindemann, “Counter the Counterstory,” as well as Solorzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology.”
[27] Padilla, 86.
[28] Broderick et al., “Teacher Counternarratives.”
[29] Gibson, 12.
[30] Gibson, “Graphic Illustration.”
[31] Shepherd, ““Infinite Diversity.”
[32]See Daniels, “The Menagerie, Part I,” Butler, “The Menagerie, Part II,” Aarniokoski, “Through the Valley of Shadows,” and Fisher, “A Quality of Mercy.”
[33] See Shaw, “Loud as a Whisper,” and Kolbe, “Melora" respectively.
[34] See Kolbe, “The Masterpiece Society,” and for example research, see Abercrombie-Winstanley and Callus, “Disability in Intergalactic Environments.”
[35] Campbell, *Contours of Ableism,* McRuer, *Crip Theory* and Oliver, “The Social Model”
[36] Locke et al. ““Counternarratives as DisCrit Praxis.”
[37] Solórzano and Yosso, 36
[38] Annamma et al. “(DisCrit).”
[39] Gymnich, “Exploring Inner Spaces.”
[40] Gymnich, “Exploring Inner Spaces.”
[41] Gymnich, ““Exploring Inner Spaces.”
[42] Solorzano and Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology.”
[43]See Daniels, “The Menagerie, Part I” and Butler, “The Menagerie, Part II.”
[44]See Daniels, “The Menagerie, Part I” and Butler, “The Menagerie, Part II.”
[45]Aarniokoski*, “*Through the Valley of Shadows,” and Fisher, “A Quality of Mercy.”
[46] Maxwell “To Boldly Go,” and Selinger, “Where No (Disabled) Person has Gone Before.”
[47] See Daniels, “The Menagerie, Part I” and Butler, “The Menagerie, Part II.”
[48] Shaw, “Loud as a Whisper.”
[49] Abercrombie-Winstanley and Callus, “Disability in Intergalactic Environments,” as well as Meyer and Preston, “Seeing Past the VISOR.”
[50] Shepherd, “Infinite Diversity.”
[51] Abercrombie-Winstanley and Callus, “Disability in Intergalactic Environments.”
[52] See Meyer and Preston, “Seeing Past the VISOR.”
[53] Meyer and Preston, “Seeing Past the VISOR.”
[54] Kolbe, “The Masterpiece Society.”
[55]Kolbe, “Melora.”

[56] Kolbe, “Melora.”
[57]See Abercrombie-Winstanley and Callus, “Disability in Intergalactic Environments,” and Lehmann, *All You Need to Know About Disability is on Star Trek*.
[58] Riley, “Disability.”
[59] See Campbell, *Contours of Ableism,* Dolmage, *Academic Ableism* and Oliver, “The Social Model.”
[60] Kolbe, “Melora.”
[61] e.g., Meyer and Preston, “Cognitive Differences.”
[62] Shepherd. “Infinite Diversity.”
[63] Shepherd, “Infinite Diversity.”
[64] Annamma et al. “(DisCrit).”
[65] Kolbe, “The Masterpiece Society.”
[66] Shepherd, “Infinite Diversity.”
[67] Shepherd, “Infinite Diversity.”

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