

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Probably the most beloved film in the Star Trek franchise is Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn. The classic characters are at their best. There's a villain that really gets Kirk's blood boiling. They're quoting Moby-Dick. It's great.

But here's the weird thing about Wrath of Kahn – you may not know this. Gene Roddenberry, you know THE creator of the Star Trek series, was booted by Paramount before that movie was made.

Roddenberry was on the outs because the first Star Trek from 1979 was ponderous and confusing – and a box office disappointment. Roddenberry was allowed to be a consultant on Star Trek II, although his notes were ignored. Throughout the '80s, he got more and more upset because he felt Star Trek was becoming militaristic – fitting in with the Regan era.

Eventually, Paramount let him develop a new Star Trek show. He couldn't use the original characters. So he created The Next Generation, which was supposed to be a counter weight to the movies. It was more peaceful and philosophical, or at least it started out that way.

DEREK: When Roddenberry passed away, most people admit Star Trek The Next Generation got better.

Derek McCaw runs the website Fanboy Planet.

DEREK: He had this mandate that there could be no inter crew conflict that they would have moved passed that. But even the most diehard fans realize that in storytelling, if everyone's getting along perfectly, then there's no story. It's not interesting. I might be great in a way of saying, that's wonderful. I'd like to believe that we could move to that point. But that's not worth an hour of television.

So here's what fascinating to me about this. We have these huge disagreements among creative people about what direction the Star Trek franchise should go. But for fans, The Wrath of Kahn and The Next Generation are all taking place in the same world, on the same timeline. And the fans are very protective of this timeline, which is called The Canon. Now The Canon includes the original show from the '60s and all the spin-offs going up to the 2000s, all the movies, the cartoon show the '70s and all the novels that were written in between.

Of cause they all can't be completely in sync. There are going to be contradictions and disagreements. On the set of Star Trek V, even William Shatner – who directed that film -- was arguing with George Takei (ta-KAY) about the canon.

DEREK: Takei wanted Sulu to get his own command because in the books he had. And he wanted to get his own command in the movies. But then Shatner was arguing with him and saying yeah, but if you do that, you can't be in the movies. You're not on the Enterprise anymore.

Actually in that movie, even Derek McCaw thought Shatner was not properly respecting the Star Trek canon.

DEREK: I was really irritated that Kirk never referenced his brother. He talked about having a brother and he means Spock, but he actually had a brother who was killed in an episode of the TV series. And I was really mad but I get it. For a movie, they can't bog down explaining to an audience who haven't watched the series as obsessively as we have, to know that yeah there was that episode where, yeah, there was an episode with these little plasma things, these butterflies of flesh like went into this back and killed his brother and his nephew with pain – I think the nephew survived – and then they don't reference that family again. So I was bugged that the movies broke that continuity. But most people just went, eh, and accepted it and moved on.

I've always liked Star Trek, but I'm not *crazy* about strict canons. Of course, you need to tell a linear story that rewards the long time fans. But I've seen shows like Lost, Fringe, Battlestar Galactica, and The X-Files – which were great shows – got bogged down with so much exposition and mythology that the casual fans just stopped watching.

So in 2009 when J.J. Abrams rebooted Star Trek, I was all for it. I thought this new generation have their own Kirk and Spock. And I thought he was being respectful because sets up this time travel snafu which explains that everything that happened in the canon still happened, but just on a different timeline. Leonard Nimoy is in the movie handing the baton to Zachary Quinto, who plays Spock as a young man.

But a lot of Star Trek fans were furious. Some of them hated the tone of these new movies, which is very action oriented. But a lot of them are upset because J.J. Abrams smashed the canon to pieces.

For Derek, the point of the canon is not script continuity. It's about having faith in the progress of humanity.

DEREK: One of the things that matters for me about Star Trek is that it's a very hopeful vision of the future. Star Wars is a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. That may not be us. Star Trek says, say like right now, when I'm scared about where the world is and what's going to happen for my kids, Star Trek tells me whether it's true or not (laughs). Because it's fiction, but it tells me that we could work together and we can solve it and we can get out, get past these problems. When the first space shuttle was built – I think it was a mistake on our part as fans to get super excited and say name the prototype that can't fly The Enterprise. Wait until one can actually go into space and name that The Enterprise. But I can remember, I guess it was 1976, where they rolled it out and they played the Star Trek theme and it was like, and all the cast was there, and it was like yes! This is going to happen! We're going to make it!

MUSIC BREAK

Now over the years a lot of people have compared sci-fi fandom to religion, or they'll say the Star Trek canon is like The Bible for fans. But they may not be totally wrong about that.

(DIAL SOUNDS)

SECRETARY: Good afternoon, Har Shalom this is Gretchen.

EM: Yeah, can I have Rabbi Ben Newman please?

SECRETARY: Sure, just a minute

Ben Newman is a rabbi at Temple Har Shalom in Colorado.

BEN: Hello

EM: Hey Ben, it's Eric.

BEN: Hey Eric, how are you?

EM: Good, good.

Ben is also a full-fledged geek. A few days before we talked, he ran a Sunday School class where he broke the students into groups based on Disney properties – Marvel, Muppets, Princesses and Star Wars.

BEN: The Star Wars group used this idea of the Force being like God as one of their basic ideas. And I didn't tell them about that and that is something I thought when I was that young too, so it's pretty cool.

Some of you might be thinking – this is going in kind of religious – are we going to keep going this way? Yes, but we are staying on topic. This completely relates. In fact the connection between religion and science fiction turned out to be much deeper than I realized.

The Old Testament is like the original canon. And the ancient rabbis noticed that there were gaps in the stories. So they starting writing their own explanations to fill in these gaps – and those stories are called Midrash or the plural would be Midrasheem.

BEN: There's a whole bunch of Midrashim written about Abraham because the story of Abraham basically begins with Abraham being told by God to leave his home, but it doesn't say anything about how his childhood. So they come up with all these stories about Abraham's childhood and how he discovered and how he rebelled against his father.

So in other words, Midrash was the first fan fiction.

BEN: Oh totally. Rabbinic Midrash is kind of like fan fiction. And they become part of canon if they feel true enough, if they're good enough they stick, they become part of the story.

Which happens all the time in science fiction.

So going back to Star Trek -- Deep Space Nine. In 1996, digital technology was new and the writers realize they could do a time travel episode where the Deep Space Nine characters go back and meet the original cast from the 1960s.

But then they came across a problem. The Klingons in the original show looked like people with goatees and heavy eyebrows. The new Klingons had these big prosthetic ridges on his foreheads. So how did they explain

the difference when the two types of Klingons were standing side by side? They implied that the Klingons in the original show had some kind of cosmetic surgery.

CLIP: WE DON'T TALK ABOUT THAT

BEN: That's Midrash! That's exactly what Midrash is.

ME: It is?

BEN: Yeah, I mean it's a way of looking at the stories and explaining the discrepancies. Okay so if it was a biblical story you would say in Genesis II the Klingons had no ridges on their foreheads but in Genesis III they did have ridges on their foreheads. What's the deal?

And why does the Old Testament have so many contradictions and inconsistencies? Because religious scholars say it wasn't written by one person.

BEN: They identify four distinct authors with different styles and different agendas and different philosophies. Supposedly according to scholars they were written at different time periods and they were collected together and probably presented to Jewish people around 400 BCE.

Now at this point in history, the Jews were scattered around the Middle East. There was a movement to bring them back to Israel -- to unite them as a culture.

BEN: They brought this document, The Torah, to the people, and they read it publically. Scholars say that's probably when it was first written down, first collected.

So their leaders are basically saying, we have to stick together as people because these are our stories. They define who we are and what we believe.

But that doesn't mean the authors agreed on what the stories meant. Sound familiar?

BEN: Each of the authors has their own formulaic way about them. So for example, there's one author called the deuteronomical author, who probably wrote Deuteronomy and several other passages throughout the Torah. And the

deuteronomic author, his whole formula, his or her whole formula is basically you do good things, you'll be blessed, bad things you'll be cursed. Basically every time you see that in the Torah, it's an indication that was probably written by that particular author. The book of Job comes along and the Book of Job basically takes the genre of the deuteronomic author and smashes it to pieces. And basically says no, you do good things and it doesn't necessarily mean that good things are going to happen to you -- you do bad things, and it doesn't necessarily mean that bad things are going to happen to you. There's a response even within the genres of one to the other. And I think you see that also in modern sci-fi also, at least when you have different directors or whatever, they're responding to each other. They're responding to different interpretations of character.

EM: That makes perfect sense, in your version you have this pristine superhero, well I'm going to make him drunk, and I'm going to make him --

BEN: Right like the Dark Knight, the whole idea of Dark Knight. Batman was originally this blue and grey character and he becomes this black character. Yeah, exactly.

A council of scholars met this year to decide the fate of another canon: Star Wars. Disney is about to crank out a ton of worth of sequels and spin-offs. But first, they had to grapple with the novels that took place after Return of The Jedi, and told the story of Han Solo and Princess Leia's children. Disney came out with a statement saying none of those stories are in the canon.

Star Wars fans who loved those novels and were told this is what happens to Luke, Han and Leia were upset. Once again, J.J. Abrams is smashing a canon.

But this is what we do as humans. We come up with stories, we fall in love with the characters, and we fight over them. That's what makes a great story.

That's it for today's show. Thanks for listening.

J.J. Abrams or Lawrence Kasdan, if you happen to be listening, my cousins Ruby and Paulie have a lot of questions that still need to be answered.

CREDITS