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## Tech leaders share how Star Trek inspired them to pursue a career in technology



by **Teena Maddox** in **Innovation**  on January 23, 2020, 12:14 PM PST

Boldly going where no show had gone before, Star Trek has inspired countless boys and girls to dream about working in high-tech.

The image shows a video player interface. In the top left corner, there is the TechRepublic logo. Below it, the video title "Video: The influence of Star Trek on tech" is displayed, followed by a duration of "3:98:53:20". A green button with a play icon and the text "WATCH NOW ()" is positioned below the title. The main video frame shows a man with glasses and a beard, smiling, in a room with bookshelves. At the bottom of the video frame, there is a dark blue banner with the text "THE INFLUENCE OF STAR TREK ON TECH" and the TechRepublic logo on the right.

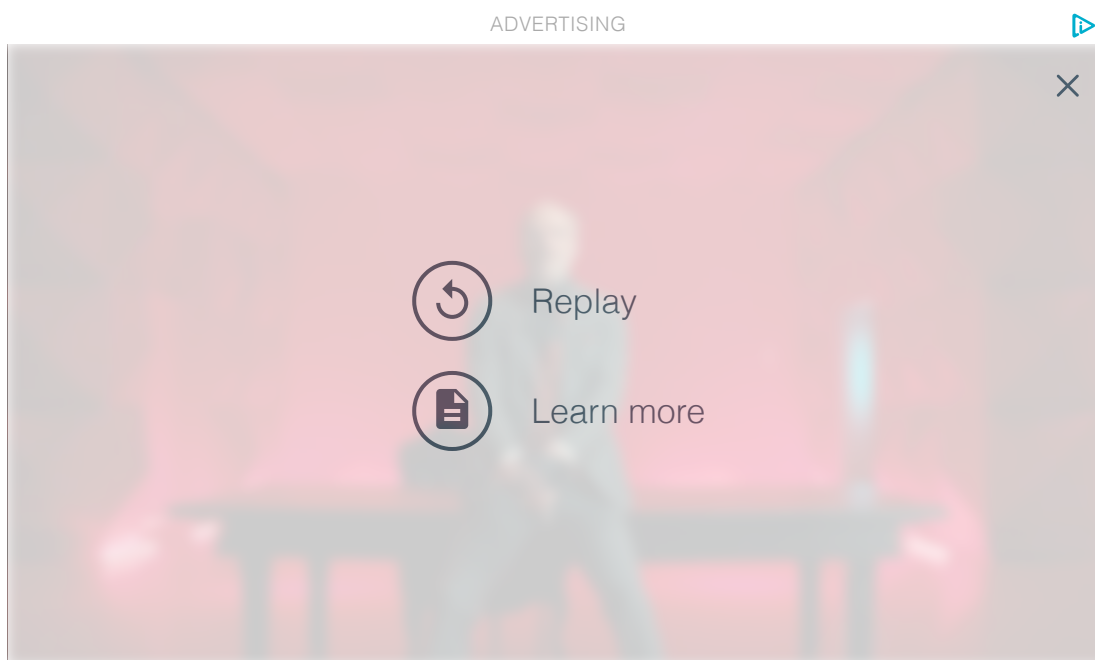
Star Trek. The mere name spawns a vast array of imagery, as the [vivid scenes from the various Star Trek series and movies](https://www.techrepublic.com/pictures/photos-a-glimpse-of-the-iconic-scenes-and-gadgets-of-star-trek/) have been a staple in the lives of legions of children for decades.

Plenty of adults were fans from the beginning, but the mystical allure of aliens and starships and faraway worlds also appealed to kids as they dreamt about what was possible.

Star Trek has been an inspiration to so many kids that it has led masses of them to pursue careers in tech. Even myself. I was one of those wide-eyed kids watching syndicated episodes of Star Trek on Sunday afternoons back in the 70s. Already an avid fan of The Brady Bunch and The Partridge Family, Star Trek was unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

I admit, I began watching it because my older brother (who has his own tech career as a principal developer at Dell) insisted, and we only had one TV in the house. I'd sit with him on the carpet in our family room, as close to the TV as my mom would allow so that I could adjust the antenna as needed. I'd quickly lose myself in a world of teleportation, tricorders and, if I'm being completely honest, slightly racy scenes with Captain Kirk. Even though I didn't understand everything I saw, it inspired me and encouraged me to feel comfortable in a world of new things with cool tech.

***Star Trek: Picard*** (<https://www.tvguide.com/news/star-trek-picard-series-everything-to-know-cbs-all-access/>) **premieres on Jan. 23, streaming every week on CBS All Access** (<https://cbs-allaccess.qflm.net/c/159047/650979/3065?subid1=techrepublic&subld3=xid:fr1590401407759bba>) **in the US and Amazon Video elsewhere in the world. You can also check out our *Star Trek: Discovery viewer's guide*** (<https://www.techrepublic.com/article/star-trek-discovery-the-viewers-guide/>). **(Disclosure: TechRepublic is owned by ViacomCBS.)**



I reached out to many tech leaders to find out how they were inspired by Star Trek as kids, including TechRepublic's own Jason Hiner. Read on to discover their stories.

## Bill Coughlin, president and CEO of Ford Global Technologies:

"I remember seeing the original Star Trek series as a lad. It was thought-provoking and packed with action and drama. But most importantly, it conveyed an optimistic and amazing view into the future. Every week, you could go where no one has gone before and visualize how technology could transform everyone's way of life for the better. To a boy who learned to build go-carts from old lawn mower engines, the show fed the imagination of what might be possible to invent. Maybe a human transporter might be beyond reach in my lifetime, but not speaking to a computer, wearable communicators, or universal translators in near real-time. I later became an electrical engineer, and yes, I'm still a fan. Now if I could only remember where I found those dilithium crystals."

## Jesse Robbins, CEO, Orion Labs:

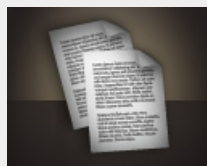
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"My adolescence started around the same time as The Next Generation, which I watched religiously. Hands-down my favorite episode is 'Darmok.' I've watched it at least a dozen times, because the story is so powerful: Two people stuck in a difficult situation, trying to understand how to communicate in real time. The story taught me that technology can do a lot, but sometimes it takes you only so far, and people have to go the last mile themselves. Often this means improvising and learning quickly in dangerous situations. People bridge the gap that technology leaves. I love the geekery of Star Trek, but for me technology is always mediated by people who are trying to work together. This is exactly what my team at Orion Labs works



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on every day."

### Jason Hiner, global editor in chief, TechRepublic:

"It took a long time for me to warm up to Star Trek. What first clicked with me was Deep Space Nine. It had this great mix of technology, spirituality, leadership, cross-cultural understanding, and a little bit of underdog spirit. It deals with dark times and big challenges, but still managed to stay positive and keep fighting. I loved that. And from there, I learned to appreciate some of those same threads in other Star Trek franchises, too."

**Don't miss: *Star Trek: Discovery*** (<http://www.cbs.com/shows/star-trek-discovery/>) **on CBS All Access** (<https://cbs-allaccess.qflm.net/c/159047/650979/3065?subid1=techrepublic&subid3=xid:fr1590401407759ifa>)

### Jeff Greenberg, senior technical leader, vehicle and enterprise sciences, Ford Motor Co.:

"What hooked me wasn't the gadgetry (though I still think the Tricorder is the coolest thing). It was the constant repartee between Kirk, Spock, and McCoy. The man of action, the man of ideas, and the man of empathy. They were passionate about their beliefs, rarely agreed with one another but together they were greater than any of them could be individually. Even at a young age, it struck me that there was something magical going on there."

**Amir Caspi, senior research scientist, Southwest Research Institute:**

"As a kid, Star Trek: The Next Generation was my first space opera. It allowed me to explore the universe and its infinite possibilities, although of course in fictional form. The storylines and characters were amazing, but my favorite aspect was the travel amongst the stars, investigating the mysteries of the universe--physics, time, space, and of course, life. Star Trek, especially TNG, really cemented my love for astronomy and scientific exploration. Now, as a professional astrophysicist, I get to do that every day, and live my own little bit of Star Trek.

"It remains my dream to experience space firsthand, even if I may never get to set foot on another planet. With advancements in commercial space access, that dream may soon become reality. If I'm truly lucky, perhaps I can even work in space, with colleagues, and be that much closer to a Star Trek reality. Some of our technology is already advancing to near Star Trek levels. We have a long ways yet to go, but I can only hope that, together, humanity can achieve the ideals of Star Trek, to live and explore amongst the stars."

**SEE:** [How we learned to talk to computers, and how they learned to answer back \(PDF download\)](https://www.techrepublic.com/resource-library/downloads/how-we-learned-to-talk-to-computers-and-how-they-learned-to-answer-back-pdf-download/) (<https://www.techrepublic.com/resource-library/downloads/how-we-learned-to-talk-to-computers-and-how-they-learned-to-answer-back-pdf-download/>) (**TechRepublic**)

**Andy Lowery, CEO and founder, RealWear:**

"The Star Trek series has always been an inspirational story to me. I joined the Navy as a Nuclear Reactor Operator, largely based on my passion of watching Star Trek as a teenage boy and wishing I could 'boldly go where no man has gone before.' Today, I am fulfilling the wish of that teenaged boy, leading a team that pioneers new discoveries and exists with a culture that represents a quintessential example of a highly diverse and super functional team. Like the Star Trek crew, each person brings unique strengths, but they are bonded by a foundational trust and inspirational leaders which extract more from the whole of the team than the sum of its parts."

**Bill Bodin, CTO, Kony:**

"In 1966, the year Star Trek debuted, my family moved from Phoenix, Arizona to Titusville, Florida. I was just entering 3rd grade. My father was an IBM software engineer at NASA and my sister, ten years older than I, worked for Technicolor as a NASA photographic captioner. I was in the epicenter of the space race, and fortunate to see much more technology than most

my age. I visited launch pads, went behind the scenes in the vehicle assembly building and the blockhouse. Needless to say, 'take your kid to work day' was incredible. And while my observations of the science at NASA shaped the rest of my life, the science fiction of Star Trek allowed me to think without limits. I credit [Gene] Roddenberry and the writers of Star Trek for providing a boundless canvas on which my future thoughts and creations would be built. And now, it's apparent to me that Star Trek was a lot more about science than it was about fiction."

**Zeus Kerravala, founder, ZK Research:**

"I was born in 1966, the year Star Trek was created. Obviously I didn't start watching the show then, but as a young child I managed to catch it in reruns and have watched every episode of the original series dozens of times. I also watched the little known animated series in the 70s and read a number of novels in the 80s. As a youth, I couldn't get enough Star Trek and that certainly influenced my decision to work in technology.

"What I loved about Star Trek was that it was the first science fiction show that had cool tech that was actually possible to build and could be explained by science. Many of the devices used in the show, such as video conferencing, mobile communication devices, and portable computers, have become a reality. Some of the others that haven't become real yet are a source of great debate within Trekkie circles. For example, matter-antimatter propulsion is theoretically possible, we just haven't figured out how to build it yet. The same can be said for food replicators and possibly transporters. Star Trek set a vision for science and technology that is still unmatched for any other TV show and the thought of 'what's possible' was partially responsible for my passion for that field today."

**Jeff Jenkins, CTO and co-founder of Upskill:**

"Star Trek absolutely inspired me to enter the tech field, specifically computer science. While my parents grew up with the original series, Star Trek: The Next Generation was my Star Trek growing up. It gets difficult to keep track of all the tech that this TV series predicted. Even wearable technology like smart glasses were on display, but what I found most intriguing was how ubiquitous all of that computing power was and how it seamlessly integrated into the day-to-day lives of those aboard the starship Enterprise.

Nearly every surface of the ship was festooned with adaptive touch screen interfaces (just like my iPhone today), and they all were integrated via a very cloud-like central processing core

(just like all my devices today). The computer was also never more than a convenient voice command away to turn on the lights or retrieve data from the archives (Alexa anyone?).

But the most inspiring thing to this kid? Gene Roddenberry's vision of a future where technology enabled humanity's better angels. It freed us as a global (and multi-planetary) society to concentrate on scientific discovery, to make cultural contributions, and to focus on self-growth. I can't think of a better or more inspiring vision for human-computer interaction."

**Ken Washington, CTO and vice president of research and advanced engineering, Ford Motor Co.:**

"All I remember was wondering how warp speed worked since I knew according to Einstein, that nothing could travel faster than the speed of light without passing through an impossible infinite mass inflection point. Well, okay I also wondered how molecules reassembled in the transporter without getting jumbled up and creating random monsters on the other side. Okay, sure, I also wondered how such small guns could fire such strong laser beams of energy over and over again, and what was up with that Vulcan nerve pinch?"

**Jim Buczkowski, Henry Ford Technical Fellow and director of Ford Electronics Research:**

"Star Trek amazed me and convinced me I wanted to find a way to amaze others. As I reflect on my youth, I was always curious about science and creating the future. I was a dreamer yearning for, and being part of, a bold future of what 'could be' versus what I was told was possible. Thinking about how I could turn my dreams into reality to 'find new ways.' It wasn't about being an astronaut, it was about exploring new and interesting things, 'going where no one else has gone before,' simply for the purpose of knowing and learning and becoming a better person.

"Today, I realize that I was just as curious about the characters and their diversity as much as the technology that enabled them to do incredible things. It was about the tension between the rational/logical (Spock) and the emotional, intuitive (Kirk) behavior. Star Trek made it ok to believe in the unbelievable, and that although logic was important, creativity and what you see in the 'mind's eye' was just as important.

"Star Trek was also about a team. A group of diverse people working together, every one equally important to the outcome. A team that was dependent on each other and even in conflict, the solution was working together valuing the ideas and contributions of everyone on the team, including learning from each other. All were flawed, but when they were together,

the sum was greater than each of the parts and all flaws were overcome. My parents taught me to respect others and Star Trek reinforced how that respect contributed to a unique and very diverse family and a better more fulfilling outcome. A family that always resolved their differences and conflicts by the end of an episode. The Roddenberry Rule."

**Milind Tambe, professor in engineering and computer science and industrial and systems engineering at the University of Southern California (USC) and fellow for the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence:**

"Science fiction in general and Star Trek in particular was instrumental in inspiring me to pursue a Ph.D. in computer science and more specifically in artificial intelligence. I watched reruns of the original Star Trek in India in the 80s--where I grew up--with fascination. While those were inspiring, the 1987 Star Trek: The New Generation brought along Commander Data, brought along new fascinating questions for Artificial Intelligence. The 'Measure of a Man' episode questioning whether a robot had rights, with the conclusion that robots indeed did, seemed so far-fetched to friends and relatives, but was quietly very inspiring to AI Ph.D. students (at Carnegie Mellon, where I was a Ph.D. student at the time, the next day there were several discussions). Many years later, when I completed my Ph.D. and began teaching AI at USC, I used Star Trek extensively in a class I had designed on 'AI and Science Fiction' to teach AI. And I used that episode of 'Measure of a Man' to teach in my class on AI and even had the writer of that episode (Melinda Snodgrass) come to my class to discuss the episode. Today, in the age of AI, these questions of robot rights don't seem so far fetched."

**SEE: [IT leader's guide to the future of artificial intelligence](https://www.techrepublic.com/resource-library/whitepapers/it-leader-s-guide-to-the-future-of-artificial-intelligence/) (https://www.techrepublic.com/resource-library/whitepapers/it-leader-s-guide-to-the-future-of-artificial-intelligence/) (TechRepublic Premium)**

**Matt Grob, executive vice president of technology, Qualcomm Technologies:**

"I read comics as a kid, but I have always been into all kinds of sci-fi. My name spelled backwards is even 'borg.' And since I started at Qualcomm, Paul Jacobs (currently the company's executive chairman) has always called me Locutus. I was born in Switzerland, and we moved to the US when I was seven years old. One of my first memories in the US was in a hotel and Star Trek, the animated series, was on TV and I just loved it. I've always loved sci-fi. I love The Six Million Dollar Man, Lost in Space, Star Trek, Battlestar Galactica. Star Trek's positive vision of the future is a nice inspiration for some of the concepts we are literally bringing from science fiction to life. In particular, devices from Star Trek (e.g., communicator,



tricorder, touch screens, memory cards, even replicators) are all now real--and it's been a joy working at Qualcomm over the years and making contributions to each one."

### **Jonathan Rosenberg, CTO, Cisco's collaboration business:**

"Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG) was the eye-opening show for me. It showed a world in which technology was less present. Their technology faded into the background. The crew accessed the computer by voice, or by tapping a screen in hallways and asking questions. It was pervasive, and available when needed--but not obtrusive. I found that fascinating and it has guided how I think about technology today. The show was also amazingly accurate in its tech predictions. The modern iPad is almost a clone of the tablets they used and exchanged in the shows. And I really loved Commander Data, just saying."

### **Scott Emmart, director of WW Customer Engineering Labs, Micron:**

"I went to a Star Trek convention right after coming to Boise to go to school. Got to meet James Doohan in person and during the conversation, he asked me what I was doing. Told him I was going to school for engineering and he started chatting me up. Mind you there's a big line behind me, but, after I told him I was going into engineering because of watching him in my earlier days, he asked me about this little noise maker I bought and it just made photon torpedo sounds or phaser sounds. So, I open it up right there in front of him and started explaining this is the clock and this is the memory chip and this is how you get the sound out. It was about 20 minutes while I held up the line talking to James Doohan. It was awesome."

### **Alex Neskin, CTO and co-founder, Petcube:**

"I enjoyed Star Trek a lot. It allowed your imagination to think of the unknown and what else could be discovered. These types of experiences when I was younger definitely made me want to work hard and bring magical things to life."



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- [10 Twitter accounts every Star Trek fan should follow](https://www.techrepublic.com/article/10-twitter-accounts-every-star-trek-fan-should-follow/) (<https://www.techrepublic.com/article/10-twitter-accounts-every-star-trek-fan-should-follow/>) (TechRepublic)
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**Editor's note:** This article was first published on Sept. 22, 2017.

