

Science Fiction: What Does the Future Hold?

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The Prime Directives of (Successful) SF TV

A moribund economy aside, conditions are as strong as ever today for science fiction television. Despite some large-scale failures (e.g., NBC's *Day One*, which went from series to TV movie to nonexistence), development interest in the genre remains relatively strong. Much of this interest is due, of course, to proliferating fan interest in SF (and SF-ish genres) across media forms, including comics, films, games, and audio and video podcasts. Somewhere in this fervor, claims the big network rationale, lies another *Lost* or *Battlestar Galactica*; AMC's development of Robert Kirkman's zombie apocalypse comic *The Walking Dead*, while not strictly SF, is a telling indication of studios' willingness to consider genre material today.

While ideas abound, the odds are still stacked against SF television. The past is littered with failure, particularly as the relatively high production costs of SF have historically lowered its chances of survival. That said, many shows have not only survived but thrived, securing long runs, critical acclaim and an assured place in fandom (or in the case of *Firefly*, at least the latter two). How did they do this? Virtually every successful (meaning long-running, critically-acclaimed, popular with fans) SF series has shared the following four qualities, which I present here as the *Prime Directives of SF TV*:

World-Building

Universe design is a crucial but often overlooked factor in television production. It's important in even the most prosaic genres, but particularly critical in SF. If the point of the genre is to encounter "the fantastic," to use Todorov's classic description, than it had better *be* fantastic, i.e., prompt our curiosity and desire. On a pragmatic level, well-designed SF TV universes guide production decisions at every level. More importantly, for long-term success, they inspire fan engagement and creativity. Thus, *Babylon 5* and *Star Trek* are most compelling when located in the realm of interstellar and intercultural politics. *Battlestar Galactica* is effective because of its complex intersection of ongoing military, civilian, survival, and philosophical concerns. *Farscape* works simply because its universe is really, really weird.

Ensemble Casts

Ensemble casts have been considered such a standard part of "quality TV" for so long that it's been easy to take them for granted, and forget exactly what they have added to television narrative. They certainly multiply potential relationships and storylines, but for SF they have also functioned as navigators of the fantastic, i.e., characters through whom we experience perceptions of their universe. While this can result in a stock array of roles (e.g., the crew members of the last two *Star Trek* series, *Voyager* and *Enterprise*), when executed effectively it can provide a continual source of intrigue and exploration (e.g., the vast regular and recurring cast of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*). The whole concept of the Final Five in *Battlestar Galactica* for example, only (mostly) worked because we had an investment in particular characters' biographies and relationships, and in the outcome of the Cylon-Human struggle.

Narrative and stylistic confidence

It's one thing to set out with an intriguing idea, and quite another to develop it. Confidence is impossible to quantify, and difficult to even describe. Nonetheless, its effects basically determine

what hits the screen. Confidence is simply belief in the series, at every relevant position: from its writers, its cast, its crew, its studio, its network, and its viewers. Your favorite episodes of your favorite series are probably from its peak moment of confidence, when everyone involved believed in it. It may take a while to get there (e.g., the mostly wobbly first two seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*), but you'll know it when you see it (seasons three through five). "Jose Chung's From Outer Space," from the third season of *The X-Files*, is a classic in this regard, with all involved not only at the top of their game, but also fully exercising that series' signature treatment of the fantastic.

Active engagement with SF concepts

What is SF? Must it have spaceships? Aliens? Robots? Ray guns? Time machines? No; it need not have any of these. Unfortunately, many ostensible SF series only apply these elements in a superficial way, usually resulting in series that sort-of *look* like SF, but rarely *feel* like it (e.g., most of the failed US SF series of the 1970s and 1980s). Successful series embrace the idea of SF, not as a bit of flashy mise-en-scène, but as a generative problematic. Contemporary *Doctor Who* and its spinoffs, while arguably functioning more as science fantasy than science fiction, are centered on the intrusion of the fantastic (e.g., the Doctor himself) into our mundane reality. Working in a different register, *Fringe* is literally *about* SF, its narratives prompted by sheer speculation, disbelief, and their combined effects. For good measure, one of its main characters is even precisely a "mad scientist."

In essence, while there's never a guarantee of success on TV, the perception of *all* of these qualities in SF TV is critical.