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'Data on Data: Viewer Responses to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'

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## Data on Data: Viewer Responses to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

### Abstract

Henry Jenkins' influential book, *Textual Poachers*, discerns that fans consider characters to be the most important part of their investment with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG). Indeed, Jenkins explores preferences for the character of Data in TNG. Focusing on science-oriented MIT students, Jenkins provides the foundation for my study, which contrasts Jenkins' findings regarding science-oriented viewers with my own findings about humanities-oriented viewers and their reactions to Data.

**Key words:** science fiction, *Star Trek*, Data, audiences, Henry Jenkins, humanities, science.

'One can learn much more from popular culture than politics because it takes a wide audience to make a show successful but only one madman to make politics.'

– Survey respondent

Given the overwhelming popularity of the *Star Trek* canon, it is surprising to discover a relative lack of attention directed towards the various characteristics of *Star Trek* viewers and their preferences. While Henry Jenkins has produced the most complete book length study entitled *Textual Poachers* in 1992 (alongside Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* of 1992), he focuses on media fandom composed of mostly female, white, middleclass viewers who actively engage in consumption and production. In this study, Jenkins discerns that fans consider characters to be the most important part of the show, noting that a 'high degree of consensus shapes fan reception' of *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who*: '[s]ome characters (Spock, Data, Vincent Avon) become fan favorites, others (Wesley Crusher) develop only marginal followings, if at all' (1992: 95). Further discussion of these favored and ignored characters remains minimal due to the focus of his project. Obviously recognizing the relevance of character discussions in terms of reception, Jenkins co-authored the 1995 *Science Fiction Audiences* in which he provides

a brief discussion of the preference for the android character Data (of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) by science-oriented students at MIT in a chapter entitled "'How Many Starfleet Officers Does It Take to Change a Lightbulb?": *Star Trek* at MIT' (*'Star Trek* at MIT'). While this chapter provides a starting point for understanding character preferences, it focuses solely on science-oriented viewers. My study attempts to augment this information with an analysis of the preference for Data by humanities-oriented individuals. My information, coupled with the previous studies, indicates that the overriding interest in *Star Trek* and the android character, Data, involves various cultural competencies and regimes of value that influence viewer's definition(s) of humanity and identification with Data.

### **Methodology**

Like Jenkins, I too am a fan of *Star Trek*, in its various incarnations. As such, I acknowledge from the outset this potential for bias while simultaneously adopting Jenkins' claim that the perils of a more academic and objective stance likewise present problems (6). Similarly, I believe that presenting myself as a fellow fan to the participants of the study has helped elicit more truthful and honest responses, without the fear of persecution sometimes attributed to fans of *Trek* by 'outsiders.'<sup>[1]</sup> The value of conducting a scholarly study as a fan is best articulated by Jenkins: 'writing as a fan means as well that I feel a high degree of responsibility and accountability to the groups being discussed here' (1992: 7). My responsibility to both the participants and the information coupled with the benefits arising from my lack of detrimental distance situate me, as a researcher, in a position to better convey and analyze the relevant issues within the limitations of potential bias.

To ensure the greater possibility of benefiting from my self-proclaimed status as a fan, I sought to minimize bias by circulating a preliminary survey to ascertain (in addition to basic ethnographic data) which characters my participants favored. The preliminary survey allowed me to ascertain whether or not the popularity of Data, the android character in *TNG* who seeks to become more human, indeed provides an interesting and valid topic of study. The survey was distributed via email to participants of the 'Fantasy and Science Fiction Area' of the 2003 Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (SW/TX PCA/ACA) conference. As the surveys circulated in cyberspace, colleagues at my university (Arizona State University) learned of the project and expressed their own (or a friend's) interest in participating. This appeal from literature majors prompted me to explore humanities-oriented viewer fascination with Data. Thus, I incorporated interested colleagues into the sampling. When the results of this initial survey confirmed widespread interest in Data, I constructed an intentionally broad, more substantive survey (focusing on Data) for the participants.<sup>[2]</sup>

Initially conceived of as a study of a small subset of humanities-oriented academic fans

inspired by conversations with colleagues at the SW/TX PCA/ACA conference, the inclusion of 'volunteer' participants skewed an already problematically small sampling. However, this methodological approach unintentionally mirrored Jenkins' own in '*Star Trek* at MIT' where he asked, as indicated by a note, 'an initial contact to recruit other close friends' (1995: 281). Further, the potentially unscientific size of this twenty-three-participant sampling also may be reflected by Jenkins' study; although he does not report the number of participants in his study, much of his research occurred in MIT dorm rooms, attesting to the necessarily small number of respondents. Therefore, the derived conclusions from my small sampling should be considered as complementing Jenkins' prior work and broadening knowledge about *TNG* viewers.

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### **Composition of the Sampling**

Like Jenkins' subjects, my respondents are primarily male members of the white middle-class.<sup>[3]</sup> However, my respondents are generally older and more educated, with nearly 50% holding a master's degree.<sup>[4]</sup> Just as his participants have viewed *TNG* since its inception in 1987, the subjects of my study share a devotion to *TNG*; all of my participants have viewed for five or more years (more than 50% have watched *TNG* for eight or more years). 65% currently continue to view *TNG* once a month or more, while those who view less than once a month are typically quick to cite time constraints or lack of access to cable (the location of syndicated *TNG* episodes in 2003). All participants have viewed *TNG* multiple times and over 75% participate in conversations about *TNG*. The respondents share similar viewing habits and interests; as such, they create a different type of subculture based not on geography or personal interaction, but based on shared interest.<sup>[5]</sup>

This shared interest goes beyond an affinity for *Trek*; it also encompasses a strong preference for the humanities, given that the majority of respondents (88%) have educational and occupational backgrounds in the humanities rather than the sciences. As such, the makeup of the group seems to problematize typical notions of science fiction audiences, since Gerard Klein suggests that the primary audience for science fiction is composed of a 'scientifically and technologically oriented middle class' (1977: 6). The differentiation of this audience from the 'typical' audience defined by Klein in 1977 can likely be attributed to the increased technological savvy that constitutes twenty-first century Western society. The popularization of cultural studies (and popular culture approaches) have made science fiction more acceptable to the humanities community, as evinced by the recent increase of science fiction courses offered by English departments. If there has been an upsurge in humanities viewers (as Adrian Mellor argues), it could possibly stem from a fairly recent technological shift that brings the humanities and sciences closer together: fan discourse manifests heavily on the Internet, as do a proliferation of online humanities journals. Considered together, these developments establish a solid foundation for an expansion of science fiction audiences that incorporate humanities-minded individuals.

## Humanities vs. Sciences

The emergence of a larger science fiction audience broadened from Klein's conception is identified by Mellor, who postulates a 'convergence of the material circumstances and social visions of the 'scientific' and 'liberal humanist' fractions of the educated middle class' (1984: 21).<sup>[6]</sup> Mellor submits this proposition in extending Klein's thesis as to the popularity of dystopian science fiction in the mid-twentieth-century. Jenkins concurs with Mellor. While implicitly affirming the broad audience of science fiction, he differentiates between humanities-oriented and science-oriented science fiction viewers, using his students as an example: 'Those students who are drawn towards the darker visions are often those who have more generally embraced the humanities and social sciences rather than those who have identified themselves with the hard sciences and engineering' (1995: 214). Students identifying with the 'hard sciences,' according to Jenkins, approach *Star Trek* as a technological utopia.<sup>[7]</sup>

Jenkins' contention is interesting precisely because the overwhelming percentage of humanities-oriented viewers in my study claim to enjoy *TNG* because of its utopian (rather than dystopian) claims for the future. Although many qualify their statements by indicating the flaws in the presented future, 75% of participants' interests revolve around a humanist agenda and a utopian future.<sup>[8]</sup> When responding to a question that reads 'what do you like about *TNG*?,' one participant writes that, 'it's an optimistic view of the future of humanity.' The same respondent identifies the agenda of *TNG* as 'humanist; it tries to convince viewers that the human species will continue in the future and – gasp – it will not have to change to do so.'<sup>[9]</sup> While scoffing at the lack of humanity's change in nearing utopia, this participant simultaneously conveys the humanist, utopian agenda as part of her attraction to the series. The group's interest in *TNG* opposes those with a background in science, whose interest in *TNG*, according to Jenkins, is due to a 'process of mastering its vocabulary and learning as much as they can about its technologies' (1995: 224). Significantly, only one of the twenty-three participants in my study cited an interest in science as a driving force for choosing to view (and continuing to view) *TNG*, and that person can be described as science-oriented.<sup>[10]</sup> Obviously, the other twenty-two participants, either implicitly or explicitly, relegated science to the background of their discussions.

While both science-oriented and humanities-oriented viewers value utopia as part of their interest in *TNG*, the *TNG* community is infused with at least two regimes of value intersecting at the point of utopia.<sup>[11]</sup> John Frow explains that regimes of value focus on the audience, rather than the text: 'no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value, and function are always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms of signification' (2001: 301). Accordingly, *TNG* viewers, as a group, bring diverse 'mechanisms of signification' and consequently impute value on the text based on

their own cultural competencies. <sup>[12]</sup> For example, a viewer, who studies medieval literature, discusses 'the representation of women in *Trek*, how Deanna and Beverly represent the healing/empathetic types of women found in medieval literature and how the character of Tasha Yar and Ro Laren don't fit neatly into that construction. How the concept of women warriors needs to be framed more differently than healers and betazeds.' This participant's chosen field of specialization provides her with a lens through which she interprets the female characters. Another respondent, a feminist, explains that she places Beverly Crusher among her top three favorite senior staff characters, because 'the name [Crusher] says it all; I'm into ballbreaking women.' The differing readings of Beverly speak to different cultural competencies within a humanist framework. While all participants are drawn to the potential utopian vision of *Trek*, cultural competencies brought to the text by the viewers – illustrated here by the medievalist and the feminist, respectively – determine the type of utopia they place value on and attribute to the series: the science-oriented viewers place primary value on the potential for science and technology, while the humanities-oriented viewers place primary value on the potential for the future of humanity. However, as will be demonstrated, identification with Data by both groups will complicate the separation of these seemingly disparate regimes of value.

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### **Perspectives on Data: The Humanities vs. The Sciences**

Within this utopian humanist framework that categorizes these viewers' attitudes and preferences, the android character of Data emerges as a favorite character by participants of my humanities group. When discussing their preferences for Data, his childlike innocence in exploring what it means to be human (along with his humor) factors into 81% of responses. One respondent claims that few people dislike Data because 'he is too innocent and gentle to dislike. His character has the purity of a child.' Another participant explains that he likes Data, because 'he has that child-like innocence but all that knowledge too. The idea that he writes poetry and has a cat and tries to be so human is just fun to watch.' This participant responds with delight in reminiscing about Data's childlike exploration of humanity, typical of the respondents of my study. The humanities group chooses characters who make them feel good and whom they admire. By choosing Data, they display a preference for a character who provides them pleasure not only because of the humor he brings to situations but because he is the 'ideal man': pure, good, inquisitive, and innocent without being trite. <sup>[13]</sup>

Interestingly, the reasons for preferring Data articulated by my humanities-oriented participants intersect with the ideas presented by science-oriented individuals of Jenkins' MIT group: 'One discussion centered around the difference between the 'childlike' qualities which they admired in Data and the 'childishness' they disliked in Wesley' (1995: 231). The preference for Data's childlike qualities by both groups indicates that they share the same core values in people (and even android people); both groups seek that which they value, admire and, perhaps, believe they themselves lack

(i.e. perceived innocence). Because of the 'real life' function of Data for these viewers, it becomes clear that both groups exhibit a preference for what Pierre Bourdieu terms the 'popular aesthetic.' Distinguished from a 'pure aesthetic' based on 'an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world,' the popular aesthetic is 'based on the affirmation of the continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function' (1984: 5, 4). One participant who chose Data as his first, second, and third favorite characters demonstrates the continuity between art and life by citing his most memorable episode as '[a] moment in 'Generations' when Data and Picard are charting the ribbon, and Data asks to be deactivated because he cannot control his emotions. That was interesting; though it is not exactly the same thing, but how many people wish to die because they can't handle their emotions?' In valuing the connection of *TNG* to life, this respondent exemplifies the popular aesthetic in his preference for Data, just as the overwhelming appreciation of the character's innocence reflects that which one sees (or desires) in lived experience. Thus, the fact that both groups embrace the same qualities admired in life (innocence, goodness) exhibits their shared value of a popular aesthetic.

Although the science-oriented subjects of the MIT study intersect with the humanities-oriented sampling on the value of Data's childlike nature and their preference for a popular aesthetic, the groups diverge in their interpretation of the machine element of Data's character. Jenkins concludes that 'When the characters are discussed in more sympathetic terms, it is most often in terms of their competent performance of their duties within the *Enterprise* chain of command' (1995: 232). Sympathetic character discussion most often revolves around Data in the MIT group by virtue of his technically perfect nature that allows him to best fulfill the role and duties of a Starfleet officer in comparison to the more fallible organically humanoid species that dominate the series. The manifestation of 'human' perfection in job performance remains a key aspect of the science-oriented group's preference for Data, perhaps pointing to the emphasis on accuracy associated with the hard sciences. In this way, the science-oriented group implicitly acknowledges their preferred hierarchy of taste and valuation. They legitimize their viewing of *TNG* by identifying with a character whom they interpret as epitomizing regimes of value in which they are inculcated.

In contrast, the humanities-based participants all but ignore the perfection enabled by his technical abilities in favor of their interest in his *struggle* for humanity. One participant marvels at the tendency to forget that Data is a mechanical being, and not technically human. She discusses Data's mechanical capacity as follows: 'Yet he is still underneath a computer, but you forget that completely at times even though his skin is gold and his head can pop right off and be hooked into the computer system.' This willingness to forget that Data is 'underneath a computer' speaks to a desire to identify with Data; indeed, identification with Data by humanities respondents tends to center on a navigation of moral complexities in a technologically rife world. One participant expresses his dissociation from his fellow humans and says 'I think sometimes we all of us feel like observers of the rest of the world.' Another respondent continues this train of

thought: 'Like Data, I don't understand humans a lot of the time. I don't understand why something is funny or why humans get so emotional over trivial matters, even though I can laugh or feel down.' By expressing their own confusion over humanity and linking it with a similar confusion seen in Data's character, this group uses Data as a vehicle to express a lack of complete understanding regarding where the individual fits into a society of human beings. Because this conversation resides within a set of individuals who 'forget' Data's android status, their responses locate complexity of meaning within humanity rather than within science and technology. For these viewers, what needs to be understood amidst an ever-changing world is not the world (i.e. science and technology) but the individual's place within that ever-changing world.

While some participants at times fail to notice Data's 'true' nature as a machine, others revel in the combination of man and machine, citing fascination

with how we as humans, in our efforts to 'improve' our species, run the risk of overdoing it, of becoming mechanized, heartless and automaton. Yet in our excessive push for industrialization, *we lose what makes us human, what we ought to value most* (compassion, awareness of our environment and our role in the natural order of things, etc.). Data exists in the balance between. He is not the Borg (the industrialized extreme of hive-mentality with its obliterated sense of the self), and yet he is also grounded in individual feelings and awareness of responsibility, selflessly in tune with how his actions impact others, willing to make amends when offense was not intended. (my emphasis)

Evinced an overtly humanist position, this participant, perhaps paradoxically, values the machine element of Data's character in conjunction with the human element for the contrast it provides between perspectives of technology/science and humanities. The tension between science/technology and the humanities can be seen in the desire for altruism and awareness of moral complexities predicated upon technological developments. Data's character makes it possible to bridge the gap, reconciling a humanist agenda with that of science and technology. Another respondent seems to support this conclusion: 'For all Data's powers, I never felt above or below him – I felt I could understand him.' Here, we see distance from hierarchical power structures in the emphasis on equality, which suggests the potential capacity to assert a humanist regime of values within a world growing more dependent on science and technology.

Although the two aforementioned perspectives (forgetting Data's mechanical nature and embracing that same mechanical nature as part of a 'human' character) seem diametrically opposed, they represent the two most prevalent and recurring positions on the interaction between man and machine, as evinced by the character. The discrepancy can be accounted for by neither age nor gender differences between the two participants – the various positions are repeated in different ways by the responses of males and females of various ages. Both groups articulate fascination with the human struggle portrayed by Data's character: the first group internalizes that struggle while the latter

places it in the external world. Thus, the participants reveal different regimes of that overlap in the pleasure and interest in Data's humanity yet diverge in the matter of accessing the relevance of that humanity. Those who remain consciously aware and those who forget Data's android status agree that 'what we ought to value most' entails that which defines 'humanity,' rather than technological progress.<sup>[14]</sup> Thus, the humanities-oriented group implicitly legitimates the regime of value in which they are immersed and uses Data within those limits to negotiate an increasingly technological world.

The final significant convergence and divergence of values between the humanities and science groups' interpretations of *TNG* characters (particularly Data) reside in their preference for realism. According to Jenkins, the MIT group prefers a scientific realism (likely a product of their preference for a popular aesthetic) and expresses continual dismay at the writers'/series' flawed understanding of neutrinos and other scientific 'givens' that their cultural competencies teach them to value. Jenkins reinforces this point when he states that 'Such judgments are delivered from a position of intellectual superiority' (1995: 225). Critiquing the realism (or lack thereof) of the series points to the particular regime of value within a larger shared realm of preferred realism. Individuals understandably evaluate and interpret based on the regime of value in which they are enmeshed. Hence, the science-oriented group values the viable reality of science while the humanities-oriented group lacks a similarly detailed frame of reference for such evaluations. Instead, the humanities-oriented group operates off of its own cultural competencies used in deciphering the 'code' of the text, and thereby placing scientific knowledge on a lower rung of their hierarchy of values.

The humanities-oriented individuals who participated in my study likewise value realism (again in relation to a popular aesthetic). One respondent applauds *TNG*, because 'a major character died and didn't miraculously come back from the dead, although the actress reappeared as different characters.' This participant values the realism that allows the dead to remain dead and alludes to a similar preference among his fellow humanities-oriented respondents. However, the majority of these participants reflect Jenkins' observation (discussed in *Textual Poachers*) that viewers seek emotional realism: 'What counts as "plausible" in such a story is a general conformity to the ideological norms by which the viewer makes sense of everyday life' (1992: 107). In short, even if situations are far from daily reality, character actions and reactions should make sense.<sup>[15]</sup> This desire for character continuity and coherence is best conveyed by a participant who took issue with the ending of *Nemesis*, wherein Data sacrifices himself to save Picard's life. Although a few participants expressed mixed emotions (citing their satisfaction with Data's ultimate proof of humanity via an altruistic act), others question the manner in which the sacrifice was presented: 'I didn't like it...Data didn't even get to say bye to Geordi; who's going to take care of Spot?' Here, the respondent identifies Data's longstanding friendship with Geordi and expresses displeasure at the failure to provide an acceptable way of acknowledging that friendship. Likewise, Data's attachment to his cat, Spot, remains unaddressed and detracts from a potentially



positive reception of what some have identified as an act of humanity. As such, the respondents' perspectives indicate that Data's actions and the construction of the plot deny the respondents emotional realism via a perceived disjunction with lived experience.

[16]

Both the humanities-oriented and science-oriented viewers value realism in the series (emotional and technical/scientific, respectively) that remains connected to a shared preference for a popular aesthetic. Likewise, both groups share types of cultural competencies that, although by no means synonymous in their cultural codes, enable preferences of a popular aesthetic. In other words, the differing cultural competencies are not indicative of a pure aesthetic, and both lead to the valuing of a popular aesthetic. Still, these cultural competencies differ significantly and lead to differing regimes of value, such as that seen in the contrast between humanities-oriented and science-oriented viewers. One of my two science-oriented participants conveys his admiration of Data's character as follows: 'There was an excellent balance between the fiction of a machine that could think freely and the reality that this is something that could possibly happen.' This participant values the potential viability of the technology involved in the existence of Data's character, which is in alignment with the scientific realism desired by the MIT group, but opposes humanities participants who claim that 'what makes us human' is 'what we ought to value most.' Nevertheless, although the humanities group considers issues of science and technology to be secondary, their interpretations of the humanist aspects of Data's character illustrate an identification with Data that helps them create, as one participant stated, 'balance between' issues of humanity and science.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, different cultural competencies of science-oriented and humanities-oriented viewers lead to different regimes of value. However, common identification with the character of Data by both groups complicates the possibility of constructing these differing regimes of value – and even the different cultural competencies – as simple binary opposites. From this, we learn that the seemingly-intuitive, clear-cut classifications of these different types of sci-fi fans (as, for example, that which is seen in the split between utopic and dystopic perspectives) requires closer interrogation; rather than diverging as one might expect from their differing educational backgrounds – and even initial discrepancies in responses – groups with disparate ideologies converge. Further examination of these issues may well provide a more comprehensive understanding of sci-fi fans as well as shifting cultural attitudes within the fan community (and even the academic community, in challenging longstanding beliefs). *Star Trek* viewers prove particularly useful for this purpose because of their relatively longstanding dedication to the show and the (comparatively) large size of the potential participants. Their continued dedication to the *Trek* canon reinforces the 'prime directive' of reception studies, which proposes that the value of a text is not inherent in the text itself but exists

as a function of what viewers do with said text.

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[1] For an account of the stigma attached to *Star Trek* fans, see Chapter 1 of *Textual Poachers*.

[2] While the results confirmed a widespread interest in Data, other characters generated discussion: Captain Jean-Luc Picard ranks as the number one favorite character, Deanna Troi is of interest to females (particularly between the ages of thirty and fifty), and Worf is the subject of much (and widely varied) speculation. Interest in Worf is widespread and focuses on a number of different aspects of his character, especially his status as a Klingon. Others cite the actor's own background as a homosexual African American male in tandem with his 'macho' character as a point of interest. Other characters that were discussed several times included Dr. Beverly Crusher, who was often described as exemplary of a strong female character.

[3] 76% of the participants are white, or Caucasian. 12% identify themselves as Asian-American while the other 12% identify themselves as Hispanic. 75% self-identify as male, while the remaining 25% self-identify as female.

[4] 47% hold at least a master's degree, while an additional 18% have a bachelor's degree. The remaining participants currently engage in some type of educational program.

[5] Jenkins supplies a similar method of re-categorizing a culture. When discussing film, he creates a new folk culture not based on geography, but based on interest. This community is voluntary and shares a utopian purpose of resisting capitalism outside fandom (see Chapter 8 of *Textual Poachers*). Further, we might consider these viewers to be a community given Elizabeth Long's findings that 'collective and institutional processes shape reading practices by authoritatively defining what is worth reading and how to read it' (1993: 192). By citing some of the processes that legitimize taste, Long situates individual readers in the context of a larger group. Since both readers and viewers interpret texts (albeit from different media), the same theory applies to viewers as it does to readers. Long's work supports the additional cohesiveness of my group by virtue of my group members' shared interest in *TNG* and the apparent process of accepting the *Trek* canon as an emblem of legitimate taste.

[6] The notion of a broadened science fiction audience can also be extrapolated from Klein's qualification of the term 'scientifically and technologically oriented middle class.' He cautions that such individuals need not work with or study the intricacies of science and technology, but must have a strong interest in such matters. In the twenty-first century, both humanities-oriented and science-oriented individuals alike typically share some interest in technology due to increased dependence on email, the Internet, etc. Thus, much of Western society has the background to enjoy science fiction. Still, there remains a difference in science-oriented and humanities-oriented viewers, as will be discussed in this paper.

[7] Although Jenkins does not expound upon the reasons why humanities-based individuals might prefer 'darker visions,' Mellor addresses the reasons behind dystopian preferences extensively in his work older work.

[8] Several participants admire the series but point out the continued struggle for gender equality and racial (and species) equality.

[9] While I would like to avoid putting words into the mouths of my respondents, it seems important to note that 'change' is a relative term reflecting the continuation of certain social structures and attitudes that continue even within the progress of the *TNG* universe.

[10] Jenkins' emphasis on science is reinforced by his later analysis of the episodes, wherein each episode becomes 'a problem set which can be resolved through mobilizing the correct bodies of scientific knowledge and which can be graded according to the series writers' grasp of MIT-sanctioned information' (227). The assumed interest in science and technology by viewers of *Trek* was countered by several of the participants in my study. Again identifying the humanist agenda as conveyed by the characters, another respondent counsels that 'by the 2<sup>nd</sup> season the writers realized that character personalities were very important to the fans. Interaction between those characters is what defines it, and the technology and politics were secondary. I think the fan mail, Compuserv SIGs, and Conventions proved that. People dressed up and wrote stories for their favorite characters, not diagramming the technology (although a few did that as well).'

[11] Although *TNG* viewers are often lumped into one community with overarching standards and values, the community is not as unified as it might appear, and, in fact, is more porous in recent years, especially with the addition of more humanities-minded individuals. The apparent cohesiveness of *TNG* fans gives rise to the problems of communication across communities – a problem discussed by John Frow in 'Economies of Value'. Addressing 'cultural intellectuals,' Frow argues against a general economy of value, in which certain standards of appreciation apply across a given community (2001: 294). Instead, he advocates the concept of 'regimes of value,' wherein individuals simultaneously produce and participate in discursive fields not bound to particular groups. Therefore, the problem of having one standard of value is mitigated by the acknowledgement of contingencies of value.

[12] I borrow the notion of cultural competencies from Pierre Bourdieu's introduction to *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Bourdieu explains that, 'A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded' (2).

[13] As with any generalization, there is an exception. One participant explicitly stated that the idea of Data's character seemed trite to him. However, of the participants surveyed, his perspective seems anomalous.

[14] It is important to recognize that half of the non-white participants provided a more

complex, less accepting view of Data, even though the focus of this paper precludes extensive discussion on the following observation. Although both cited their interest in *TNG* and enjoyment of Data's character and Data episodes, they provided more critical perspectives. One concludes that 'If Soong is human, then Data is a product of a race of people that are horrible; human history is all bloodshed and death. But Data is the ideal person.' He contrasts Data's 'humanity' with the less acknowledged history of human 'development.' Another participant observes that Data is 'funny/comic, and therefore easily dismissed as 'unreal' – as he consistently is by Aliens and humans alike in the series. He is a mirror, not a real being; a pet, a thing; Picard's 'wife': obedient, patient, ever helpful. He is everything and nothing. He changes according to what we want him to be.'

[15] Jenkins makes a gender assessment in regards to emotional realism as a female response. The male respondents in my study challenge that notion. For more information on Jenkins' reading, see *Textual Poachers*, pp. 107-119.

[16] The use of 'realism' in this context is related to the perceived realism of Data's actions – actions these people feel he should have taken in connection with this particular plotline. To elaborate, I again turn to Jenkins: 'I would argue that 'emotional realism' is not a property of fictions so much as it is an interpretive fiction fans construct in the process of making meaning of popular narratives. [...] Such a conception of the series allows fans to draw upon their own personal backgrounds as one means of extrapolating beyond the information explicitly found within the aired episode' (107).

Contact (by email): [Jennifer M. Santos](mailto:jennifersantos@asu.edu)

### **Biographical Note**

Jennifer Santos is a Graduate Teaching Associate in the Department of English at Arizona State University, USA.

