

SCIENCE VISION



Paul McGann was the eighth and last actor to play Dr. Who. He was the doctor in the 1996 TV movie of the same name. The movie and series that preceded it are credited with awakening a generation of youth to the world of technology.

MSOE exhibit honors 'Dr. Who'

Underneath the "chic geek" culture that formed ever since computers became cool are the nerdy computer geeks — the true masters of the machines — who love science fiction with a passion.

They might be closet sci-fi fans, or they might flaunt their love of futuristic fantasy with pride, but most likely their love of computers, software programming or engineering came from watching every episode of the various "Star Trek" series or seeing the "Star Wars" trilogy for the 112th time.

They saw Scotty on "Star Trek" screaming that the warp engines were about to fail, and they thought: "Cool."

In the spirit of the marriage between science fiction fantasy and the current digital age, the students at the Milwaukee School of Engineering have built an exhibit and Web site in honor of "Dr. Who," a British series that is the longest-running science fiction TV show in the world.

Dr. Who is about a wise-cracking, time-traveling alien called "the Doctor" who roams the universe, often haphazardly because of his malfunctioning spacecraft. The Doctor, who was played by several



**STANLEY A.
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actors over the years, is a noble, professor-like action hero who shuns violence in favor of out-thinking his adversaries. The show entralls its fans with imaginative plots, witty dialogue and exceptionally low-budget special effects.

The exhibit's Web site, www.msoe.edu/library/dr_who, offers a virtual incarnation of the display for fans who can't view it at the Walter Schroeder Library on the MSOE campus, 500 E. Kilbourn Ave. The exhibit went on display in late November and will continue through March.

The site begins with a streaming video welcome from John Leeson, the actor who provided the voice for one of the Doctor's companions — a robotic dog name K-9.

From there, visitors can read through five Who-related essays written specifically for the MSOE exhibit from science fiction critics, including a few who are the who's who when it comes to Dr. Who.

The site also has a complete collection of links to Dr. Who sites across cyberspace, including fan sites, large picture archives and *Cuttings* archive.org.uk, which is a large library of scanned news clippings about the series.

The exhibit celebrates the 37th year since the

Please see **DR. WHO, 2M**



Tom Baker, the fourth Dr. Who, played a time traveler who preferred to think his way out of tight spots instead of resorting to violence.

Science fiction can launch fans' interest in technology

DR. WHO. From 1M

show was created by the British Broadcasting Corporation. The final episode produced by the BBC aired in December 1989, although an Americanized TV movie produced by Fox and the BBC in 1996 continued the story line. The series hasn't been broadcast in Wisconsin for years, but it will be back when Time Warner Cable in Milwaukee adds the BBC America channel to its digital cable offerings this week.

The Dr. Who exhibit is a diverse collection of literature and memorabilia going back to 1963, when the series began.

Some of the items include books, cards, action figures, comic books, toys and autographed photos. Costumes worn in the Dr. Who episodes "The Caves of Androzani" and "The Trial of a Time Lord" are among the exhibit's trophy pieces.

Engaging young minds

"Many of the students who study at MSOE gained an interest in engineering through exposure to the field in science fiction television programs and films such as 'Dr. Who,' 'Star Trek,' and 'Star Wars,'" Nick Seidler, assistant director of student activities at MSOE, says on the Web site. "This exhibit is a continued celebration of the exposure that popular culture and science fiction has given to the field of engineering."

Seidler, an avid "Dr. Who" fan and coordinator of the exhibit, agreed that science fiction's influence extends beyond engineering, sparking the imagination and interest in computers and software programming, too.

"It would be very hard to find a student on the MSOE campus who doesn't like sci-fi," he said. "If it is not 'Dr. Who,' then it's 'Star Trek,' 'Star Wars' or even 'Knight Rider.'"

Leroy Dubeck, a physics professor at Temple University and author of "Fantastic Voyages: Learning Science Through Science Fiction Films," shows his

classes clips from movies such as "Colossus: The Forbin Project," a 1969 sci-fi thriller about a supercomputer with a mind of its own.

"You have to try to stimulate their interest," he said. "I'll show clips to illustrate a point. Clearly, students get most of their information about science from TV, and a fair amount of that is misinformation. I try to get them to look with a less accepting eye at what they are seeing."

Fiction becomes reality

Dubeck said technology envisioned in the original "Star Trek" series in 1966 was a type of conceptual blueprint for current technology. For example, the hand-held communicator Capt. James T. Kirk often barked orders into isn't too far from the digital phones and two-way pagers available today.

"Science fiction serves as a stimulus as what people would like," he said. "In 'Star Trek' the computers are voice activated. In some areas, we are getting into what 'Star Trek' was depicting 30 years ago."

Other experts agree that science fiction has had a profound effect on America's computing culture, whether it's swaying students to pursue high-tech careers or inspiring new software, computers or hand-held devices.

"The way we've articulated these bits and bytes, zeros and ones represents a rhetorical choice," said Andrew Wood, assistant professor of communication studies at San Jose State University in California. "We make our choice using the narratives and images available to us. Unsurprisingly, many of the programmers and designers — themselves raised on a steady diet of pop cultural ephemera — draw from the same sources."

Inspiring children

Wood, author of "Internet Communication: Linking Technology, Identity and Culture," which will be released in April, cited examples such as the movie "Tron," which when released

in 1982 "provided a glimpse of cyberspace before the word was even coined."

Jennifer Kramer, a film scholar and vice president of the Picture Palace, a virtual video site, said that while science fiction films such as "Tron" can inspire children to explore technology in reality, adults who didn't grow up with electronic toys aren't as susceptible to its sway.

"I saw 'Tron,' and it made me drop out of college," she said, laughing. "Although the finished product had a lot to say about computer technology, and it had a profound affect on people who were 10 years old, the older people were left out of the loop."

"People at that time had no concept about what computers were, and it went completely over their heads," she said.

Science fiction "only really affects the very young. They are adventurous enough to want to learn more. I think there is kind of a cut-off point, a cultural gulf between the intellectual haves and have-nots. Unless you get them young, you are not going to get them at all."

Aaron Marcus, president of Aaron Marcus Associates, a user-interface design firm with offices in California and New York, said science fiction continues to influence how technology develops.

Marcus' firm is working for Samsung Electronics in South Korea, designing future products "starting from the point of people instead of starting from technology for technology's sake." For example, merging a personal digital assistant, mobile phone and time management software that is easy to use and aesthetically pleasing.

"We are trying to take some of these notions and concepts — some of which have been talked about in science fiction — and dream practical dreams."

"Science fiction has routinely explored issues at the cutting edge of science and in effect helped to translate the implications of science and technology developments for popular culture," Marcus said.