

## Ron Moore's Deep Space Journey

By JOHN HODGMAN

The interior of the Battlestar Galactica is a warren of shadowy, angular hallways and spare functional chambers split over two sound stages situated on the semi-industrial fringe of Vancouver, British Columbia. The Galactica is a spaceship, but it does not feel particularly space-age. The communication panels on the walls were scavenged from a Canadian destroyer; the desk lamps are from Ikea. If you have seen "Battlestar Galactica," which began its second season on the Sci Fi Channel on Friday, you will know that this Galactica only vaguely resembles the ship that previously bore that name, when "Battlestar Galactica" first flew on prime time in 1978, square in the shadow of "Star Wars." And it certainly does not resemble the Enterprise, the "Star Trek" vehicle that has defined the visual and thematic vocabulary of television science fiction for four decades. On the Galactica, there is no captain's chair; there are no windows full of stars. The command center is busy and dark, protected deep within the ship the way it would be on an actual military vessel. As the actors move from room to room, hand-held cameras swoop behind them, closing in on them claustrophobically. The characters do not travel heroically from planet to planet, solving the problems of aliens. There are, in fact, no aliens at all.

To be fair, though, there are androids. As in the original show, the humans of the Galactica and its fleet are relentlessly pursued by evil robots called Cylons. But in the current version, conceived by Ronald D. Moore and David Eick, most of the evil Cylons look like people and have found God. Ruthlessly principled and deeply religious, the Cylons have been compared by fans and critics both to Al Qaeda and to the evangelical right. And the humans they are relentlessly pursuing are fallible and complex. Their shirts are not clingy or color-coded; the men of space wear neckties. They are led by Edward James Olmos as the Galactica's commander and Mary McDonnell as the president of the humans, and their stories revolve as much around the tensions within -- between the military and civil leadership of the fleet -- as they do around the Cylon threat. As Eick described the show to me last month with evident, subversive pleasure, "The bad guys are all beautiful and believe in God, and the good guys all [expletive] each other over." Moore, who is also the show's head writer, put it more simply: "They are us."

It is sometimes jarring to watch "Battlestar Galactica," for it is not like any science-fiction show on television today. Science fiction is a genre that, for all its imaginative expansiveness, tends also to be very conservative; its fans sometimes defend its cliches fiercely. "Battlestar Galactica" upends sci-fi cliches. The show is jarring also because it is, after all, "Battlestar Galactica," which in its original incarnation was seen even within the world of science-fiction fans as something of a sincere but goofy oddity -- a mere 24 cumulative hours' worth of television that, like some bit of shrapnel from the "Star Wars" explosion of the 70's, lodged in our consciousness but had been largely forgotten.

How Moore and Eick came to transform that show into one of the most original and provocative programs on television is strange. What is stranger is that there was a small but very dedicated group of "Battlestar Galactica" fans who didn't want them to succeed.

The Galactica was not the first spaceship that Ron Moore had a hand in building. A quiet man with shoulder-length hair whose profound thoughtfulness and patience sometimes borders on the unnerving, Moore, who is 41, grew up in rural Chowchilla, Calif., a high-school quarterback and a "Star Trek" fan. "Star Trek" appealed to Moore's fascination with both naval history and the exotic-seeming Kennedy-era progressivism the show surreptitiously broadcast -- the original liberal-media conspiracy. In grade school he built models, including an extremely detailed miniature of the Enterprise, which he still has today, and wrote stories about dinosaurs fighting in World War II. He went to Cornell to study political science on a Navy R.O.T.C. scholarship. Though he flunked out of college and never ended up joining the Navy, he still has a deep affinity for the institution and its rituals and still subscribes to the Navy journal Proceedings ("Much to my horror," says his wife, Terry, who grew up in Berkeley). In his office in L.A., Moore has a complete set of Samuel Eliot Morrison's multivolume history of the Navy's World War II campaigns, a model of the U.S.S. Utah and an actual ship's binnacle (as well as a rather vicious-looking bat'leth, the ceremonial sword of the Klingon empire).

In 1989, when he was in his mid-20's, he managed to sell a spec script to "Star Trek: The Next Generation," which was still in its infancy. Titled "The Bonding," it told the story of a boy on board the

Enterprise who is suddenly orphaned when his mother is killed on a routine mission. (Do not fear -- he is later semi-adopted by Worf, the Klingon security chief.) Soon, Moore became a staff writer for the show, then graduated to helping to produce its darker spinoff, "Deep Space Nine." As a writer, Moore became a fan favorite, known for his thoughtful scripts that revered yet challenged the long-established mythos of "Star Trek." He also became known for killing people. He would go on to kill the mother of Worf's biological son; in the movie "Star Trek: Generations," written with Brannon Braga, he managed to kill Captain Picard's young nephew, as well as Captain Kirk. It was this latter death that changed his status slightly among the fan community, to the tune of death threats.

He told me that he wept as he worked on the scene in which Kirk falls to his death. "But I was really driven to do it," he said. "I wanted to do this story about mortality, and how mortality comes to even the greatest hero, and what happens when Kirk dies." He paused. When he is asked a question, Moore often replies with a calm, unsettling candor bespeaking long reflection. "It's weird," he finally said. "He was my childhood hero, and I killed him. What does that mean? What does that say about me?"

It all came to an end with the third spinoff, "Voyager." Moore had been intrigued by its premise: a starship and its crew are left to fend for themselves in deep, unknown space (a premise not unlike that of "Battlestar Galactica"). He had hoped it would be a new direction for the story he loved -- setting "Star Trek" loose from the moorings of its old cliches and letting it explore new, more realistic territory. But as he watched the show develop, Moore grew disenchanted. No matter how many times the bridge of the "Voyager" was destroyed, the ship was always spic and span by the next episode. "How many shuttle crafts have vanished," he later said in an interview posted on a science-fiction Web site, "and another one just comes out of the oven?" But no one at "Voyager" seemed to share this frustration, and after he joined the show in 1999, at the beginning of its fifth season, his attitude left him isolated from the rest of the staff. Within months he quit. "It was very difficult," he told me, his eyes locked sadly on an empty space somewhere between us. "I didn't want to leave the nest." It was the first time he had been outside the "Trek" universe in 10 years.

Shortly after Moore left "Voyager," Richard Hatch was in the San Diego convention center, receiving a standing ovation. Hatch had been the star of the original "Battlestar Galactica," playing the idealistic Captain Apollo opposite Dirk Benedict's roguish Lieutenant Starbuck. Together they had been on the cover of *People*; their faces served as the models for countless lunch boxes and T-shirts. But then it was all suddenly over.

The original "Battlestar" was often dismissed as a "Star Wars" rip-off, but it was always stranger and more ambitious than that. There was an element of 70's-era "Chariots of the Gods" crackpot-ism to it. ("There are those who believe that life here began out there," spoke the tweedy voice of Patrick Macnee at the opening of each episode, and proof of this common ancestry was provided weekly in the King Tut-style space helmets Apollo sported.) But that was blended in an intriguing way with late-cold-war anxiety over Soviet appeasements and an openly biblical story line, widely considered a tribute by its creator, Glen A. Larson, to the parables of his own Mormon faith. Twelve colonies of space-faring humans, survivors of slaughter driven away from their home planets, had set off through space in search of the mythical 13th tribe that, legend tells, settled a promised land called "Earth."

Yet "Battlestar" could never fully escape the orbit of its time. The most expensive-to-produce program of its day, at \$1 million per episode, it kept drifting to the security of "Love Boat"-style prime-time conventions: feathered hair and a fondness for weekly guest stars, including Fred Astaire as Starbuck's con-man father and Macnee as, well, Satan. After the show's initial great success (the premiere drew a reported 65 million viewers), the audience quickly dwindled, and it was canceled after eight months.

Dirk Benedict went on to star in "The A-Team." Richard Hatch did soaps and TV work and started a business leading seminars in personal communication. In 1995, his girlfriend at the time persuaded him to do a signing session at a "Star Trek" convention in Pasadena. He agreed, but he wasn't sure if anyone would come. By that point, "Battlestar Galactica" had virtually disappeared. There had never been a complete video release, and with only a single season's worth of programming in existence, reruns were few and far between. So Hatch was nervous before the signing session, clutching his handful of photographs, watching the long lines of fans waiting to meet their favorite "Star Trek" actors, wondering if he would be sitting at his table out on the edge of the convention for hours by himself. Then his name was announced on the P.A., and he heard the crowd roar. One by one, they came to him, the fans, with their memories of "Battlestar Galactica," emotionally recounting what the

show had meant to them, how it helped them through difficult times in their lives.

"With all its flaws and imperfections, 'Battlestar' had somehow connected," Hatch told me recently, recalling the convention. "I think that archetypal, very powerful story -- Moses and the Israelites journeying across the farthest reaches of space in search of a new homeland -- there's something epic in that."

After the signing, Hatch registered the Web site [battlestargalactica.com](http://battlestargalactica.com). (Neither Universal, which had produced the original show, nor Larson had ever bothered.) And so began his campaign to find and bring together fans of the original series and lead them to a new homeland, a resurrected "Battlestar" TV show or movie modeled on "Star Trek: The Next Generation" -- one that would continue the journey to Earth and would star several of the original actors, with Apollo as one of the leaders.

The journey took many turns. As Hatch continued to call and meet with executives from Universal, trying to convince them of the viability of his idea, he was approached to write new comics set in the old "Battlestar" universe, and then to share writing credits on a series of novels that would outline his vision. The first, "Armageddon," was published in 1997. Six more followed. Universal seemed content to let him work within these media. But when it came to a new TV series, Hatch says, the executives he met with in the "black tower" building at Universal just didn't get it. They couldn't get past the original failure of "Battlestar." So he decided that the best way to spark interest in a revival was to shoot what he called a "proof of concept" -- in effect, a trailer for a film or television show that didn't yet exist, based on one of his own books and starring him. He shot it using his own money, mortgaging his home and maxing out his credit cards. He relied on volunteer help from actors and cinematographers he knew around town and from fans he met on the Internet.

Compared with the thriving "Star Trek" and "Star Wars" franchises, "Battlestar" fandom was marginal - - the province of a few diehards making Web sites and sewing Colonial-warrior costumes. But these diehards rallied around Hatch, donating the costumes and props they had fabricated or volunteering to do the computer graphics for the space battles. And as they did, Hatch became for most of them the face of the fight for the new "Galactica."

In 1999, at the San Diego Comic-Con, he showed his completed trailer, titled "Battlestar Galactica: The Second Coming." He reports that it received a standing ovation. I can report that it looks remarkably professional and engaging and certainly faithful to Larson's original story. But you will probably never see it, because Hatch spent somewhere between \$20,000 and \$40,000 of his own money to create a film within a franchise in which he owned absolutely no rights and which, for this reason, as well as actors' union regulations, he can never show or distribute for money.

But that was fine. Because for Hatch, it was always about convincing the world that it made sense to bring back "Battlestar." And in fact, soon Universal would indeed be relaunching the Galactica -- although Richard Hatch would not be on board.

In December 2001, David Eick, who was behind shows like "American Gothic" and "Xena: Warrior Princess," got a call from David Kissinger, president of the media conglomerate Studios USA, which controlled the Universal library. Over the previous year or two, the idea of reviving "Battlestar" had been floating around Universal. Now, Kissinger said, there was some new interest at Studio USA's sister company, the Sci Fi Channel. Would Eick be interested? Eick had his misgivings about the idea. But he had some experience sending out secret, under-the-radar cultural messages through pulp entertainment (in Xena's case, a nascent lesbian chic). He saw an opportunity -- what he called "a great potential for irony." As he told me, "If you could do a show called 'Battlestar Galactica,' with that title, that would harken toward the kind of sincere, dimensional, textured, emotional drama of '2001' and 'Blade Runner' -- oh, my God. You could blow everyone's mind."

Eick met Ron Moore a few years before, when Moore was consulting on "Good vs. Evil" for the Sci Fi Channel. But even though Eick didn't know "Star Trek" particularly well, he knew that "Star Trek" was exactly what he didn't want this new series to be. And he knew that "Star Trek" was not and would never be a subject that was close to Moore's heart. And so he called Moore and asked him if he was interested in bringing a second big spaceship show back to life. Moore knew the original "Battlestar," and after talking to Eick, he watched Larson's original three-hour pilot again. It surprised him. Here was a deeply somber story about a civilization that had basically endured genocide, and for the first hour it was elegantly told and strangely affecting. "They were *trying*," he told me. "It took a hard left

turn to insanity when they reached the casino planet, but they were really trying."

Moore said he would do it, but he wanted to make some changes. After numerous meetings and a full script treatment, he wrote a two-page memo that laid out the basic tenets of what the new "Battlestar Galactica" would eventually become. "We take as a given the idea that the traditional space opera, with its stock characters, techno-double-talk, bumpy-headed aliens, thespian histrionics and empty heroics has run its course, and a new approach is required," it began. "Call it 'naturalistic science fiction.'" There would be no time travel or parallel universes or cute robot dogs. There would not be "photon torpedoes" but instead nuclear missiles, because nukes are real and thus are frightening.

"To this day," Eick says, "I don't think either of us could have anticipated how valuable the memo would be." It would repair everything that had been worn down to convention in a genre Moore had once loved. But "Battlestar" would be more than just an opportunity to do "Voyager" correctly.

"When I watched the original pilot," Moore says, "I knew that if you did 'Battlestar Galactica' again, the audience is going to feel a resonance with what happened on 9/11. That's going to touch a chord whether we want it to or not. And it felt like there was an obligation to that. To tell it truthfully as best we can through this prism." In the miniseries Moore wrote to introduce the new "Battlestar," the echoes of the war on terror were unapologetic and frequently harrowing: what happens when an advanced, comfortable, secular democracy endures a devastating attack by an old enemy that it literally created (which enemy, in Moore's version, also happens to be religious fanaticism)?

For a genre often derided as escapist, science fiction has a long tradition of social commentary, no small part of which comes from "Star Trek" itself, which embraced race and gender equality on the bridge of the Enterprise at a time when it was still largely being rejected in real-life America. But Moore wanted a show that would move between the idealistic fantasies of "Trek" and the hard moral pragmatism of the military -- that would embrace both the binnacle and the bat'leth, if you will. He listed for me some of the thornier questions the show evokes: "What does it mean to be free in a society under attack? What are the limits of that freedom? Who's right? Who's wrong? Are you rooting for the wrong side?"

Like Richard Hatch, Moore and Eick were taking "Battlestar Galactica" more seriously than it had been taken in a long time, though in a very different way. And for this reason, Moore thought he would be a hero to those who had rallied to Hatch's cause. At last there would be someone who would get a new "Battlestar" made and, what's more, who would be faithful to the original story's dark premise -- perhaps even more faithful than the original had been.

As production progressed on the miniseries, details of the changes Moore and Eick had in mind for "Battlestar Galactica" began to circulate on the Internet, and to many fans they were deeply disturbing. The Cylons would look human, and they would be sexy. Even more troubling: Moore had killed the idea of any "continuation story," as Hatch had long been championing. All of the characters would be recast, including Hatch's own Apollo, and the story would start over.

Things had not gone easily for Hatch and his followers since that great day in 1999. Two attempts to revive or create a new series based on "Galactica" -- one by its original creator, Glen Larson, the other, for Fox, by the film director Bryan Singer and his producing partner Tom DeSanto -- had seemed imminent and had then fallen apart. Both had been continuations. The failure of the Singer-and-DeSanto project was particularly heartbreaking for Hatch. He had thrown his support behind DeSanto's proposed pilot, and the fans followed. But Singer left the project to complete "X2," and Fox subsequently let it drop before it could go into production.

So among the hope-dashed fan community, which had come to see the issue of a continuation as sacrosanct, Moore was regarded with some suspicion, his "Star Trek" credentials aside. Then, when they learned that he intended to recast Starbuck as a woman -- it was too much.

"Starbuck is a guy. A GUY. A GUY!!!" posted a fan named Rhonda on the forums of [battlestargalacticclub.com](http://battlestargalacticclub.com) in December 2002. Moore was accused of bowing to political correctness, of dishonoring the memory of the original actors, of requiring a beating. One original-series fan called him "the Paul de Man of current science fiction," accusing him of casually deconstructing the story that had been so close to their hearts for so long, only in order to "make his mark."

"I started a Yahoo group called 'Ron Moore Sucks,'" John DiPalermo, a New York-based old-series supporter, told me recently by e-mail. "I proudly take credit for starting to refer to him as the MooreRon right after the script was first made available." (Someone leaked the script on the Internet.) "In every 'Battlestar Galactica' Yahoo group, I would call him the MooreRon, and it became very popular."

As for Hatch, he had been approached about doing a cameo in the miniseries, which, if he accepted, would, in effect, give the new show his blessing. Hatch declined. In an interview on the Web site "Sci Fi Pulse" in August 2003, Hatch conceded that Moore's ideas were interesting, but, he said, "what angers me is the fact that they have disregarded the polls and most if not all of what fans have said they liked about 'Galactica.'" And Hatch was right. The fact was that the active fans of the old series, pro-continuation or no, represented a tiny percentage of those who might come to Moore's show out of curiosity and stay if it was good.

But Moore understood fans from his "Star Trek" days. He had *been* a fan and had gone to conventions, and he remembered what it was like to feel that devotion to a fictional world, and what it could make you do. And so when he was invited to appear at Galacticon, the convention Hatch was helping to organize to mark the 25th anniversary of the original show, Moore said yes.

It was held in October 2003, two months before the miniseries was to go on the air, at the Sheraton Universal Hotel in Universal City. Moore took video clips from the miniseries that no one had ever seen. "I really had this blind faith," he told me. "All the way through it, I always had this faith that they just have to see it, and then they'll see that it's actually pretty good."

The audience was tense and angry. Apparently a coordinated plan had been circulating to pelt Moore with popcorn. He took the stage and showed his clips. And the crowd booed. ("They *booed*," Moore recalled, with a kind of cool, blinking amazement. "And hissed.")

The popcorn didn't come, but the questions did.

"I know it must be uncomfortable to be here," one audience member began. "Not to patronize you, but we owe Richard so much. . . . Ron, it's a *slap in the face* that he was not taken into consideration." The room grew quiet. "And when this miniseries fades away, and if it becomes a series, and when that series fades away . . . I hope you will consider what some of us said here today. That there could have been a correct way to making this happen."

Moore nodded understandingly and said a few words in his own defense. "I was asked, 'What do you want to do with 'Galactica?'" he told the audience. "I said, 'This is what I want to do' . . . and I did it. And I don't make any apologies for that. . . . I have nothing but good things to say about the original show. I have nothing but good things to say about Richard Hatch. . . . But I'm the guy that's doing the show, and this is the choice that I made, and I stand by it."

A boo began to form in the room again, and people started to yell things, and then, in the back of the room, Hatch stood up. He wore a black T-shirt, and he raised his hand to calm his people. (If you are curious, there is a commemorative DVD of Galacticon 2003, and at this moment, the camera swings wildly around to quick-focus on Hatch.)

"Ron," Hatch said, "I just want to say, No. 1, that it takes incredible courage to stand there and listen to people express their emotions and feelings, and I just take my hat off to you, No. 1." He then said he didn't blame Moore for anything. "You had the boldness and strength to actually commit to that vision," he said. "Whether it stands or falls will be up to the wide audience of this world. But just even from this, I can see that you have a bold vision, that you're an incredibly talented man and you have a lot to say. And I honor that."

"Enterprise," the most recent tv series in the "Star Trek" franchise, was going off the air as I was visiting Moore and Eick in Vancouver. The week I saw Moore in L.A., the most recent "Star Wars" movie, "Revenge of the Sith," was opening up at the CityWalk in Universal Studios. I saw it there, not far from where the old "Battle of Galactica" display on the Universal Studios Tour used to be, before they replaced it in the 80's with a mock earthquake, not far from where Moore and his writers meet now.

When I walked out, those two sagas were finished (at least for now) for the first time in almost 40

years, and it was difficult not to appreciate the strange journey "Galactica" had taken to outlast and, at the end, outshine those sagas it had once been accused of ripping off. Having made its debut first as a miniseries in late 2003 and then having its premiere as an original series this past January, "Battlestar Galactica" is the most successful original program in the Sci Fi Channel's history. Meanwhile, many of the fan sites that had originally opposed Moore and Eick's vision now actively or passively support it. Discussion of the show has migrated somewhat, from the fan boards to political blogs, where the issues it raises about security, religion and the ethics of android torture inspire heated debate, as well as praise from conservatives and liberals alike.

But there are some remaining diehards. "I will never support the MooreRon," John DiPalermo wrote to me. "Maybe I'm stubborn and pigheaded, but . . . Starbuck is a MAN!!!!!" He said he prayed every day that Moore would lose his job, and he said he had also felt angry at his former rebel leader, Hatch. Because after the miniseries was a success and the first season was green-lighted, Moore e-mailed Hatch and again offered him a new role. And this time Hatch accepted.

The day I left L.A., I called Hatch and met him at the apartment complex where he lives, not far from the "black tower" of Universal he had fought for so long. He was friendly and gracious. He said he had gained some perspective on the cause that had taken up so much of his time. "Looking back," he said, "it's hard for me to believe I did what I did." He never intended to become so emotionally involved, he said. "I just felt there's something powerful here. And I just found myself taking a series of small steps that turned into big steps."

Things changed, he said, when he saw Moore defend the miniseries at Galacticon. "I just had such great respect for him up there," he told me. "I realized I was no longer thinking as the idealist. I could respect somebody else's vision for something, even something I had fallen in love with." He said it was sort of like falling in love with another man's wife. "Eventually you had to realize she's married. And not to me."

And it was hard to turn down the part that he had been offered, which was a wry and inspired matching of role and actor. Hatch now plays a former terrorist who leads a band of malcontents in the fleet, all the while striving for rehabilitation. Needless to say, the casting was Moore's idea.

John Hodgman is a contributing writer for the magazine.

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