

By T. Rob Brown, 2014

A Content Analysis of Joss Whedon

Introduction

This study is about the intertextual phenomenon known as *Firefly* (2002), created by Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dollhouse*, *Avengers*, *Agents of SHIELD*). What started out as a sci-fi/Western genre mash-up television series, was cut short in its first season by Fox, the network that broadcast it. Despite its early cancellation, the show has grown into a phenomenon that permeates much of the geek/nerd and gaming culture. I was drawn to this subject because I qualify as a gamer geek and am quite fond of *Firefly*. In addition, I am intrigued by the cultural discourse both displayed within the phenomenon and regarding those who are fans of the phenomenon.

Media Relationships

Being an intertextual phenomenon, *Firefly* exists as many different forms of media. Though it began as a broadcast television series, it soon became a syndicated cable series on the SyFy Channel. From there, it branched out into the motion picture *Serenity* (2005), which had a short run in the cinema. The feature-length film began to spin off merchandising of its own, including the *Serenity Role Playing Game* hardback book published by Margaret Weis Productions (2005), owned by famous fantasy author Margaret Weis who wrote adventures and fiction stories for the book. The television series and movie also released on DVD and later on Blu-ray. A musical score CD was also available for sale in 2005 for *Serenity*. Three visual companion books were also released by Whedon from 2005 to 2007.

Four supplemental books were written to expand the *Serenity Role Playing Game* between 2005 and 2010, including *Out in the Black* by famous fantasy author Tracy Hickman, *Big Damn Heroes Handbook*, *Six-Shooters & Spaceships*, and an adventure book. During that five-year period, Dark Horse Comics began to publish comic books and graphic novels based on the *Serenity* license. Many of

these were written by one of series creator Whedon's two younger professional writer brothers, Zack Whedon. His other writer brother, Jed Whedon, has worked with Whedon on numerous film and television projects.

The intertextual aspects also include board game *Firefly the Game* by Gale Force Nine (2013), an expansion for that board game (2014), and *Firefly Out to the Black Card Game* by Toy Vault (2014). In addition, the roleplaying game made a comeback under the *Firefly* license as *Firefly Role-playing Game* (2014), again published by Margaret Weis Productions, Ltd., after a limited preview edition was released at Gen Con (2013) in Indianapolis.

The combination of these many texts have created a cultural icon that is both revered and much talked about by its fan base. Its cultural significance can be seen in person at conventions, such as the aforementioned Gen Con or at Comic-Con International: San Diego, where many fans will wear the appropriate attire. These outfits may be as simple as T-shirts depicting a variety of images from the starship *Serenity*, characters from the series, to even merchandising subjects that take place within the series (Fruity Oaty Bars, Jayne's Troublemaker gun T-shirt, the Blue Sun Corp., etc.). In addition, the fans—who often call themselves Browncoats—dress up as Mal, Jayne, or other characters from the series. Sometimes they just wear a replica Jayne hat. According to Standpoint Theory, these experiences within the subculture shape the fans' perspectives.

The Analysis

In analyzing this intertextual phenomenon, I utilized several of the tools from Berger's text. Primary of these was **Sociological**. There are many aspects of *Firefly* that lean toward sociological analysis.

To start, I looked at the relationship and similarities between *Firefly* and the U.S. Civil War, which I'm certain our Capt. Malcolm Reynolds would prefer the term, “The War of Northern Aggression.” Reynolds fought in the series' war as a Browncoat for the Independents, the show's equivalent of the Confederacy. Likewise, the Browncoats lost the war to the technologically superior

central government.

Not only does *Firefly* mimic the U.S. Civil War in that vein but also in respect to the war's focus on freedom and individual world rights vs. a stronger central government (controlling all of the planets in the 'Verse). This rift of power results in a drastic split of the classes and standards of living, which can also be looked at using Marxist analysis. The pro-government (and mostly wealthy) worlds saw prosperity and every luxury known, while the occupants of the anti-government worlds were left to mostly fend for themselves on poor planets. This is a form of subjugation and control—a battle between high society and the common folk.

The series is filled with intercultural aspects as well. As the people of the 'Verse spread out into the stars from “Earth that was,” they incorporated multicultural influences. Primary of those is the intertwining of the Chinese (Mandarin) language with the English language. This influence grew as society spread through the 'Verse. The characters on the show often curse in Chinese and certain other expressions are also spoken in that language. One of the show's main characters, Inara, is of Indian heritage. Her clothing and traditions display the culture of India. The savage Reavers, which take on the role of the primary antagonists (aside from the central government) in the series, resemble the Hollywood “Injun” stereotypes (Curry, 2008).

The series is also filled with counter-hegemonic and marginalized figures that go against the grain of tradition. Capt. Mal Reynolds is not the typical hero—he has a darker side. Through the influence of native American mythology, he takes on the role of a trickster while remaining a hero (Gelineau, 2008). In the feature-length film *Serenity*, he transforms into a trickster-shaman as he works to heal his crew and heal the world by informing them of the government's atrocities.

Capt. Reynolds' first mate is a black woman who is strong, focused, and also a good leader. Zoe is in an interracial marriage with her white husband, Wash, who is the more submissive of the two. This pairing is much different than what we have seen traditionally on television in the past. Though it is not out of the question for science fiction shows to be more progressive. The first scripted interracial kiss

on television was on the original *Star Trek* series (“Plato's Stepchildren”, 1968). In *Firefly*, Whedon is not afraid to put women into positions of power, making them strong characters who do not need a man to rescue them. In fact, Zoe must come to the rescue several times in the series, especially once for both Reynolds and Wash (“War Stories”, 2002). Whedon self-proclaims to be a feminist (Whedon, 2013).

Inara, who is a Companion on the show, is basically a legal prostitute. She gives strength of character and grace to whores of color, who are marginalized in society (Amy-Chinn, 2006). Inara uniquely maintains the dual roles of femininity and feminism on the show.

Even River Tam—the brilliantly gifted but young, scared, government-experimented-on sister of ship Dr. Simon Tam—transforms from her initial state into a powerful, confident, and skilled warrior by the end of *Serenity*. The contrast between her small, slender form and the large, muscular male soldier Jayne leads to an exchange of roles when the hegemonic male becomes scared of her after she tells him, “I can kill you with my brain.” (“Trash”, 2003)

Finally, the fans themselves are part of the sociological aspects of the series. Being of the geek culture, most are marginalized in society. They have their own subculture utilizing their own language that stems from the show (in accordance with Standpoint Theory), which they use in casual conversation sometimes but most often when among other fans. Words like “Verse,” instead of “universe,” “the Black” instead of “deep space,” or utilizing some of the Mandarin Chinese expressions from the show. For example: *Huen Dahn* or “**bastard, jerk**, literally 'rotten egg,’” *G'en Ho Tze Bi Dio se* or “**engage a monkey in a feces-hurling contest**,” and *Go Neong Yung* or “**son of a bitch**.” (Chambers, 2005, pp. 221-223)

Under Marxist analysis, we look at the power struggles between the strong central government that believes it knows what's best for its people. Whedon takes a look at that power flux and how it affects the status quo. In the series, the status quo may slightly fluctuate up and down but in the movie *Serenity*, the status quo is disrupted. When this happens, the government sends out everything it has—an entire fleet of ships and a high-level covert operative—to attempt to regain control. Being the

trickster that he is, Reynolds retaliates in a way that they are unable to predict. As a result, he permanently changes the status quo. “You can't stop the signal, Mal,” said Mr. Universe. (Whedon, “Serenity”, 2005)

For the fans, their merchandising habits can be looked at through Marxist analysis. The show creates a desire to belong (also in accordance with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as well as the needs of the ego from psychoanalysis), to fit in with other Browncoats. To do so, many fans purchase a lot of *Firefly* merchandise. For some it is collecting for the sake of the collection and may only fulfill some desire of the id. These are not things they need in order to survive but things they want. They fulfill the gap that is left by the show's early cancellation. For the fans who purchase the merchandise, the show can live on in their lives—they don't have to let it go.

Through the wide variety of games, especially the roleplaying games, Browncoats can re-enact scenes or adventures from the series or create new stories of their own. This too helps them hang onto a show that was canceled about twelve years ago. Players often quip quotes from the franchise as they play the games. Overheard in the dealers' room at Gen Con 2013 from board game demo participants, “Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal,” as they played with toy dinosaurs that decorated the tables. This relates back to a scene from the two-part pilot episode “Serenity” (*Firefly*, 2002).

Under semiotic analysis I looked at the irony of the symbolism on the show. The ship itself, *Serenity*, is a *Firefly*-class transport ship. It is called this because of the glowing engine light on its tail end that resembles that of a firefly. This is symbolic of possibly a couple things. One, it infers a beacon of light in the Black—in the void of space. A light in the darkness can be synonymous with hope. In *Serenity*, the ship certainly does bring hope at the end of the film by helping the crew to complete their mission and spread vital knowledge to the 'Verse.

Additionally, most of the government ships are mechanical-looking compared to the nature reference of the *Firefly*. The symbolism holds true for nature vs. machine—an age-old discourse. This symbolic theme has been used in *Star Wars* as well, by having the inferior and primitive Ewoks defeat

the stormtroopers of the Galactic Empire. (*Return of the Jedi*, 1983).

Within the context of the show, the name *Serenity* is a signifier that relates to the signified, or the concept that Capt. Mal Reynolds will never forget what happened at the Battle of Serenity Falls during the war. Despite their victory, they still lost the war. This name has extreme significance to Mal and Zoe. Vicariously, it takes on strong meaning for the audience as well. Because the word serenity has other meanings, Whedon utilizes this in the dialogue for scenes like when Inara tells Mal, “Besides, why would I wanna leave *Serenity*?” (“Shindig”, 2002)

Also in relation to the sense of belonging from Maslow, many of the fans felt as if they were part of the show. “A show that made you feel like a member of the crew, like a part of the family, like you had your own bunk on *Serenity*. It was poised to just take over.” (Vancil, 2013)

Findings

From its initial vision by Joss Whedon to its growth and expansion across the fandom, *Firefly* is likely here to stay. Though it has not completely permeated popular culture as *Star Wars* has, it certainly takes a lead from its science fiction multimedia predecessor. Within the geek subculture, *Firefly* is one of the most popular science fiction series ever created. Its intertextual aspects are not anywhere near as varied as that of *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, but it certainly has stretched out across a variety of media.

This project did not teach me, with any degree of certainty, what the future of the *Firefly* franchise might be. That is mostly left to speculation but it does not appear to be dying off anytime soon. What is the future of this intertextual phenomenon? Joss Whedon's current contract with Disney/Marvel Studios will take him through additional seasons of *Agents of SHIELD* and at least two more *Avengers* films as well as his other Marvel franchise duties. After that, who knows? The fans have even ran a campaign in recent years to try to get the *Firefly* rights into the hands of Nathan Fillion, who played Capt. Reynolds on the show. For the time being, Fillion is quite busy as the lead actor on the hit television series *Castle*.

Conclusion

I believe that a qualitative study including interviews from a variety of *Firefly* fans from all walks of life could better help determine the longevity of the franchise. This study could be performed as a documentary film with still images and audio-visual interviews to let the fans tell their story. Not only would it help us to better understand the success-after-death of the series, but it would also help us to better understand the Browncoats and their passion for these texts.

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