"It's the Perfect Story, So They Say":Viewer Participation and the Works of Joss Whedon

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In an letter written to his fans just prior to the momentous release of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* on the Internet in the summer of 2008, Joss Whedon (2008) presents a call to action, urging his fans to "spread the word" about the production he had paid for entirely on his own, had produced during the 2007-2008 Writer's Strike in Hollywood, and was about to post for free on the Internet:

> Spread the word. Rock some banners, widgets, diggs… let people know who wouldn't ordinarily know. It wouldn't hurt if this really was an event. Good for the business, good for the community – communitIES: Hollywood, internet, artists around the world, comic-book fans, musical fans (and even the rather vocal community of people who hate both but will still dig on this). Proving we can turn Dr. Horrible into a viable economic proposition as well as an awesome goof will only inspire more people to lay themselves out in the same way. It's time for the dissemination of the artistic process. Create more for less. You are the ones that can make that happen.

Whedon, demonstrating knowledge of his fan base as well as an idealistic belief in the power of ordinary people, set out to create a different model for how such productions are produced and distributed. Television networks, especially, have long exhibited a fear of the internet, worrying that if they make their shows available on the Internet, they would follow in the footsteps of the music industry, which might result in the steady loss of revenues. What Whedon's production proved is that the networks lacked a creative approach to the changing face of media, especially in terms of the Internet. Whedon pushed back against the conservative nature of the networks and his experiment was an immediate success: "[d]emand for the first [act] was sufficient to crash the whole Hulu site as well as Whedonesque and the homepages for *Dr. Horrible* and *The Guild*" (Walters, 2009: 67). And when the show was made available on iTunes and later on DVD, "[w]hat began as a lark turned into something far bigger: the first series in history to find an audience and make money entirely online—outselling every TV show on iTunes in the weeks after its release" (Kushner 2009: 38). Of course, this Cinderella story is not without its caveats— Whedon was an already successful television and movie writer, director and producer who had the necessary money and friends needed to make the show as well as a firmly established fan base from his earlier fan-favorite shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*. However, it was Whedon's ability to understand, respect, and sympathize with his fans as well as his trust in those fans' intelligence and his willingness to challenge such intelligence that led to the success of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. In this essay, I will look at the trajectory of Whedon's television career, examining how each of his television shows released prior to *Dr. Horrible—Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*—created a fan culture that was primed for such an event as *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Understanding how Whedon employed popular conventions of fan culture in his own work will help to demonstrate not only why *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* became such a success, but will also serve to highlight how Whedon shaped his own fan base by encouraging fans towards critical inquiry of their own fan practices.

Approaches to Fan Culture: A Brief Overview

Of course, Whedon's creations are not the only television shows that have engendered a dedicated fan following. The most obvious comparison is with the long running multiple series *Star Trek* franchise, which has its fair share of fans and is perhaps one of the first franchises to attract such a loyal following. Other shows have provoked such a response as well, including *Xena: The Warrior Princess*, *Dr. Who*, *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. Yet, I would argue that Whedon's shows move viewers beyond typical fan engagement that often seeks to rewrite the series to the fan's expectations to a more nuanced and reciprocal relationship between Joss Whedon, the creator and author of these series, and the fans who seek to engage with the Whedonverse. As David Kociemba (2006: par. 32) argues, "Whedon guides the audience . . . to an investigation of their accustomed ways of thinking about identity and being, authenticity and duty, caring and vengeance." A brief exploration of two studies of fan cultures will help to illuminate both how Whedon's fans are responding differently to his work and how Whedon and his team of writers, actors, and producers used the conventions of fan culture to create shows that played off common fan practices.

In his influential and often-quoted book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins objects to the commonly negative stereotypical depiction of fans, examining the culture of fan practices in order to demonstrate how a variety of fans interact with television programs. Jenkins, writing in 1992, saw the prevalently negative view of fan culture at the time as narrow and limiting, failing to recognize the complexity of such cultures, and urged ethnographers of fan culture to question their own academic pretentions in relation to their depictions of fan culture. Eighteen years later, such depictions of fans still exist, although perhaps more acceptance has been given to many fan culture practices with the advent of the Internet and with the numerous academic studies that have sought to re-define fan cultures. Jenkins further argues that fans develop intelligent reading practices that allow for a participatory culture, using Michel De Certeau's concept of "poaching" about which De Certeau argues that "[f]ar from being writers . . . readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves" (in Jenkins, 1992: 24). Jenkins chronicles how fans write fan fiction, filk music (music inspired by the show of which they are fans), create their own movies using clips from the shows (commonly called "vids"), and sometimes attempt to live the ideals of their chosen show in their own lives. The extensive discussion Jenkins provides of these common genres in fan culture highlights how fans seek to make television shows into their own text as they nomadically move from show to show, appropriating storylines and characters for their own purposes. By becoming active respondents to the shows that they love, fans can become "readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (Jenkins, 1992: 23). Such participation allows viewers to become creators as well as they create their own stories for the show.

Matt Hills (2002: 137) extends and revises Jenkins's discussion of participatory culture in his book *Fan Cultures*, arguing that cult television shows owe their success to "endlessly deferred narrative" that encourages "multiple fan productions, speculations and recreations." Because such television shows never provide their fans with closure, fans, in turn, are encouraged to create their own closure and finish writing the story, becoming authors as well as viewers of the show. The viewer, then, gets to make the choice about how to deal with such "aporia" in the text; they can become frustrated and turn away from the show, write their own answers to the dilemmas that such shows provide, or allow the dilemma to remain in their minds, encouraging a more nuanced and critical reading of the show. Hills (2002: 137) further argues that in addition to the deferred narrative that sustains viewer attention and engagement, many cult shows use "hyperdiegesis," which is "the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extensions." Hills (2002: 137) continues, "the hyperdiegetic world may, as Jenkins notes, reward re-reading due to its richness and depth, but its role is, [Hills] would suggest also one of stimulating creative speculation and providing a trusted environment for affective play." So, in addition to Jenkins's argument that the detailed worlds of these cult television shows allows for viewer participation as they imagine parts of the world that do not appear on that show, Hills argues that such a world creates trust in the viewer as he or she learns the rules and can in turn play with that world in their own reactions to the show.

The participation that Jenkins outlines and Hills complicates is not without its problems. Throughout his book, Jenkins seeks to describe how fans interact with shows in an attempt to rewrite the commonly negative representation of fans in popular culture; however, the examples he provides often serve to reinforce such depictions. Often, the fan practices that he recounts have a major emphasis on fans rejecting the storylines and characterizations provided by the series they are devoted to. Whether it is in slash fan fiction, where fans usually imagine explicitly sexual relationships between male characters, or the fan videos, in which fans splice together scenes from the series, choosing music to help define the new scenes they create, fans are not so much responding to the series itself as creating something new out of the series. While this does point to a very active fan culture, it also highlights the problematic nature of fan culture, since fans become so fixated on a certain story or character to the detriment of paying attention to the series as a whole. Sometimes fans risk becoming so obsessive about their own storylines, making the series truly their own, that the reciprocal nature of their interaction with the series is lost. They stop learning from the series and interacting with it intellectually in order to become participatory fans. The work of Joss Whedon pushes against this impulse as he cleverly employs fan culture actively to engage his viewers and also challenges his viewers by presenting them with difficult ethical dilemmas. Throughout the rest of this essay, I will chronicle how the trajectory of his television career increasingly employed fan practices which culminated in his webshow, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, in order to demonstrate how Whedon encourages fans to participate in "agencies of interpretive exchange" with his work that teach viewers how to move beyond mere spectatorship to a more engaged stance (Eide, 2002: 1).

"Bring Your Own Subtext": *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* **and Fan Culture**

Whedon's oft-quoted impetus for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reveals how, from the beginning, he had a knowledge not only of how to mess with genre conventions but also to employ such conventions in order to draw in fans and educate them. On the DVD commentary of the opening episode of the series, Whedon (2002) discusses his intentions:

> The first thing I ever thought of when I thought of *Buffy: The Movie* was the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed, in every horror movie. The idea of *Buffy* was to subvert that idea, that image, and create someone who was a hero where she had always been a victim. That element of surprise and genre-busting is very much at the heart of both the movie and the series.

By taking a genre and turning it on its head, Whedon is seeking to do what many fan cultures had already been doing in response to other shows: question the genre conventions and create something new out of those conventions. So while some fans might create fan fiction about *Star Trek* that focused on lesser-known female characters in order to voice the objections they have about the anti-feminist undertones of the show, in the ultimate act of dynamic participation, Whedon creates his own show that does the same thing. And throughout the run of the series, Whedon and his writers continued to encourage reader response as they employed fan practices in the creation of many characters and episodes.

Whedon's awareness of the fan community surrounding his work was apparent from the beginning of his creation of *Buffy*. It was in response to a fan's post about the relationship between Faith and Buffy on the Bronze VIP discussion board that Whedon (in Stenger, 2006: 36) made one of his most famous urgings to fans, "Bring Your Own Subtext":

> "Okay, so I guess I must apologize . . . I just read the piece on Buffy and Faith . . . and by God, I think she's right! I can't believe I never saw it! . . . But then, I think that's part of the attraction of the Buffyverse. It lends itself to polymorphously perverse subtext. It encourages it. I personally find romance in every relationship . . . so I say B.Y.O. subtext!"

Unlike other authors who have sometimes demonstrated a discomfort with fans using their work to create something new, leading to many fans adopting pseudonyms for fear of being sued for copyright infringement, Whedon encourages viewers to respond to his creation by bringing their own perspective to bear on the series. Indeed, as Josh Stenger (2006: 35) argues, Whedon and his cohorts often surfed the discussion boards: "On several notable occasions the series' writers, directors and producers responded to fan suggestions and queries from The Bronze posting board by incorporating them into stand-alone episodes." Such a willingness to allow fan intervention into the show demonstrates how Whedon approached authorship differently than most television writers and producers.

Justine Larbalestier's (2002: 228) article, "*Buffy*'s Mary Sue is Jonathan: *Buffy* Acknowledges the Fans," highlights many of the individual episodes of the show that respond in particular to fan concerns and ideas, discussing how fan subtext often becomes text within the show:

> *Buffy* is a show that runs on subtext so that it frequently becomes text. This makes the kind of "poaching" activities that Henry Jenkins discusses even more complex. How do you poach a show that poaches itself, i.e., that has stand-alone episodes that appear to ignore the general arc of the show and play on the 'what if' scenarios beloved of fan fiction?

Larbalestier's question highlights the paradoxical nature of Whedon's involvement with his fans. Does his involvement, rather than encouraging participation, preclude such active engagement because it is already done for the viewer? Or does Whedon's use of fan practices encourage an even further engagement from the fan as it promotes critical inquiry of fan practices? By looking more closely at a few episodes of the show, I will demonstrate how Whedon's manipulation of fan practices at once engages fan culture and urges fans themselves to adopt a more critical stance in their own reactions to the show.

In her article, Larbalestier (2002) identifies several episodes that are commonly identified as being inspired by the fan community, "The Wish," "Doppelgangland," "Something Blue," Superstar," and "Restless." About the first three episodes on this list, she argues that they "provide responses to speculative fan scenarios: what if vampires ruled Sunnydale and Willow and Xander were vamps? What if the Vamp Willow and the good Willow were to meet? What if Buffy and Spike were engaged?" (Larbalestier, 2002: 229). Usually employing humorous alternate-world scenarios, each of these episodes plays with fans expectations even as they grant the fans' wishes. Interestingly, even when the show seems to produce a stand-alone episode, the events in those episodes advance major storylines in the series. So, even when the writers of the show play with fan conventions, they go beyond simple wish fulfillment, using fan ideas to complicate the world of the show.

The episode, "Superstar," goes even farther in the wish fulfillment scenario as the minor character, Jonathan Levenson, casts an augmentation spell to make himself the hero of the Buffyverse. As Larbalestier (2002: 233) argues, "this is the wish fulfillment fantasy of every fan who has ever watched a show and longed to be part of it. Within fanfic there is a tradition of writing oneself into a show in just this way. These stories are called 'Mary Sues." Jonathan, then, becomes the representative of the fan who wants to belong in the fictional world that they enjoy every week. Larbalestier (2002) further argues that this depiction of fan practices within the show, more than the other episodes previously discussed, seeks to subvert and perhaps criticize such desires. Throughout the episode, everything about Jonathan is perfect; he fights the best, gives the best advice, writes his own biography, and is apparently an accomplished singer and athlete. "Mary Sues" in fan fiction are usually criticized by the fan population as most fans see it as uncreative engagement with a text. Jonathan's role as the "Mary Sue" thus holds a mirror up to the fans. No one on the show is perfect, and the exaggerated perfection of Jonathan serves to emphasize the ridiculous nature of such desires. At the end of the show, as Jonathan's augmentation spell falters and fades, Jonathan is once again the nerdy outsider, standing on the outskirts of Buffy and her group of friends. Larabelestier (2002: 234) argues that this episode may "imply that all fans are wanna-be's" and "that their engagement with a show like *Buffy*" may be "caught up in their/our desires to be a better Slayer than Buffy, more knowledgeable than Giles, and so on."

She further argues that Jonathan is not only "pathetic, but everyone knows that he is pathetic. The object of desire, the show and its actual central character, Buffy, is punishing the one who desires it: the fan" (Larabelestier, 2002: 234). Indeed, responses to the show were divided as some fans "enjoy the way "Superstar" comments on and mocks Mary Sues," taking pleasure in "the little in-jokes about Jonathan's involvement with the show," even as other fans demonstrate embarrassment as the episode comes "dangerously close to caricaturing the relationship of fans to the show" (Larbalestier, 2002: 234).

I agree with Larbalestier's (2002) characterization of the show as creating a sort of double-response in the viewers as they both laugh at fan practices but are made uncomfortable by the mirror held up to their own involvement with the show, but I would also argue that the episode makes further commentary on fan practices, cleverly encouraging fans to adopt a more critical stance about their own connection to the show. Shiloh Carroll (2009: par. 1) is correct in asserting that "*Buffy* writers never write one-dimensional episodes, and there is more to Jonathan and "Superstar" than parody." Jonathan is thus not only parodying fan culture, but also providing commentary on what the effects of rewriting the series might be. As Jane Espenson (2006), the writer of the episode, notes on the DVD commentary of the episode, "we actually started the teaser with Buffy rolling around on the ground having gotten hit. An astute viewer might realize right away that Buffy is not her normal slaying self." And, of course, the "astute viewers" Espenson is most likely referring to are the fans of the show. If Jonathan is the representative of fans within the show, demonstrating fans' twinned desires to participate in the world of the show and to rewrite that world to their own tastes, the effects on Whedon's central idea for the show, taking a stereotypically weak character, the blonde in the alley, and giving her the power to fight back, is in danger. What this episode communicates to fans who write their own versions of relationships on the show is the danger in such revisions. After all, "[i]n stealing Buffy's accomplishments, [Jonathan] also steals her self-confidence and happiness" (Carroll, 2009: par. 5). Buffy is not effective at all throughout the episode; she lacks the confidence to kill even a single vampire by herself and none of her friends listen to her and are shocked when she calls a meeting without Jonathan there. This episode serves to reflect fan practices back to themselves, forcing fans to question the way they interact with the show.

Jonathan is not the only minor character who represents fans within the show. Later, Andrew Wells, a member of the Trio of super-villains, which also included Jonathan, serves as a representation of fan culture within the series. Throughout seasons six and seven, Andrew provides frequent parodies of fan culture, as he is shown collecting *Star Wars* action figures, painting the Death Star on the side of a van, and discussing who is the best James Bond. Indeed, David Kociemba (2009: 133) argues that "the Trio represent the kind of casual viewers that watch the series to ogle Sarah Michelle Gellar during the cool fight scenes." Andrew's obsessive commitment, and as Kociemba argues, addiction, to fan culture lightly mocks many of Whedon's fans and also reflects earlier depictions of rabid fans depicted in the media, such as Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*. Kociemba (2009) further argues that the portrayal of Andrew in particular provides a warning for viewers of how not to be a fan. Andrew only consumes media; he doesn't

interact with it. Describing Andrew in comparison with Xander, Kociemba (2009: 139) asserts that Xander provides fans with a more positive example of how to respond to the media that they love so much: "Xander recognizes his Klingon love poetry and gets Andrew's comic book references. Xander provides a positive role model for Andrew, however, because he stops himself from getting lost in talking about them." Thus, throughout the series, Andrew holds a mirror up to certain kinds of fans, and his depiction, along with Xander's different approach to fandom, makes fans question their own engagement with the show.

In the episode, "Storyteller," the effects of Andrew's unexamined fanaticism are particularly highlighted. As the episode opens, the camera pans through a library decorated with *Star Wars* paraphernalia as music reminiscent of *Masterpiece Theatre* plays in the background. Eventually, the camera stops on a book-reading Andrew, who facetiously addresses the viewer, "oh, hello there gentle viewer. You caught me catching up on an old favorite. It's wonderful to get lost in a story, isn't it? Adventures, and heroics, and discovery, don't they just take you away?" (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* "Storyteller," 2003).   From the beginning of the episode, Andrew's vulnerability to being caught up in stories rather than focusing on reality is highlighted. His opening speech reflects one common fan response to the show, getting lost in it and escaping reality. As the episode continues, it becomes clear that Andrew is not some fancy narrator, but rather just a person videotaping the events of the world around him. And his love for storytelling becomes increasingly problematized as the episode develops.

Throughout the episode, it is clear that Andrew writes his own story onto that of the other characters, imagining himself at one point living like a God and providing fantasy scenes that introduce many of the main characters. He also re-imagines stories that have already been told in the series. Mimicking the practice of "vidders" or fans who make videos, he imagines a scene with Dark Willow where he had total power over her. In this reimagined scene, the parts with Dark Willow are merely recycled scenes from season six of *Buffy*, and Andrew inserts himself into those scenes, echoing the Mary Sue tendencies of Jonathan in "Superstar." Part of the reason for this storytelling is that Andrew does not want to face his own complicity in what is currently happening in Sunnydale. Andrew will not admit his own responsibility for killing Jonathan until the end of the episode, when Buffy pretends that she will murder him in order to close a seal on the Hellmouth. She urges Jonathan to "stop. Stop telling stories. Life isn't a story," continuing "you make everything into a story, so no one is responsible for anything because they're just following a script . . . This isn't some story where good triumphs because good triumphs. Good people are going to die." (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* "Storyteller," 2003) This speech functions as a message to fans to stop simplifying the Buffyverse. Andrew wants a simple story with simple answers, but Buffy makes clear that this is impossible. At the end of the episode, Andrew realizes the reality of his situation. He starts to tell a story again, but turns off the camera, and the episode ends. The subtext of this ending makes clear that it is necessary to stop fantasizing and start living. As Kociemba (2009: 140) argues, "Andrew must undo a lifetime of spectatorship and learn active, engaged listening." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s comments towards the fans encourage them not only to participate as many fan cultures do, but also urge viewers to adopt a

more critical stance on how they are participating. This nuanced connection with the fan culture continues in the spin-off of *Buffy, Angel: The Series*.

"Not Fade Away": *Angel: The Series* **and Fan Culture**

Angel: The Series, which was created as a spin-off in 1999 after Angel had appeared on three seasons of *Buffy*, built upon the fandom created by *Buffy* even as it adopted a slightly darker tone. Although there are no completely analogous characters to Jonathan and Andrew on *Angel*, the show still reflects fan behaviors back to them, commenting on such behavior and continuing to encourage a more active and nuanced fan participation. Angel himself demonstrates fanatical tendencies in his love for all things Barry Manilow and Winifred Burkle, better known simply as "Fred," portrays the geeky charm that Willow and Xander had both perfected that serves as a reflection of the show's fans own geekiness. The character, Lorne, the unquestioning loyalty to Jasmine at the end of season four, and the series finale specifically demonstrate a knowledge of fan response to the show and use such a response to create a conversations of sorts with the fans.

Lorne, sometimes known as "the Host" or "Krevlornswath of the Deathwok Clan," made his first appearance in the opening episode of season two of *Angel*. The episode, marking a departure from the first season of the series, begins with Lorne's singing "I Will Survive." At first, the introduction of a singing demon would most likely confuse viewers as they have not yet learned that Lorne is an anagogic demon that reads people's destinies by listening to them sing. However, viewers soon learn that he is perhaps one of the most tolerant characters presented on any of Whedon's shows. From the beginning of his tenure on the show, he establishes a particular connection with the audience, sometimes speaking directly to them as he acts as a storyteller in many of the episodes. In "Judgement," and "Spin the Bottle," for example, he acts as the narrator for the story, interspersing his own commentary within the events of each episode. In this way, he mimics the storytelling aspect of Andrew on *Buffy*, but rather than becoming a model for negative fan interaction with narrative, Lorne becomes a model for a more advanced view of a critically engaged fan. As a storyteller figure in the series, rather than attempting to create his own version of events as both Andrew and Jonathan do, he not only watches the events of the series unfold, but also provides a model for engaged listening and creates his own story rather than attempting to adapt someone else's story as his own. More than any other character in the Whedonverse, Lorne is a listener. He not only functions as a listener in his club, "Caritas," as he listens to various demons sing in order to help them with their lives, but he also becomes a listener for Angel and many of the other major characters. Lorne's listening is different from the passive spectatorship of Andrew as he not only listens, but also usually provides complex advice to the person he is listening to. Lorne never tells any of the characters to do anything and never provides a certain answer to their problem; rather, he highlights the uncertainty of the future and the importance of agency.

In addition to developing Lorne as a model for a more critically engaged fan, *Angel* explicitly addresses fan culture conventions at the end of season four when the demon goddess Jasmine creates a shiny, happy world full of sycophants that do not question any of her actions, including her frequent eating of people. Jasmine creates a utopia of sorts, ridding the world of conflict and strife, and everyone who comes into contact with her immediately worships her. Yet, underlying this worship is uneasiness. The world is too perfect. While this arc can be seen as explicitly criticizing unexamined religious worship, the main characters' interactions with Jasmine and the cult-like following that she engenders also comment on fan culture and the dangers of unquestioned devotion. In the episode, "Shiny Happy People," before the main characters learn that Jasmine is evil, they discuss their fanatic response to her presence. Jasmine herself tells Angel that "there's no room for doubt, Angel, only love" (*Angel* 'Shiny Happy People,' 2003). And Angel tells Fred that "everything just seems so easy," commenting to her that the questioning is finally over (*Angel* "Shiny Happy People" 2003). What this unexamined devotion makes clear is that having a more critical approach is important; the characters lose free will as they are consumed by their love for Jasmine. This depiction of devotion sends a message to fans not to love something without doubt, to maintain questions, encouraging fans to question what they love even as they love it.

Further, Angel's son, Connor's, response to Jasmine can be interpreted as a representation of a lack of critical engagement. From the beginning of her birth, Connor can see the ugly face that she hides from the world, and he accepts her and even continues to love her despite knowing that she eats people and that, underneath her beautiful disguise, she is a horrible, maggot-eaten demon. When Angel tries to convince him to leave her side, Connor responds, "I'm finally part of something. I belong. I won't let anyone ruin that" (*Angel* "Sacrifice," 2003). Connor's desire to find a place where he belongs blinds him to the negative aspects of Jasmine, just as sometimes fans are blinded to the negative undertones of what they love. Connor provides a model for fans of how not to respond to a text, demonstrating to fans the dangers of unexamined worship. That Connor was perhaps the least liked character within Angel fandom indicates how fans of the show might prefer the sort of fan represented by Lorne, a fan favorite.

Aside from these models of fan interaction, *Angel*'s series finale, entitled "Not Fade Away," goes beyond holding a mirror up to fan practices and encouraging fans to develop a critical approach to the show; rather, the finale acts a sort of tribute to fan involvement in the show and, especially, to the "Saving Angel Campaign," through which fans protested the cancellation of the series. Stacey Abbott (2005: 231) recounts the activities of the campaign:

> The campaign took numerous and often quite creative forms, including: online petitions, a WB call-in campaign, in which fans were urged to telephone their local network during Angel's commercial breaks to remind them of all the viewers who vanish with the series' cancellation; and a regular flood of postcards to the network and advertisers.

Fans also raised money to hold a rally in Los Angeles on March 31, 2004, donating the leftover funds to the International Red Cross (Abbott, 2005: 231). This campaign provides a testimony to how invested fans were in the show and to how positively they responded to Whedon's constant

urging towards a more critically engaged fandom. And the series finale nods at the fans activities to save the show, with its theme of not giving up the fight. The uncertain ending of the series, in which Angel, Gunn, Illyria, and Spike are in an alley about to face down a hoard of seemingly undefeatable demons, provides hope for the viewer and celebrates the idea of fighting for what you believe in. Angel's final words, "let's go to work," indicate there is still more to do, and the ending implies that the story will continue, providing a boon to fans who could keep the show alive with their own activities. (*Angel* "Not Fade Away," 2004) Although the fan campaign to save *Angel* was unsuccessful, what the series finale says to fans is that caring enough to try is what is important. Joss Whedon's short-lived series, *Firefly,* inspired similar fan responses, including a fan campaign to save the show that resulted in the movie, *Serenity*.

"You Can't Stop the Signal": *Firefly* and *Serenity* and Fan Culture

By the time Joss Whedon created *Firefly*, his longtime fans had already been educated in how best to approach their fandom. The television series, which aired for less than a season and was mishandled by the Fox network, inspired a great deal of fan devotion. In the documentary, *Done the Impossible: The Fans' Tale of* Firefly *and* Serenity (2006), several fans attest to how quickly they were mesmerized by the characters on the show and the manner in which the story was told. Many fans discuss how they were immediately drawn to the show because Joss Whedon had created it. Whedon's earlier television series had successfully built up an intelligent and media savvy fan base. While the show wasn't on long enough to establish the same kind of extensive conversation with its fans about their own practices, the fans' involvement in the show indicates how much they had learned from Whedon's earlier work.

What is most remarkable about fan culture in relation to *Firefly* is how large the fan culture became in such a short time and how successful they were in influencing Fox to release the series on DVD and helping to allow Whedon to continue the story in the form of a movie. Fans of the show, more commonly known as "Browncoats," developed a particular community even within the scope of Whedon fan cultures. This community is documented at length in the documentary *Done the Impossible* (2006), in which fans discuss their individual journeys with the series. Many of the fans comment on how they enjoy the show because it doesn't talk down to them, demonstrating a recognition that Whedon expects more from his viewers. The documentary also highlights how those involved with the series, the actors, crew, writers, and producers, also became fans of the series. Whether it is Nathan Fillion talking about how much he loved his role as Malcolm Reynolds on the show and who still tweets about the show and references it quite often in his new series *Castle*, or Adam Baldwin, who played Jayne on the series, tearing up about the cancellation of the series, all of those interviewed in the documentary demonstrate that they were deeply involved in the series and subsequent movie and did not view it as merely a job.

Similarly to the response to *Angel*'s cancellation, the Browncoats campaigned for the series to

remain on the air, and once they knew the movie was going to be produced, they began their own gorilla marketing campaigns, blanketing entertainment stores in flyers for the movie and creating websites in support of it. In the ultimate act of fan participation, many of the fans were invited to be extras in the film. Indeed, as Stacy Abbott (2008: 236) argues, "[i]n the case of *Serenity* discourses around the film's production have . . . blurred the distinction between creator and fan by positioning them as working together to bring their shared vision to the screen and to a bigger audience." *Serenity*, in many ways, can be seen as a tribute to the fans, and the character, Mr. Universe, serves as a representative of fan practices and engaged participation. The crew of Serenity goes to Mr. Universe when they need information because he is a hacker of sorts who can not only read the various signals of the media, but also can broadcast to the entire universe. As Abbott (2008: 236) describes, he is a "classic techno-nerd, [who] controls and monitors the galaxy's communication networks." He is the one who deciphers the subliminal message sent to River that triggers her to attack a roomful of bar patrons. And he is the one who has the line "can't stop the signal," which became a rallying cry for fans. Mr. Universe can thus be seen as an expression of gratitude towards the fans. But even as the character provides a thank you to the fans, it also highlights Whedon's continuing desire to educate his fans.

Fans of the series and film often see themselves as fighting against the networks and studios, using the metaphor of the Browncoats provided by the show to express their displeasure with the way in which the series and, to some extent, the film, was handled. In the series and film, the "Browncoats" represent the losing side in a war for unification; their rivals are the Alliance, who won the war and now rule over the entire universe. The fans began to demonize Fox Network and Universal Studios by identifying them as the Alliance. In a direct response to this demonization, Whedon urged a more nuanced reading of his creation, maintaining "the reason I made the Alliance a generally benign, enlightened society was so that I could engage these people in a debate about it" (in Cochran, 2008: 248). Whedon disallows an us vs. them dichotomy, creating a world which is not black and white to which he wants fans to respond with debate rather than certainty, highlighting to fans the necessity of vigilance in their critical interactions with the show. Such an approach is further developed in his webshow, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*.

"Get a Pic, Do a Blog": *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* and Fan Culture

As I discussed earlier, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* was a unique event that capitalized on Whedon's already established fan cultures in order to make a statement about the television and film industries. And the continuing dialogue with his fans about their critical engagement only served to increase the likelihood that they would approach his new creation with intellect and curiosity. Indeed, without his fans, the success of *Dr. Horrible* and its ability to subvert these industries would have been in danger. More than any of his series, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is a direct response to and commentary on participatory fandom and its practices, continuing the conversation with fans about the manner in which they engage with popular culture. In particular, the representation of the groupies and Billy/Dr. Horrible use many conventions of fan cultures.

The depiction of the groupies follows the pattern of Whedon's other creations in that it lightly mocks fan culture. The groupies display their unswaying devotion to Captain Hammer as they sing about how fantastic he is. They have signed photographs from him, a lock of his hair, and t-shirts with his face on them. At one point, they tell him, "we do the weird stuff," and they sit in the audience gazing at him admiringly when he announces the opening of the new homeless shelter (*Dr. Horrible* 2008)*.* The groupies never question Captain Hammer's motives or seem to notice his inability to speak eloquently; they admire him unquestioningly, until Dr. Horrible gains the upper hand. Quickly, they shift their loyalties to Dr. Horrible and hold up photographs of him, wearing his trademark goggles and t-shirts with his face on them. These groupies represent fans that lack the critical engagement to read beyond the surface, who are willing to follow any fad. Such fans can be contrasted to the increasingly loyal and intelligent fans that Whedon had developed.

Billy/Dr. Horrible also employs some of the conventions of fan culture. He notably doesn't belong, something that many fans identify with, and he is computer-savvy, keeping a blog to detail his exploits as a Dr. Horrible. He even has his own fans who send him e-mail, which he answers on his video blog. He encourages a sort of community and wants to join the Evil League of Evil so that he is a part of something bigger and more important. He also encourages others to participate in the online community, telling people to "get a pic, do a blog," indicating that participation is how change happens (*Dr. Horrible* 2008). While Billy admittedly demonstrates some of the negative stereotypes of fans, such as being nerdy and awkward, he does eventually become more confident with Penny and succeeds in his own plans, nefarious though they are, to be a super-villain. Even though his story ends tragically, Billy/Dr. Horrible provides an example to fans of how to participate in fan culture *and* live the story of their own lives. Billy is a huge fan of Bad Horse, but he doesn't just content himself in that fandom; he seeks out ways to emulate Bad Horse and develops his own approach to achieving those goals.

Beyond this commentary on fan culture within the show itself, the commentary provided on the DVD of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* further develops Whedon's response to his fans. There are two commentaries on the DVD, one is the usual kind of commentary where the show's actors, writers, and director discuss the background of the making of the show, but the other is "Commentary: The Musical." Again, demonstrating his well-honed savvy about fan culture, Whedon capitalizes on fan practices, like filking, by creating such a commentary. In "Commentary: The Musical," (2008) the actors and writers sing a variety of songs in relation to the show. Joss Whedon's musical number presents further discussion of his response to the fans. His song, "Heart, Broken," is about how people respond to his work. He sings, "now we pick pick pick it apart. Open it up to find the tick tick tick of the heart." ("Commentary: The Musical" 2008) The song highlights his concern over those who seek to appropriate his work and impart to it ideas he had not intended and betrays his discomfort with the "bring your own subtext" theory that he presented early on to fans. His cohorts respond to him in the song, "without these things you spit upon, you'd find your fame and fan base gone," highlighting a productive tension between Whedon's desire to communicate ideas through his show that encourage his viewers to think

thoughtfully about the world around them, and his desire to let fans play with his creations in order to participate more fully ("Commentary: The Musical" 2008). *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*'s success reveals how this tension between Whedon's ideas and the fan's response can help to create a particularly critical and active fan community that not only debates the numerous issues raised on Whedon's shows, but also brings their own perspective to such debates.

"With Hope, You Can Do Your Part": Conclusions

In an interview in the documentary *Done the Impossible* (2006), Whedon pays tribute to his legions of fans, commenting on how they frequently raise money for charities, "[t]hey're better people than I am, which is a little annoying. The fact of the matter is that's always been a side of who these fans are that their first instinct would be to raise enough money to do what they needed and then do something right with it." He continues, "I'm not saying that it's something Mal [from *Firefly*] would have done, but it is something that I think shows enormous character, and I like to think is something we helped build together. The unity that they get from the show and from each brings out the best in them, which, as you can see is pretty extraordinary" (in *Done the Impossible,* 2006). His idea that they built this community together indicates the high expectations he has of his fans. He doesn't write down to them or give them easy answers; rather, he challenges them with shows that depict difficult situations and ethical dilemmas that often do not have an answer at all. He also challenges their own practices by holding up a mirror to typical fan responses, pushing fans towards a more educated and critical connection to his work. Whedon dwells in the gray areas in his creations and invites his fans into those areas so that they, too, can grapple with complex dilemmas. As someone who greatly admires teachers and who once said his dream job was to be a teacher, he educates his viewers in how to treat one another better, how to become more critically engaged as fans, and how to approach living in a difficult world in which almost no one feels like they belong.

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