

**Queer Composition, Fantasizing Phlebotinum, and Worldmaking  
with the Whedonverse: A Course in Religious Studies Using  
Critical, Genre-based, and Technology-Supplemented Pedagogical  
Methods**

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[1] As noted in Christine Jarvis's 2016 article in *Slayage*, "Whedon scholarship has a strong pedagogical strand" (Jarvis, 2016), and although others have considered Whedon's work relative to the concerns and methods of religious studies (e.g., Santana & Erickson, 2016, pp. 149-160; Mills, Morehead, & Parker, 2013; Koontz, 2008; Stevenson, 2003), I hope to demonstrate how Whedonverse texts provide material for an enjoyable course, well-suited to undergraduate liberal arts or advanced secondary education, that pulls together three valuable pedagogical techniques in the context of religious studies: critical pedagogy, genre-based pedagogy, and technology-supplemented pedagogy. Although a full course of this sort may only be possible for liberal arts professors who have relatively high degrees of control over the courses they design and offer, elements of it could be applied to course design by a far greater number of instructors, including in disciplines other than religious studies, such as rhetoric and composition, media studies, and sex and gender studies. The suggestions presented here attempt to

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provide concrete ideas without supplying an overly constrained, fully determined syllabus. Broadly, for a teacher with the freedom to present a full course, I propose a course unit devoted to an introduction to genre analysis, followed by three units focused on engagement with Whedon texts<sup>1</sup> and secondary academic texts to support discussion of (a) the queer construction of a selected Whedonverse character, (b) the “queering” of “family,” and (c) how a genre may itself be “queer.” Finally, students engage in their own critical religious world-building through a multimedia composition project. This is summarized in Table 1 at the end of this introduction.

[2] If religious studies is understood as a discipline fundamentally oriented toward the *critical* analysis of worldviews and world-making processes (cf. Taves & Aspren, forthcoming), its courses are a natural site for the application of critical pedagogy—the methodical use of education to promote the critique of power, the recognition of how its operation naturalizes and conceals itself in human-made worlds, and the liberation of the oppressed. In this case, queer studies is the selected lens for guiding a religious studies critique of world-making. Queer studies is another critical discipline that focuses on the construction, constructedness, and instability of sexual identities and categories, sometimes moving beyond analysis of the normative to celebration of the different (cf. Benschhoff, 1997). Queer studies is chosen in part because Whedon’s corpus lends itself to this, and in part because it is useful, in the context of religious studies, to remind students that religion is not always or only about purity, stability, or seriousness. Humor, horror, and sex, though often treated as antithetical to “religion,” are central to certain religious phenomena and worldviews, and Whedon’s worlds and world-making help stimulate reflection on the religious significance of things like blending and boundary-crossing, tricksters and terror. Students attracted to a course using Whedon’s work are more likely to be open to the idea that queer, LGBT, and kinky spiritualities and religions, though deemed illegitimate by some religious people, are real and interesting worldviews, fully worthy of study. As a PhD student researching made-up worldviews in speculative fiction, I find that this course design reflects my growing conviction that the use of fictional texts and worldviews in the religious studies classroom solves

a number of challenges unique to religious studies by permitting (1) a less personally threatening, (2) a more detached and critical, and even (3) a playful and entertaining consideration of such questions as how worldviews produce personal experiences, are constructed as meaning-making systems, are shaped by and in turn shape configurations of power, and are enabled and constrained by cognitive factors (cf. Fredrickson, 2016; Fredrickson, forthcoming; Taves & Fredrickson, 2017).

[3] Whedon’s approach to religion supports the religious studies instructor in helping students to attend to what Smith (1978) has called religion’s *locative* and *utopian* qualities. That is, in its “locative” mode, religion provides people with a coherent, meaningful world to inhabit; however, some religious worldviews also provide occasions for critical reflection on artifice, fictionality, and emptiness—in other words, “utopia,” in the sense, not of “good place,” but of “no place.” Some words for this critically reflective process, to which students are introduced throughout the course,<sup>2</sup> are “deconstruction” (as when one notes inconsistencies and contradictions in Whedon’s worlds and symbols), “defamiliarization” (as when something “normal” is presented in such a way as to arrest attention and render it unusual), and “problematization” (as when something unquestioned and natural is converted into a problem, a subject for critique); in fact, “queer” itself may function as an adjective meaning “critical” or “subversive” or as a verb meaning “to critique” or “to subvert.”

[4] Santana and Erickson (2016), discussing religion in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* storyworld, stress its critical, utopian nature, or, one might say, its anti-nature: “The mythology of *Buffy* is more accurately anti-myth—not an affirmation of older systems of thought—but a continual challenging of them, not stories that explain and comfort us with certainty, but stories that pull the ground out from under our understanding” (p. 158). Just as the “queer” resists stable, essentialized sex-based identity, Whedon’s approach to religion:

resists categorization and static meaning throughout, and, especially in its later years, introduces subversive elements into the conceptual universe of the earlier seasons. The series is an instructive text on the interaction of American popular culture

and popular religion in that it presents religious and theological themes in ways that refuse to provide comfort and stability. (Santana & Erickson, 2016, p. 159)

The intentional, active cultivation of awareness of fictionality or constructedness is a central feature, too, of queer studies, which may help account for the abundance of queer material in the Whedonverse.

[5] Of critical pedagogy, genre-based pedagogy, and technology-supplemented pedagogy, perhaps the most intriguing is the growing and impressive body of evidence for genre-based teaching, particularly in the context of writing studies (e.g., Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bazerman et al., 2009; Devitt, 2004), although it is appropriate to note that the close analysis of text types and genres has long been a central method in religious studies. Essentially, genre-based pedagogy encourages students to focus on how genres are constructed. Introducing students to different genres and helping them to think through how these are constructed and how their construction relates to rhetorical concerns promotes a variety of evidence-based pedagogical outcomes. Among the benefits of genre-based pedagogy, it (1) helps cultivate critical, reflective thought, (2) prepares students with transferrable skills to respond adaptively to new tasks, and (3) increases empathy (cf. Keen, 2007), which may be tied to students' metacognitive abilities.<sup>3</sup>

[6] Genre-based pedagogy promotes critical thought because it inherently distances its practitioner from the literary and audiovisual texts and genres it studies. It "queers" them by calling them into question and reading them in alienated and alienating ways. Placing queer studies and religious studies in the foreground of a course using Whedon's corpus intensifies and specifies the critical perspective. Although eleventh century theologian Saint Anselm may have defined "theology" as *faith seeking understanding*, treating faith as unquestioned even while it questions, the suspicious discovery and critique of power and its operations in religion is one of religious studies' primary foci as an academic discipline (Bush, 2014). Its critical focus distinguishes it from theology. And just as religious worldviews may supply their adherents with critical perspectives regarding alternative worldviews (e.g., "heretics," "pagans," and "secularists") as well as positive, even utopian visions of what is possible, so too queer studies may supply, not

only a critique of any monolithically signifying sexuality (Sedgwick, 1993), but also utopian hopes of possibility (Muñoz, 2009).

[7] Since Whedon's universes are located in and constituted in terms of the conventions of a range of speculative genres, the Whedon corpus provides a useful body of material in which to apply genre-based pedagogy. Since the Whedon "texts" are already multimedia texts, they likewise lend themselves to pedagogical methods that take advantage of technology and that promote an understanding of composition that embraces more than textual production alone. Finally, Whedon's critically literate works exhibit a "queer" or "utopian" sensibility that may, with the aid of queer studies, help promote critical thought in the religious studies classroom, challenging and transforming previously naturalized and essentialized categories, including not only sex, gender, race, and even species, but also genres themselves.

[8] Regarding technology-supplemented pedagogy (in this case, multimedia or digital composition) and its link to genre-based pedagogy, it is productive to note that, as McLuhan (2003) famously argued, the medium is the message. It is sometimes hard to distinguish between medium and genre in genre-based pedagogy, for the medium necessarily constrains and enables the expressive powers of the story told through it. Wysocki (2004) notes that those who compose in new media need to engage with the rhetorical insights of writing instructors. And, in harmony with Wysocki's argument, this course builds on rhetorical concepts used to interpret and understand how texts are situated and structured in persuasive and informative ways to consider other media. This unit of the course is designed with the TPACK framework in mind (Koehler and Mishra, 2009). "TPACK" refers to "technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge" and is a daunting call for teachers to use technological and digital affordances to supplement and enhance their teaching, but the term also points to the interrelatedness of these abilities. As opposed to focusing on blended learning (cf. Garrison and Vaughan, 2013) or the instructor's assumed use of instructional technologies<sup>4</sup> and effective use of the course management systems like Moodle to facilitate more than ease of access to information (e.g., syllabi, lecture notes, readings, and resource links), the focus here is on teaching students to understand and create narrative content in digital media. Part

of the critical awareness students should cultivate, however, should be appreciation of the economic and social factors that make certain media accessible to some people but not others (cf. Warschauer, 2003). By using the genre-based method to consider queer studies and religious studies content in Whedonverse texts, the course itself reinforces the interrelatedness of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge. Use of models from Whedon's corpus introduces students to storytelling and analysis in media other than and in addition to the textual, but it demands of its instructor a variety of TPACK competencies.

[9] The degree to which a given teacher will be able to devote class time to digital composition will vary widely. In general, I assume that class time will be limited. Thus, students should be made aware early on that, although some technological skills will be modeled briefly, very little class time be devoted to the numerous specific software and hardware technologies through which students may be able to compose digitally. They will need to factor this outside class time into the homework burden. One's syllabus might explicitly state, "Substantial active, inquiry-based, problem-solving self-instruction and conflict-resolving collaboration is expected." This emphasizes again that pedagogical knowledge is part of technological and content knowledge so that one may be able to assist one's students by providing them with necessary affordances for growth (Chickering and Gamson, 1991; Daniels and Walker, 2001; Michaelsen et al., 2002; Silberman, 1996). And this is good. The play of difference operative in a variety of methods, as in a variety of genres, seems to help promote critical thinking (Yuretich, 2003). To learn technical skills for digital composition, many institutions offer access to sites like Lynda.com, and there are a number of other free online educational websites and resources for learning how to use digital composition technologies.<sup>5</sup> Learning to use such tools will be far easier if students work together. The teacher would do well to point out to students—again, perhaps in the syllabus itself—that though the course is focused on a single creator, Whedon, these media are inherently collective, and the final project is collaborative because that is demanded by the nature of the media.<sup>6</sup> Collaborative composition helps students engage in what Leary calls "macrocomposition," an expression he uses to indicate "a new understanding that, in digital realms, assembling the

work of others ought no longer to be viewed as a means to an end, or as ‘a preliminary stage’ for developing writers, but as an end in itself” (2011-2012, p. 2).

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## **Table 1: Summary of Course Reading and Viewing Suggestions**

### **I. Genre-based Pedagogy**

- Suggested Whedon text for class discussion: *Cabin in the Woods* (2011)
- Suggested secondary texts for class discussion: Carroll, 2010; Bunn, 2010; Dirk, 2010; Irvin, 2010

### **II. Critical Pedagogy**

#### *a. Queer Characters*

- Suggested Whedon texts for class discussion: *Buffy*, “Buffy vs. Dracula” (5.1) and *Dollhouse*, “Echoes” (1.7), “Needs” (1.8), and “Meet Jane Doe” (2.7)
- Suggested secondary text for class discussion: Boulware, 2013
- Suggested Whedon text for class discussion of Angel: *Buffy*, “The Wish” (3.9) and “What’s My Line?: Part 2” (2.10)
- Suggested secondary texts for class discussion of Angel: McCracken, 2007; Hollywood, 2016;
- Suggested Whedon text for class discussion of Spike: *Buffy*, “Fool for Love” (5:7)
- Suggested secondary texts for class discussion of Spike: Spicer, 2002; Amy-Chinn, 2005; Lavoie, 2011
- Suggested Whedon text for class discussion of Lorne: *Angel*, “The House Always Wins” (4.3)
- Suggested secondary text for class discussion of Lorne: Palmer, 2008

#### *b. Queer Families*

- Suggested Whedon text for class discussion: *Buffy*, “Family” (5.6)
- Suggested secondary text for class discussion: Chambers, 2009

#### *c. Queer Genres*

- Suggested Whedon texts for class discussion: “Once More, with Feeling” (6.7) and *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008)
- Suggested secondary texts: I suggest one start assigning readings to support the composition project at this point, delivering information about how a genre might be queer or queered in lecture format.

### III. Technology-supplemented Pedagogy: Multimedia Composition

- Suggested texts for final project:
  - Chapter 6 of Jobling (2010) or Erickson (2008) or the introduction to Wilcox and Cochran (2008)
  - “Fantasizing Phlebotinum – Worldview-making Worksheet” (see Appendix 1), which might be supplemented with Williamson (2014) or Card et al. (2013)
  - excerpts from McCloud (2006)
  - excerpts from Lambert (2010)
  - excerpts from Dancyger and Rush (2002), with Martin (2010)

### Genre-based pedagogy

[11] For students to benefit from genre-based instruction, they must understand the purpose of the method. They must be active participants in the transformative process. In fact, they would do well to become aware of their “novice” or initiate status (cf. Sommers and Saltz, 2004). The defamiliarized state—like the feeling of opening a new fantasy novel, joining a new RPG, or travelling to a different country—should become *familiar* and desirable, in part because there will always be new genres to learn. And the goal of critical genre awareness is, in a sense, to shift students into a perpetually liminal or queer state relative to the genres they are analyzing and in which they are composing. Whedon appreciates genres such as horror, sci-fi, and the western but resists permitting their conventions to become frozen or naturalized in his understanding. He is able to construct novel variations on and blends of their features precisely because he knows that they are constructed.

[12] Introduce and explain genre-based methods to students early so that they may pay attention to the right things and play an active role in their self-development. Happily, there are a number of accessible online readings about the study of genre for composition students at <http://writingspaces.org/essays> (e.g., Carroll, 2010; Bunn, 2010; Dirk, 2010; Irvin, 2010). I suggest classroom discussion of at least the four readings just cited, with accompanying small exercises in which students select, analyze, and even compose texts in specific genres. For example, students might be asked to pick two sources from two different genres on the same topic and explain how the differences between the genres shape their respective treatments of the topic, or students might transform a text in one genre into another genre.

[13] Even at this early point in the class, it is vital to point out that deconstructive analysis of a genre goes hand-in-hand with constructive composition in and with a genre or genres. The rhetorical terms students learn from the readings on composition in order to engage in genre analysis—such as old Greek words like *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*—are not ends in themselves. They are not just fancy terms for diagnosing how politicians and advertisers manipulate people. Rather, because rhetorical genre analysis is being combined with critical pedagogy, these rhetorical methods are intended to become tools for liberating people from what they assume to be the limits of the real and persuading people what is possible.

[14] Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011) provides material for the entire class to become familiar with genre-based instruction, genre analysis, and the rhetorical categories that facilitate it by focusing on the horror genre. The instructor will guide students who are horror-genre literate to help explain its conformity to and violation of the genre to those students who know less about the genre, with the instructor perhaps referencing clips from comparable genre-critical works—e.g., *Hot Fuzz* (2007), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006), *Funny Games* (2007), etc. Furthermore, the instructor will encourage students who know less about the genre to reflect on and express features they may have found distressing or annoying due to their unfamiliarity or novelty. Use Lipsett's (2012) "'One for the Horror Fans' vs. 'An Insult to the Horror Genre': Negotiating Reading

Strategies in IMDb Reviews of *The Cabin in the Woods*” as a secondary reading to promote such a discussion. As background preparation for classroom analysis of *The Cabin in the Woods*, an instructor should become generally familiar with H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos and perhaps prepare some example clips from other Lovecraft-influenced works like *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994). Starr’s (2013-2014) “Whedon’s Great Glass Elevator: Space, Liminality, and Intertext in *The Cabin in the Woods*” can aid an instructor in using the film as a way to introduce some useful critical vocabulary for the queer analyses that students will engage in throughout the course.

### **Critical (genre-based) pedagogy**

[15] Genres like horror, fantasy, and science fiction lend themselves to critical thinking and are especially popular with critically literate authors. Call (2012, p. 16) states:

From its inception, SF&F [science fiction and fantasy] has been all about violating norms: first those of literature and later, during the New Wave of the 1960s, its own. It has been about blurring borders, first those of genre and later, again during the 1960s, those of gender and sexuality. SF&F is indeed “something truly outside.” It is a genre always already outside literature: a “paraliterature,” to use Delany’s term.

The queer has often been defined in an oppositional relation to the normative,<sup>7</sup> and so perhaps it is not surprising that genres like science fiction that have been “all about violating norms” have been among the first genres in which non-normative representations of gender and sexuality were most explicitly explored. Early science fiction and fantasy texts—including comics and movies—titillated their audiences with thinly disguised (and sometimes undisguised) queer themes like BDSM, homoeroticism, and even cross-species (i.e., coded interracial) romance. Such genres let the queer out of the closet, and, as Call (2012, p. 15) observes:

The thing about coming out of the closet is that you can’t go back in again afterwards. Kink is here to stay, and mainstream pop culture will continue trying to represent it. America is hungry for

honest, edgy representations of kink. Weiss has documented a “mainstream public” which “continues to look to BDSM as an inspiration for norm violation, a location that promises an attack on borders, boundaries, and closed-down options” (2006a: 129).

In order to attune and sensitize students to some of the queer and kinky aspects of the Whedonverse storyworlds, as stated above I propose three course units following the introductory discussion of genre analysis and preceding the course project. The proposed units focus on (1) the queer construction of a selected character, (2) the queering of family, and (3) how a genre may itself be queer. Depending on time, one might only be able to cover one of these units, or one might want to offer the course as a two-quarter or two-semester sequence, introducing readings and concepts in the first half and devoting the second half of the course to the multimedia composition project.

#### *Queer characters*

[16] McCracken’s (2007) chapter, “At Stake: Angel’s Body, Fantasy Masculinity, and Queer Desire in Teen Television,” offers a queer reading of the way the character Angel is presented as pierced and penetrated, wounded so that Buffy is not. Buffy and Angel’s relationship is an expression of what Polhemus (1990) calls “erotic faith” and what C. S. Lewis (1959) calls the “religion of love”—a religion in which virtually anything is permitted and any sacrifice is sanctified in the name of Love. For some, love justifies even queer representations and acts that disrupt sexual roles and binaries. While Sedgwick’s (1993) discussion of the sentimental contemplation of Jesus’ wounded and displayed body might be too challenging for most undergraduates, one might assign students, with the McCracken (2007) reading, Hollywood’s (2016) ““That Glorious Slit’: Irigaray and the Medieval Devotion to Christ’s Side Wound,” which examines some of the fascinating ways Jesus was feminized by Christians—male and female—seeking mystical union with the divine. This facilitates a comparative analysis of both (1) the idolized and fetishized male star and religious devotion to Jesus and (2) the queer feminization of the beloved male figure. Or, instead of Angel, one might focus on what is queer in the representation of characters like Spike (Spicer, 2002; Amy-Chinn, 2005; Lavoie, 2011) or Lorne (Palmer, 2008). Another possibility might be to assign the episode “Buffy vs. Dracula”

(5.1) and consider, not only the vampire lesbianism that panders to Giles's male gaze, but also Xander's Renfield-esque infatuation with Dracula. (Editor's note: See also Greenwood, this issue.) The episode may continue discussion about the horror genre and Whedon's use of intertextuality, but the queering or "faggotization" (Puar, 2007) of Xander relative to his vampire "Master" may be used to explore, through mature classroom discussion, how "queer" may refer to more than same-sex eroticism, including (1) the dom/sub dynamic and erotic pleasure derived from the play of power and pain and (2) relationships, as in religious attachments, between humans and supernatural beings.

[17] The manner in which Xander, Giles, and Buffy are overcome by the minds, wills, and desires of the vampires leads into a critical discussion of *Dollhouse's* premise—as well as the quite literal way its characters are converted from straight to gay and *vice versa*.<sup>8</sup> *Dollhouse* queers its characters by having instances of what Strongman (2008) calls "transcorporeality" (cf. Boulware, 2013), but, unlike the African-derived religious examples Strongman is interested in, the persons whose powers surpass the human individual and who possess them with alternate selves are corporate, not divine. Consent is also less clear in this case, which encourages critical thought about the nature of rape as well as the presumably "voluntary" nature of corporate work and the neoliberal rational self. The surrender or assumption of the self to or into the collective—the very mechanism of salvation in Christian theology—may be, as Durkheim (1995) argues, foundational to religion, but the transcendent and its claims on the human subject may be engaged with greater suspicion when, as in the case of *Dollhouse*, it is realized in a corporate rather than a supernatural person. Draw on cyborg theory to consider how the technology-supplied and supplemented subjectivity relates to our own increasingly enhanced and virtual lives (Hayles, 1999), the conditions of which ultimately seem to lead to the postmodern collapse of the concept of a unitary, masterful, stable subjectivity. Thus, in the consideration of queer characters, the concept of a "character" may itself be deconstructed. *Dollhouse* supports a subjectless critique even while portraying the heroic (re)formation of a new kind of subjectivity. Students read Boulware's (2013) "I Made Me': Queer Theory, Subjection, and Identity in *Dollhouse*" to assist discussion of these issues.

Throughout the classroom discussion, the religious studies instructor helps students appreciate how the “religious” and the “secular” mutually constitute each other and how many central concepts of the public, secular world, such as “sovereign” and “subjectivity,” still retain much of the logic of the Christian past. Religious studies, as a discipline that critically examines *worldviews*, does not exempt the secular order from its analyses.

### *Queer families*

[18] In *Buff*y, Whedon makes an explicit analogy between gay identity and Buffy’s identity and coming out as the Slayer, Oz as a werewolf, as well as between Willow and Tara’s sexuality and witchcraft. In some cases, coming out can threaten the ties of family, and Whedon uses this threat to affirm the real and voluntary character of chosen family. When thinking about Whedon’s worldmaking process, one may note that he has invented numerous fictional religions and other worldviews, but his central characters’ worlds are founded on the idea of family, sometimes biological, but often not. This theme is, among other places, discussed at length in Battis’s (2005) *Blood Relations: Chosen Families in Buffy The Vampire Slayer and Angel*, which makes fine background reading for an instructor, and Chambers’s (2009) chapter entitled “The Meaning of ‘Family’” in *The Queer Politics of Television*, which is a manageable text to assign to students. Whedon’s ideal of one’s family or tribe or crew as extending beyond and often having nothing to do with the biological is a queer one,<sup>9</sup> and it extends to his relationship with his fans. In interviews, Whedon often discusses his unusually close relationship with his fans.<sup>10</sup> He wants them to take his worlds and extend them—inviting a “participatory culture” wherein the rather authoritarian and one-directional logic of mass media is somewhat disrupted by bottom-up, creative fandom processes (cf. Jenkins, 2006, 2013). For example, Whedon once stated in an interview regarding *Buff*y:

I designed the show to create that strong reaction. I designed *Buff*y to be an icon, to be an emotional experience, to be loved in a way that other shows can’t be loved. Because it’s about adolescence, which is the most important thing people go through in their development, becoming an adult. And it mythologizes it in such a way, such a romantic way—it basically says, “Everybody who

made it through adolescence is a hero.” [. . .] I wanted her to be a cultural phenomenon. I wanted there to be dolls. Barbie with kung-fu grip. [. . .] I wanted people to internalize it, and make up fantasies where they were in the story, to take it home with them, for it to exist beyond the TV show. (Robinson, 2011, pp. 28-29)

Not only is the adoration of pop icons and superstars recognized as religious and as a religious threat by some faith leaders, who lament it as idolatry, but fans also themselves sometimes adopt religious language to explain the fandom experience (see, for example, Erzen, 2012). Participatory culture supplies a way of life and a worldview, as well as a community, whether understood as religious, secular, or otherwise, that is an appropriate and stimulating subject for analysis within the religious studies context and comparison with other worldviews and ways of life. I shall discuss fandom and participatory culture further below in the context of genre, digital media, and particularly *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, but through guided discussion, students may be helped to appreciate how Whedon's notion of family metaleptically extends outside of his storyworlds, again pointing to the queer, transgressive, boundary-crossing quality of utopian religion (cf. n. 6; see also, Tweed, 2006; Albanese, 2013; Kukkonen & Klimek, 2011).

#### *Queer genres*

[19] Above, I have already outlined an argument that science fiction, horror, and fantasy are genres that seem to be especially hospitable to queer critique because they are rooted in the exploration of alternative possibilities and that this may play a role in their appeal for Whedon. Gray's (2015) critical reading of Willow and Tara's relationship in her chapter in *New Directions in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Gothic* argues that *Buffy* represents a postmodern version of the gothic genre. Gothic, as a critical, romantic response to the Enlightenment and modernity's self-confident will-to-mastery and foreclosure of possibility, challenges civilization, patriarchy, and technology with such Whedonesque things as liminality, femininity, nature, magic, and sexuality. Another genre that contrasts with the rationalism, realism, conservatism, and masculinity of genres like the gangster movie, the Western, and the detective film<sup>11</sup> is the musical. Whedon's fondness for the musical genre has been explored by scholars such as (1) Cox (2013), whose dissertation on *Dr. Horrible's*

*Sing-Along Blog* provides fine material for a lecture to guide classroom analysis of the work; and (2) Dvoskin (2010, 2006), who wrote her Master's thesis on the musical episodes in *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and whose work argues—contrary to the idea that the genre is inherently nostalgic, as some have similarly argued regarding country music—that, in fact, the musical is an excellent genre for queering history. One might, like Adorno (2001), criticize the culture industry and genres like the musical for their authoritarian, totalizing impulses—as when everyone starts dancing and singing in spontaneous unison and support of a protagonist; however, the musical's potentially disruptive nature, due to its anti-realist or non-mimetic qualities, which it shares with genres like science fiction, horror, and fantasy and media like comics and animation, may also be emphasized.

[20] Using *Dr. Horrible*, a classroom discussion of the musical genre transitions to the course's third pedagogical theme of technology and digital composition (see Willis, 2014), and, moving from its critical, queer analyses of world-making elements such as characterization, relationships, and genre, the course shifts into the constructive phase of active, participatory world-making, with guided reflection on the queer potential of participatory culture. But before moving on to the constructive phase of the course, it might be productive to have students turn in a short critical reflection on a chosen aspect of the Whedonverse. For example, students might be given the following short-essay prompt:

In three to five double-spaced pages (with standard 12-point font and 1-inch margins), please explain in your own words (but using course readings, concepts, and terms) how either a particular Whedon character, community, or genre expresses the critical, queer, and utopian functions of religion.

### **Technology-supplemented (critical, genre-based) pedagogy**

[21] Let's begin consideration of this challenging unit with an anecdote. In the interview with *The Onion* cited above, Whedon was asked how he deals with the emotional intensity that some of his fans display when interacting with him (crying, inability to speak, etc.) (Robinson, 2011, pp. 27-28). Whedon replied:

It's about the show, and I feel the same way about it. I get the same way. It's not like being a rock star. It doesn't feel like they're reacting to me. It's really sweet when people react like that, and I love the praise, but to me, what they're getting emotional about is the show. And that's the best feeling in the world. There's nothing creepy about it. *I feel like there's a religion in narrative, and I feel the same way they do. I feel like we're both paying homage to something else; they're not paying homage to me.* (emphasis added, Robinson, 2011, p. 28)

How may one engage creatively in the kind of world-making in which "there's a religion in narrative"? (Cf. Lavery, 2002). Moreover, is digital or multimedia composition really appropriate for a religious studies classroom?

[22] Religious studies teachers are responsible, not only for teaching domain-specific information about worldviews, but also for helping students to develop a range of domain-general competencies that will help them be successful in the contemporary world. In harmony with the objectives and disciplinary expectations of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), religious studies teachers should fulfill their obligation to help cultivate students' compositional abilities by promoting "rhetorical dexterity" (Carter, 2008), including "digital dexterity" (Patterson, Hancock, & Reid, 2014).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, important religious phenomena are occurring in popular culture media, such as movies, TV shows, videogames, and in online communities (cf., e.g., Cusack, 2010, 2017; Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Possamai, 2005, 2012; Erzen, 2012; Chidester, 2005). The formation of participatory cultures, referenced above, and intense fandoms raise important questions regarding the distinctions between and relations among such things as fiction, reality, fandom, and religion (cf. Wilcox, 2015). Thus, some religious studies teachers might feel called to push themselves to learn how to help students become multimedia literate through digital composition projects. This constructive phase is also an appropriate balance to the deconstructive activity that dominates the preceding course units. By this point in the course, students have been thinking deconstructively for quite some time; they should find it positive or even refreshing to shift into the constructive mode.

[23] As with the students' critical relationship to genre, they should be assisted in coming to view storytelling in other media both analytically and constructively. For this reason, the course not only examines Whedon's work and worlds, but also calls on students to engage in world-building of their own. In this way, they will develop new skills and critical awareness of media other than traditional written texts—particularly visual genres that, due to their immediacy, may be unusually compelling and coercive. And they may come to see both how Whedon uses his media as instruments for realizing his visions of alternative worlds—that is, how a medium may *function as a tool* of one's will—and how a medium may *be an extension* of one's own imagination, not as a tool with a function to be mastered, but as a manifestation of the possible worlds one projects as extensions of one's most intimate being and thinking (cf. Heidegger, 1977). Of course, many students will not develop the fluency with their medium that is assumed in such a realization of extended self-expression and cognition, and that is fine.

[24] To facilitate the constructive phase of the course, the instructor might assign Chapter 6 of Jobling's (2010) *Fantastic Spiritualities: Monsters, Heroes, and the Contemporary Religious Imagination*. An alternative reading that focuses on Whedonverse materials in order to reflect on religious worldmaking is Erickson's (2008) chapter, "Humanity in a 'Place of Nothin': Morality, Religion, Atheism, and Possibility in *Firefly*," in Wilcox and Cochran's (2008) edited volume, *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, the introduction of which might also be used (Wilcox & Cochran, 2008). To assist students in the challenging task of making their own fictional worlds and worldviews, it is helpful to review in lecture some of the common story formulas, many of them religious in origin, that Whedon plays with and reformulates in a postmodern style.<sup>15</sup> Many scholars have thought about Whedon's heroes relative to Campbell's (2004) monomyth (e.g., Buckman, 2008; Money, 2008), which many screenwriters are indoctrinated to follow rather slavishly; others have noted his use of apocalyptic themes (Weaver, 2013) and other formulas. Dancyger and Rush's (2002) text on alternative scriptwriting foregrounds the problem of formulaic writing; Martin (2010) has written a chapter on teaching film production using *Buffy*; McCloud (2006) provides a useful and

digestible synthesis of visual composition advice that is relevant to both comics and movies; and, more generally, Williamson (2014) and others (e.g., Card et al., 2013) have written guides to storyworld building that pay attention to the issue of making worldviews, whether magical, religious, or more generically “cultural.”<sup>14</sup> Joe Lambert’s (2010) seven steps or “elements” in his *Digital Storytelling Cookbook* help students break the digital storytelling task into manageable parts. Based on Taves and Aspren’s (forthcoming) arguments in favor of “worldviews” rather than “religions” as the analytical category in the discipline of religious studies,<sup>15</sup> a worksheet is appended to this article to aid in the construction of a fictional worldview, taking up Taves and Aspren’s (forthcoming) suggestion that worldviews might be organized around or defined in terms of “Big Questions” in categories like ontology, cosmology, epistemology, axiology, and praxeology.

[25] Students should brainstorm individually before collaborating in person and online. Digital composition options include making (a) a short film or (b) a web comic, thereby emulating two of Whedon’s media. Students should practice pitching their ideas (using Keynote, Prezi, PowerPoint, or related platforms), with others providing critical responses. Then, they will draft a script using trelby.org (or Final Draft if one’s university or college provides computers with it downloaded). For those who want to turn the script into a short film, Lynda.com and other sites provide advice on using iMovie. Students are encouraged to watch *Tangerine* (2015) to see the potential of filming a queer movie with smartphones. If a group instead chooses to make a web comic, it might either (1) draw, scan, and post on a webcomic hosting platform or (2) compose digitally and post directly on a webcomic hosting platform. After the creative, constructive phase is complete, students should write reflective responses to their work critiquing its production and content. This will help cultivate the reflexive habit of metacognitive deconstruction and critique that should accompany creative and associative work.

[26] At the conclusion of the course, the instructor’s final assessment will reflect an evaluation of (1) students’ degree of active engagement with course concepts as measured by tracking attendance, participation, comprehension throughout the course, (2) their ability to

critically analyze the features and functions of genres through engagement with Whedon's works, as represented in particular by their short paper, and (3) their efforts to apply their knowledge of critical world-making in their digital or multimedia composition. Successful participation in the course will not necessarily produce great art, but it will display the gradual cultivation of the habit of recursive or "metacognitive" self-reflection, which is the hallmark of critical thinking, and an effort to build connections among course concepts, examples, and past knowledge and experience.

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### **Appendix 1: Fantasizing Phlebotinum – Worldview-making Worksheet**

**Ontological (What exists? What is real? What kinds of beings, forces, and things are there?)** What are the levels of reality? Are there beings, forces, or things that are supernatural? Think about their biology, the rules that govern their properties and activities, their spiritual nature, their personalities and relationships, whether they are mild or dangerous, good or evil (but also think about more complex or ambiguous relationships than clear binaries and dualisms), and what functions, powers, and limits they have. Make little stories about them. Notice that beings like gods may embody issues like ideal family structure, economic and political systems, and anthropology. They may suggest the validity of or problems with social hierarchies or racial and sexual essentialism. The degree to which levels of reality or kinds of beings interact should also be considered.

**Cosmological (Where do we come from? Where are we going?)** Make or adapt a simple story of the origin of the cosmos. How did it develop? Think not only about the *actual* history, but also about how it might be told differently by different people. What are important locations, natural and made? What are important times? Try to make up stories for these. What do people expect, hope, or fear will happen? Make an alternate version.

**Epistemological (What is true? How do we know?)** What are the sources of knowledge in your world? For example, sources could include texts, songs, stories, and experts of various types. What is unknown, unexplained, or unexplainable? Note that faith seems to be possible only when certain knowledge is not present. What degrees or kinds of knowledge are there? Describe how people learn what is true. How does this relate to your ontology? Are certain kinds of knowledge or ways of getting it better than others? What knowledge is forbidden or esoteric? How are valued things represented and thereby known? How does the style and medium of representation shape the knowledge?

**Axiological (What should we value? What is good?)** Make or adapt a story about a value (for example, a kind of being, a state (such as health, happiness, or courage), a location, a practice, the elimination of a practice, a time, etc.). Then make another, competing story about a different value. What are some negative aspects of the value or ideal? Do people worship a kind of being (e.g., deities) or pick a specific member of that class of beings, or does worship matter at all? Who decides what is worthwhile? What is trivial or unimportant?

**Praxeological (What should we do?)** Relate correct behavior to the different kinds of beings, forces, and objects—how should different kinds of things relate to each other? What practices accomplish basic life functions: food acquisition and preparation, warfare, building, commerce, and so on. Invent a ritual or custom (e.g., foodway, song, dance, way of dressing, posture or movement, saying, gift-giving and charity, prayer, curses, object-making, etc.), perhaps related to a certain time, place, practice, state of body or mind, event, or other value. Turn this into a story. How did it change over time? How might someone disagree? How costly is the practice? What does it demand of someone? How might the ritual be different in a different place? How might it affirm a value or repeat (or foretell) a cosmological event? Who knows the correct ways of doing things and keeps track of whether they are done correctly? How free or constrained are beings to do or not do what they ought?

*Go back through and try to think of ways to link these categories further given the details and stories you have started. Develop a theory of religion applicable to your world.*

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In order to watch instructor-selected episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Dollhouse*, and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, as well as movies like *Cabin in the Woods*, students might be asked to purchase subscriptions to content providers like Netflix, Hulu, and HBO for the period of the course. This seems preferable to sacrificing a significant portion of in-class time to showing the chosen Whedon works.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article's course design description, one may note a recurring focus on supplying students with new vocabulary. This arises in part from my conviction that giving people new words to describe their world and their experience in it is one of the most empowering things a teacher can do.

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<sup>3</sup> Claims of this sort are based on data such as measures of theory of mind in autistic individuals, and the interpretation of the data is contested.

<sup>4</sup> These include, for example, videoconferencing, online peer editing, writing, reading, and critiquing, and PowerPoint and Prezi presentations, perhaps with embedded audio or video, as is assumed if one uses a platform like Glogster.

<sup>5</sup> These include Apple's guide for iMovie using an iPhone (<https://help.apple.com/imovie/iphone/2.2>), Windows' guide for Movie Maker (<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/help/18614/windows-essentials>), WeVideo's support page (<https://www.wevideo.com/support>), MIT Open Courseware (<https://ocw.mit.edu>), Tuts+ (<https://tutsplus.com>), Alison (<https://alison.com>), Future Learn (<https://www.futurelearn.com>), and MakeWebcomics.com (<https://makewebcomics.com>).

<sup>6</sup> One might also argue that a rhetoric of collaboration is consistent with the practical consequences of feminist and queer critiques of the singular, sovereign, originating author (cf. Kirsch and Royster, 2010; Royster and Kirsch, 2012; Lunsford, 1999; Lunsford and Ede, 1990; Selfe, 1985). Editor's note: One might also note that Whedon's creations are collaborative.

<sup>7</sup> This construction may be problematized (cf. Hollywood, 2016, pp. 163 ff.).

<sup>8</sup> The rape-like nature of the domination, possession, and forcible conversion of people's sexualities may be triggering for some students, and it might be appropriate to warn them before showing certain clips from *Dollhouse*.

<sup>9</sup> If one were to assign the McCracken (2007) reading on Angel during the unit on queer characters, then one might return, in the unit on queer families, to McCracken's critique of *Angel* as heteronormalizing Angel by conforming him to the ideal of a biological and reproductive family.

<sup>10</sup> Aspects of Whedon's personal life have recently highlighted questions about that relationship. On that relationship in 2017, see Pateman (2017).

<sup>11</sup> In *Firefly*, Whedon plays with the genre of the Western, creating a blend of science fiction, fantasy, and Western elements reminiscent of *Star Wars* while simultaneously resisting the feudalistic hero-worship of the *Star Wars* cosmos. Likewise, in *Angel*, Whedon plays with elements of the detective genre.

<sup>12</sup> For a collection of sample syllabi on composing in new media, see <http://compfaqs.org/NewMediaCourses/ListOfSyllabi>.

<sup>13</sup> Whedon as auteur is a master of intertextual pastiche, an appropriately postmodern style (cf. Jameson, 1991). This style emphasizes the constructedness of things, as well as the manner in which humans are technical and creative. In this respect, just as drag uses caricature and irony to materialize the artifice and artificiality of gender, to perform the performance so that its performativity is unmasked (cf. Butler, 2006, p. 169), so too what some (though not Whedon himself) would call Whedon's "camp" style, exhibited for example both in the character of Spike with his knowing theatricality and ironic affectations (cf. Masson and Stanley, 2006) and in his playful pastiche of genre conventions, resists allowing one to rest in an uncritical,

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transparent interpretation of his work. It calls out for audience engagement and supplementation. This postmodern, self-constructed, participatory culture is enabled by technologies—and a late-capitalist order—that render our identities increasingly posthuman or cyborg (cf. Collier et al., 2009).

<sup>14</sup> I know of no single text for an instructor who wants to assign and facilitate this kind of world-making project, so the above suggestions are intended to aid other instructors, both as background readings for in-class discussion and as potential readings that might be excerpted in a course reader.

<sup>15</sup> In part this is because “worldview’s” higher level of generality permits comparison with other religion-like phenomena like magic, sport, music, drugs, politics, economics, and so on. The concept is also a fruitful way of thinking about narrative genres and media (cf. Nünning et al., 2010).