Go Run Your Little World:
Role Playing in the *Firefly* Universe

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[1] The 'Verse: a collection of eight star systems that have been terraformed to support a human exodus from the dying Earth. Called home by smugglers, government agents, and pirates, the average ship captain in the 'Verse can expect a life full of rewarding adventures and daring journeys. The possibilities for heroics are endless in the universe of *Firefly*, as long as you choose to create those heroics yourself. The narrative run of *Firefly* only lasted for half of a season in 2002 and a film in 2005, making the canonical storylines from the show within such a massive galaxy limited to say the least. Despite cinematic depictions of the 'Verse ending over a decade ago, the Browncoat fandom refuses to give up on the ship and the worlds that captivated their imaginations. Browncoats and others called for more tales of the intrepid Serenity crew, made evident by the nearly $1 Million dollar fan effort to buy the rights in 2011 (Crider 1). Beyond that, a longing to explore the terraformed galaxy that has not reached its full narrative potential has resonated with *Firefly* fans for years. Even though the *Firefly* series contains only 12 hours of canonical cinematic content, the relatable aspects of *Firefly*'s narrative and universe spawned role playing games such as the *Firefly* Pen-and-Paper (PnP) Role Playing Game (RPG), an RPG *Firefly* board game, and *Firefly Online,* a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) currently produced by Quantum Mechanix, all of which allow previously passive viewers to become active players as captains, mercenaries, and other roles within the *Firefly* universe. The central question to ask about the popularity of role playing games within the *Firefly* universe is, why *Firefly*? *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is Joss Whedon's most successful original program, yet all 12 full seasons within the *Buffy*verse have only spawned one RPG for each series.[1] The interest in role-playing *Firefly* stems from the universe itself, and not the narrative events of the show. Given such a large and ultimately unexplored galaxy, the crew of Serenity becomes a single campaign, one group's interpretation of how to survive rather than the defining experience of the 'Verse. The show's narrative becomes a guideline rather than an instruction manual, as fans can interpret events, rules, or characters however they see fit in a way that allows new narrative to come from this preexisting universe. This flexibility demonstrates that the most successful aspect of *Firefly* is not the narrative storyline for one group of people, but the fleshed out world building that allows

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[1] 12 seasons of both *Buffy* and *Angel*, excluding the *Buffy* Season Eight Comics, as I have excluded the *Firefly* comics from the canonical timeline.

not only this one crew, but thousands of crews, to exist organically and collectively in a long established universe.

     [2] To begin, we must explore why the content of *Firefly* makes connections to the role-playing audience, and why it works well enough to have inspired three variations of RPGs. The freedom of travel and exploration is a shared core concept of both *Firefly* and RPGs. As defined by Gary Alan Fine in *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Fantasy Role Playing is "any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (Fine 6). When envisioning the Serenity crew as a campaign of players this freedom of operation applies, as they are able to choose their own adventures, destinations, and allegiances while moving about freely in the *Firefly* galaxy. The crew ultimately has the choice of their actions and is not dictated to by others, as seen with the refusal of completing Niska's robbery in "The Train Job" (F1002), or detouring their passenger delivery to meet Patience on Whitefall in the episode "Serenity" (F1001). The actions of the crew are their own, and they will travel wherever they please in order to find work and complete their quests. The lack of rigidity or procedural format of the show allows the same freedom in an RPG adaptation, as there is no proven system for success that a crew can follow for automatic completion. This is why the ultimate choice the crew has over their actions lends itself to role-playing. In his book *The Art of Video Game Design*, Chris Crawford defines the difference between a game and a story as:

> A story presents the facts in an immutable sequence, while a game presents a branching tree of sequences and allows the player to create his own story by making choices at each branch point. The audience of a story must infer causal relationships from a single sequence of facts; the player of a game is encouraged to explore alternatives, contrapositives, and inversions. (Crawford 9)

Firefly storylines are often unpredictable and fluid, because choices made by characters often explore alternative actions that do not appear linear to a formulaic, goal oriented plot. In "The Train Job" (F1002), Mal returns the medicine the crew stole for Niska to the sheriff. This goes against the established narrative goal of completing the job in order to follow Mal's moral code, meaning his exploration of alternative outcomes lends itself more to a game than a linear storyline. The ultimate decision of choice granted to a crew who follow no rules but their own is a significant factor for establishing freedom of action in an RPG.

     [3] In the *Firefly* universe there is also a similarity of a ship's crew and the party, or the group of adventurers in an RPG. The first similarity is the collaborative spirit held

by a diverse group of people with different personal goals and values. Fine describes the reasoning of collaboration as "A need for cooperation…recognized by the players who typically form a single party for the sake of unity and strength" (Fine 166). This is evident in the crew of *Serenity*, as they have banded together for the common goal of survival. Even when disagreements between crewmembers take place, such as Mal and Book's clashing views on religion or Jayne's greed for prosperity over loyalty, all the little things fall away for the greater objective to keep flying. Simon sums up the best expression of the collaboration between conflicting characters for the sake of the larger party while confronting Jayne in "Trash" (F1011), stating,

> "Odds are you will be under my knife again, often. So I want you to understand one thing very clearly. No matter what you say or do or plot, no matter how you come down on us, I will never, ever harm you…Because I'm your medic, and no matter however little we may like or trust each other, we are on the same crew. We have the same enemies, same troubles…I'm trusting you, and you should do the same. I don't see this working any other way" "Trash" (F1011).

Simon's forgiveness of Jayne for the sake of maintaining a functional crew makes the crew stronger, as they can focus on the same enemies and same troubles that will keep them from surviving without fear of betrayal. This collaboration takes place between the players as well, because each player brings their own goals and motivations to their characters. Chris Crawford writes about social interaction in games, arguing that,

> "Interaction is important for several reasons. First, it injects a social or interpersonal element into the event. It transforms the challenge of the game from a technical one to an interpersonal one. Solving a cube puzzle is a strictly technical operation; playing chess is an interpersonal operation. In the former, one plays against the logic of the situation; in the latter, one uses the logic of the situation to play against the opponent" (Crawford 11).

Although "play against the opponent" is not the best view to hold while collaborating in a RPG, it does hold up against the opposing goals, moral views, or values that each player might have. In regard to the PnP RPG, the character class of "Core Hospital Intern" (Valentinelli 168) values helping people and life over "Blue Sun Corporate Assassin" (Valentinelli 167), who is about making people disappear. These character types may need to depend on each other on the same crew in order to "play against the opponent" of the common enemies that the Game Master will create for them.

[4] Part of having a functional crew that can succeed in different scenarios is having a diverse range of skillsets in your characters. For example, in a game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, a player may want a Fighter for melee combat, a Ranger for ranged archery, a Sorcerer for magical support, and a Cleric for medical aid. This diverse dynamic among skillsets is also required to run a ship in the *Firefly* universe. The different skillsets in the *Firefly* PnP RPG are categorized by Social, Mental, and Physical abilities, which include skills such as Drive, Labor, Shoot, Sneak, and Trick (Valentinelli 148) and describe different talents that crew members possess. In the *Firefly* board game, the skills boil down to Fight, Tech, and Negotiate (Sweigart, Dill 5) Wash is a talented pilot, but isn't one for hand-to-hand combat. Jayne can fight off an entire bar, but was never a knowledgeable man. Inara is persuasive and charming, but is not a heavy lifter like Jayne. These roles are best depicted in the first scene that takes place on the ship in *Serenity*, as Mal travels through the ship and speaks with each member of the crew. Wash preps for landing as the Pilot, Jayne has an armload of guns as the Mercenary, Zoe aids supervision as the 1st mate, Kaylee fixes the engine as the Mechanic, and Simon vaccinates Mal as the Medic. All of the members of Serenity's crew supplement the weaknesses of their allies with strengths of their own. Everyone has their own job within the group, be it repairing engines, mending wounds, or leading the whole. The successful blending of varied abilities among a group is vital, and just like how a pack of non-violent bards will be unsuccessful in combat without a fighter, a ship of only mercenaries cannot even fly out of port without a pilot.

[5] The quest is central to any RPG, and *Firefly'*s job-of-the-week format allows campaigns to successfully add short and long term quests to the narrative. Much as how *Dungeons & Dragons* defines its purpose as "[Players] who will travel about in this make-believe world, interact with its peoples, and seek the fabulous treasures of magic and precious items guarded by dragons, giants, werewolves, and hundreds of other fearsome things" (TSR Hobbies 1979:1), *Firefly* can be described as people who will travel about in this terraformed galaxy, interact with its peoples, and seek necessary items of survival and wealth guarded by Reavers, the Alliance, bandits, and hundreds of other scavenging outlaws. While the loot is much more mundane and based on necessity, the crew of the *Serenity* still takes quests in order to make money, help people in need, acquire goods, and defeat evil-doers. This quest-of-the-week structure that *Firefly* uses parallels the Role Playing Session, and is acknowledged in the PnP RPG referring to a session as an "Episode," (Valintenelli 11) a specific adventure, job, or quest to complete within an overarching narrative of continued character progression and growth.

[6] Another significant aspect of the use of *Firefly* as a RPG universe is the 'Verse itself, and the realistic levels of world building that flesh out an entire galaxy. At first thought, realism in fantasy seems oxymoronic. *Dungeons & Dragons* is a high

fantasy world filled with monsters and magic, and *Fallout* is a post-apocalyptic world with century-old mutants. The success of *Firefly,* a science fiction universe with space cowboys, should seemingly depend less on realistic standards of environment and more on the fact that spaceships are exciting. The truth is that fictional worlds, fantastic or not, rely on realism as a way of establishing grounded connections with the audience. As Thomas Pavel writes in his book *Fictional Worlds*,

> "Realism is not merely a set of stylistic and narrative conventions, but a fundamental attitude toward the relationship between the actual world and the truth of [Fictional] texts. In a realist perspective, the criterion of the truth and falsity of a literary text and of its details is based upon the notion of possibility (and not only *logical* possibility) with respect to the actual world" (Pavel 46-47).

With no basis for the suspension of disbelief with audiences, a fictional universe cannot be successful. Without a logical possibility of reality tethering a fictional world to our real one, there is little for the audience to relate or connect with, and the entire 'Verse simply becomes a loose justification for space-age astronauts to drink in a saloon. The logical possibility of the *Firefly* universe's existence is that it is based in the reality that we live in. As described by Joss Whedon in *A Brief History of the Universe, Circa 2516 A.D.* the founding of the 'Verse is not based on discovering alien technology or an existing universe beyond our own, it originates simply because "Earth-That-Was couldn't handle the growing population and resource needs of humankind" (Whedon 1). Beginning from a common fear in the current day and age and establishing that the 'Verse is a representation of a possible future from our own timeline allows for plausibility to be granted by the audience, and helps to suspend disbelief towards the logistics. It is still far fetched to see space-cowboys light years away as humanity's descendants, but outlining how Point A of abusing planetary resources connects to Point B of space colonization through terraforming grants some semblance of conceivability to the concept, and therefore suspends belief enough that audiences (and players) can go along with the story without questioning the very basis for its reality.

[7] The authenticity and relatability of the universe is also established through the existence of multicultural beliefs rather than an existent monoculture. In the *Firefly* 'Verse different planets have different rules and cultures, similar to the differences that exist between nations on Earth. An example of the national parallels to planets is when River's cockney accent in "Shindig" (F1004) prompts Badger to say "Nice to see someone from the ol' homestead," leading the audience to believe the planet Londinium is based in English cultural, or at least linguistic, origins. This planetary connection between people with Anglophonic accents helps to unite a common people to a single

planet, rather than the occasional occurrence of disenfranchised accents in the galaxy. (It seems the Jury is still out on the planetary origin of Niska's Czech accent). Some cultures revolve around industry, where the Mudders in "Jaynestown" (F1007) exist in a subservient worker society based on clay-making and mud-farming; religion. When the witch fearing townsfolk in "Safe" (F1005) try to burn River to "Avoid congress with a witch;" or reputation, with Mal partaking in a ritualistic sword duel for Inara's honor within a hierarchal, aristocratic culture in "Shindig" (F1004). The *Serenity* crew even acknowledge these quirky cultural differences, as Wash tells Zoe, "Every Planet has its own weird customs…I spent six weeks on a moon where the principal form of recreation was juggling geese" ("Our Mrs. Reynolds" F1006). Even the perceived monoculture that stems from the central planets is a mixing of Western and Eastern influences and language that vary on each planet, which is also supported by the dual-colonization by China and America. These seemingly small instances of set design for a show allow great freedom to RPGs, as it grants variety to settings, story goals, and character motivations. If the entire 'Verse were to have the industrial culture of The Mudders or a reputation-based culture, than an entire story arc would need to revolve around labor or diplomacy. Allowing characters to not only interact with these cultures, but also inhabit them, grants a number of cross-cultural interactions and conflicts that can be explored in a game that limited itself to a less intriguing single mono-cultural society.

[8] Another relatable aspect of the *Firefly* universe is the avoidance of the "chosen one" trope, where supernatural beings serve as the only viable heroes in the universe. With the exception of River, all of the characters are normal people who rely on their skills rather than special powers. Being of humble origins is important in connecting with the Role Playing Audience, as it grants the feeling of inclusiveness on the ability to achieve goals. With *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy is "Special" in that she is the chosen "Slayer" and given supernatural abilities in the fight against vampires. While The Scooby Gang manages to get by without Buffy's aid on occasion, she is needed to take down the "big-bads" and save the day. The *Serenity* crew shows that anyone is able to partake in these adventurous jobs. They may be more skilled in some fields or better equipped than the audience, but the central idea is that they are common folk who could as easily go live on a farm as take on the Alliance.

[9] With so much personal investment in the world of *Firefly*, it is not surprising that the fans are ravenous for more narrative content from the 'Verse. There are currently over seven thousand fan fiction stories about *Firefly*, and those counted are only the ones posted on FanFiction.net. The fans help to fill the void left behind by the show's cancellation, but that void will never truly be filled. Francesca Coppa writes in her paper *Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance*, "Few fan fiction writers will ever have access to the means of production for Mass Media storytelling."

(Coppa 227). Given the massive production costs and insurmountable logistical problems of bringing the series back to life, many fans have accepted that fan-made content and media paratexts such as the RPGs and comics are the only way we will hear new stories from the universe. For some people this is a freeing realization, as it gives free rein to the narrative possibilities in the *Firefly* universe (within the confines of IP and copyright law, which is not always the first concern of the fan fiction writer). Without fear of official canonical stories coming out to contradict fan created narratives, they may stand on their own and continue the stories from the 'Verse. Having this control over the media allows for customization and recreation of the established media.

[10] As creating narrative in *Firefly* RPGs is up to the writing and storytelling of the player, full creative control is taken away from the source material and reduced to a framework, while true control is given to the fans and players. In her critique of a "choose your own adventure" adaptation of *Hamlet*, Emma Leigh Waldron writes that "Here, adaptation (as a mode of play) 'takes control of the ["work"] and gives it to the [player] for them to explore, challenge, or subvert'" (Waldron 1). The *Firefly* universe is at the whim of the player in the RPGs, and changes made to the stories or characters are completely up to them. This is a core value of the PnP RPG, which states,

> "With the *Firefly* RPG, you can participate in telling new stories in the
> 'Verse. The dice you roll will twist and turn your story into interestin'
> and unexpected directions. What's more, you'll get plenty of chances
> to slip into the role of your favorite characters or, if you fancy it, create
> your own" (Valentinelli 7).

The formal structure of how the gameplay is provided in the handbook, and within those boundaries the player is able to tell whatever story they deem fit. It can be a continuation of the show by taking on the roles of the *Serenity* crew. It can be a completely new roster of characters, or a mix of both. This is seen in the *Firefly* board game, in which preexisting characters, as well as new ones, can be hired to a player's ship's crew, meaning Wash, Crow, and Saffron can all work together and complete legal or illegal, moral or immoral jobs for Niska, Patience, or Badger, fulfilling a narrative that the player decides upon. The PnP RPG also has detailed modules that allow individuals to play through the narratives of the show's episodes (Valentinelli 17-140), meaning he or she can interact with the show's story as it played out on screen, change elements to tell a personalized narrative, or even put their own created characters through the show's events and see how a different crew would hold up to the show's plot. The sanctity of *Firefly*'s narrative is not as important as the universe itself, as fans and players can rearrange any of its elements in search of new narrative. If seen as just as a single campaign, then the events of the show are flexible, and allowed to be mimicked or

completely avoided if the player wishes. The elements of the universe can be applied to different characters or scenarios, and this is more important to fans now than how the elements were assembled to specifically make the *Firefly* story.

[11] One of the greatest aspects of RPGs is the act of collaborative storytelling, and within the context of *Firefly*, using the collective players and Game Master to further the narrative of the silent 'Verse. In an interview independent RPG designer Nathan D. Paoletta (*Dungeon World*, *Fate*, *Breaking the Ice*) describes collaborative storytelling in RPGs, saying:

> "I think role-playing works best when you co-create something new together. I think it's the creation of a fiction that you would have never imagined by yourself that makes role-playing so unique, and slavishly aping genre tropes gets you… those genre tropes. Using game mechanics to direct a game towards the feelings that you get when you experience the inspirational genre is what interests me the most (Paoletta 1).

With *Firefly*, if a player can create a narrative that is so similar to the original source material that the emotional response is the same, the need for an official mass media source is lessened. The homemade version may not have the same production value or familiar faces of the original, although in the *Firefly* board game the cards feature the original actors, but the emotional fulfillment that the play gains can be nearly equal. It is the experience of being within the universe rather than seeing a Mutant Enemy production.

[12] Within this massive galaxy full of 200 planets and dozens of moons, we have only seen half a season of television content in addition to a two hour film *Serenity* that depicts these environments. Due to the swift cancellation of *Firefly*, the promise of exploring so many diverse worlds, their cultural quirks and societal structures was never fully delivered. Viewers were teased with the promise of seeing an entire galaxy but ended up left with less than a dozen planets. Just as Browncoats refused to accept the Alliance's authority in the 'Verse, viewers refused to accept Fox's decision that the narrative possibilities within this universe are over. Thanks to Whedon's and Mutant Enemy's thorough framework of world building for the universe, fans decided to take the responsibilities of the writer into their own hands and created their own folklore within the *Firefly* universe. Looking for the same emotional connections that they had to the series, fans used Role Playing Games to insert themselves into the 'Verse and explore the stories that were left untold. Whedon and the creators of these games gave them the reins to contort, change, and modify the universe in any way they wish, and they have used this

power to reclaim the narrative power abandoned by mass media producers of canon. Mal said, "Love is what keeps [*Serenity*] in the air," and it is the love of the dedicated *Firefly* fandom that keeps the 'Verse relevant and alive.

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