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**Banter, Battles, Betrayal, and “Kissy th’
face!”: *Sugarshock!*’s Playful
Whedonverse¹**



Introduction

[1] When *Sugarshock!*, the one-off comic written by Joss Whedon with art by Fábio Moon, first appeared in three installments on *MySpace Dark Horse Presents* in 2007, Whedon’s film & TV work was well known and he had already written for established graphic series *Astonishing X-Men* and *Runaways*, and launched print comics based on or linked to his TV shows, including *Fray* (2001-3), *Tales of the Slayers* (2002), and *Serenity: Those Left Behind* (2005), followed by the *Buffy Season 8* (2007-11) and *Angel: After the Fall* (2007-11) lines. However, *Sugarshock!* also has much in common with *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008) in that each first appeared as a three-part web-production, and in that with both *Sugarshock!* and *Dr. Horrible*, Whedon creates a new, unique narrative world, unrelated to any previous text by Whedon. *Sugarshock!* helped launch Dark Horse’s webzine *MySpace Dark Horse Presents*² by drawing the attention of Whedon’s fanbase to the first three issues. Since then, the only critical attention *Sugarshock!* has received is Jack Milson’s cursory “Joss Whedon 101” introduction in PopMatters’ *Joss Whedon: The Complete Companion*. Milson acknowledges that the story “defies categorization” (336), and sums up *Sugarshock!* thus: “As an insane ride through space, music, and love, *Sugarshock!* leaves readers disappointed that the story ends after three parts; having only just met these characters, the readers want more....Fans just want more, be it online or in traditional formats” (335-6). Indeed, writing for television—or any popular medium—today must sometimes seem like doing a trick for a toddler who will laugh wildly and command, “Do it again!” until you have repeated the trick to the point of exhaustion.³ The point of *Sugarshock!* is that it *is* a “one-off,” unique, and uniquely recognizable as the work of Joss Whedon.

[2] *Sugarshock!* won an Eisner Award for Best Web Comic in 2008, but seems to be Whedon’s least-known work. It deserves more attention, because while Whedon’s script draws on familiar genres, including science fiction and manga, the result is both *sui generis*

and quintessentially Joss Whedon. *Sugarshock!* may seem like a bit of fluff made up primarily of verbal play, wacky non sequiturs both visual and verbal, and quirky characters, but the darker sides of Whedon's 'verses are here as well: violence, betrayal, and loss—within a comedic framework—aided significantly by the sequential graphic art of Fábio Moon. And Whedon's comedy deserves more consideration. Much has been said and written about deaths of beloved characters in Whedon's work. Recently, after an infamous episode of HBO's *Game of Thrones*, Joss Whedon tweeted: "Not up on "Thrones" but hear George killed more peeps - can he PLEEZ have my rep now so I can stop hearing about it? #gettingold." In the next day's Twitter #whedony chat, anticipating the premiere of Whedon's film version of Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado about Nothing*, the topic was Whedon and Shakespeare. Tweet after tweet compared Whedon's dark themes and sudden character deaths with Shakespeare's tragedies. Finally, one #whedony Twitterer responded, "Gee whiz, @whedony, lots of talk about dark Shakespearean #whedony stuff. #MuchAdo is a comedy, one of many Will wrote. Joss also v funny!" (Rambo). As the line goes, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard" (*My Favorite Year*, 1982—among other places). In *Sugarshock!*, we find Joss Whedon at play, and it's not as easy as it looks.

"Spoiler. Alert. Sorry." – Dandelion Naizen

[3] For those who are not familiar with this gem, a brief plot summary follows. The title, *Sugarshock!*, refers to a nearly-all-girl rock band made up of lead singer/guitarist Dandelion Naizen (Asian, pink hair), statuesque drummer Wade, willowy blonde L'lihdra, and Robot Phil, accompanied by Wade's devoted, nameless, male groupie. As the story opens, the band loses a competition to their musical nemesis, "Sensitive Guy." On the way home, an alien falls on their car, carrying a message Dandelion interprets as an invitation to an intergalactic battle of the bands—what self-respecting rock band could resist?

[4] In Part 2, "For Those About to Rock and/or Die," our heroes discover that the "battle of the bands" is more of an actual intergalactic battle, and things look bad when an alien warrior wielding a laser-sword cuts Robot Phil in two with the efficient sound effect "BISECT!" However, Wade and L'lihdra reveal their secret identities and superpowers as an alien princess and her guardian. As L'lihdra slices up monstrous alien warriors with her laser sword, Wade confesses that she ran away from her emperor father after falling in love with a groupie. They almost save the day, until an even greater enemy appears, and Dandelion must resort to her ultimate weapon: "The Saddest Song in the World."

[5] Part three, "The Greatest Story Ever Blogged," picks up where part two left off. The others doubt the efficacy of the Saddest Song, but it's all they have, so Dandelion plays, and the intergalactic audience is overwhelmed with sorrow and pity. The whole competition is revealed to have been a ploy by Wade's lost love to get her back again. But is this what she truly needs? There's a sudden death—how could it be a Whedon story otherwise?—and everyone learns valuable lessons. Then the band is once again shockingly betrayed (or not), before returning home to Earth. And here I must point out that Milson's synopsis gets this detail wrong, saying "readers are teased with possible future adventures because the planet [Earth] is missing" (335). The concluding inset-panel conversation between Robot Phil and Dandelion establishes that Dandelion is merely looking for Earth in the wrong part of the heavens: Robot Phil: "No, it's over here." Dandelion: "Oh, neat." While additional adventures are possible, this story is tied up neatly. This story is amusing enough, and Whedon has visited space before, of course, in *Firefly* and *Titan A.E.*, but *Sugarshock!* is its own comedic enterprise in dialogue, execution, and variations on themes.

Banter

[6] The clever, distinctive style of Whedon's scripts has been noted by numerous scholars and critics, most notably Michael Adams in *Slayer Slang* and as editor of a special issue of *Slayage* devoted to "Pragmatics, Discourse, and Style in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" (*Slayage* 5.4). Overbey and Preston-Matto, in one of the first essays to examine Whedonesque linguistics, describe the "linguistic capabilities" of the Scoobies as "invention, playfulness, contextualization, archival knowledge, compilation, and translation" (83). These qualities may also be seen in the dialogue written for characters of other shows—for example, Susan Mandala explores translation (or the lack of it) in the various ways Chinese is used in *Firefly*, and Cynthia Masson "glosses" the intertextual relationships between the *Dollhouse* episode "Belle Chose" and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. In "'Much Madness Is Divinest Sense': *Firefly's* 'Big Damn Heroes' and *Little Witches*," Alyson Buckman describes River as the embodiment of Irigaray's definition of *l'écriture féminine*, non-linear feminine discourse—"whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious...not to mention her language, in which she sets off in all directions" (Irigaray, qtd. in Buckman 46). River may be an extreme example, but nonlinear so-called discourse—both verbal and visual—may be found throughout Whedon's worlds, including his interviews.

[7] Doubtless readers can think of many examples from Whedon's TV shows, such as Buffy's puns and non-sequiturs—for example, her final confrontation with the child-enslaving demon in "Anne":

Buffy: Do you want to see my impression of Gandhi? [smashes demon to bits]

Anne: Gandhi?

Buffy: Well, if he was really pissed off.

Or recall the opening scene of "The Message"—Wash & Zoe enter the tent of the supposed alien lifeform and Wash exclaims, "Oh my god, it's grotesque!" then deadpans, "Oh, and there's something in a jar." A combined visual/verbal non-sequitor is the *Firefly* pilot episode's introduction of Wash at the bridge of Serenity: "Everything looks good from here..." but when the camera pulls back, we discover Wash is not talking about navigating interstellar space...he's playing with dinosaur toys ("Serenity").

[8] In *Sugarshock!*, the standout non-sequitur is the transition between part 1, which sees our heroes about to board a rocket bound for the "intergalactic battle of the bands" on "planet Flenders" and a semi-metatextual signoff from "Dandelion":

Can't wait to see more? Well, we haven't made any more yet, it has to be inked and colored and all this stuff, so I guess you *can* wait, can't you? Maybe think about someone else for a change, the hard-working letterer or someone, while you wait for your *free* comic. I hate you.

Kissy th' face!

—Dandelion

Part 2, (which originally appeared online some months later) then opens without title or explanation in a completely different graphic style and color palette—semi-realistic and sepia toned, suggesting a historic recreation, as we see easily recognized portrayals of Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln discussing a weirdly tilted end to the Civil War:

[panel 2] Pres. Lincoln: When I think of what the slaves have endured these long years, and the bloody cost of freeing them...

[panel 4] [Mary T. Lincoln puts wood into an iron stove]

Pres. Lincoln: You are a dear, Mary Todd—stoving over a hot slave whilst I run this still divided land. [panel 5] Well, I'm off to address Congress. I'll just get my coat and my slavepipe hat... (9)

Only the final panel of baffled Wade (saying “Can we start again?”) with L’ihdra and Phil, assures us that yes, this is *Sugarshock!*

[9] The next page reveals Dandelion has been passing the time on their space journey by explaining that Lincoln freed the slaves because of a mental aberration that caused him to confuse slaves, stoves, and—caribou: “Don’t you see? The man was *mad!*” (10). Insulting a great icon of American history and making light of a landmark of racial justice may seem like risky business, but we know Joss Whedon is an equal-opportunity offender. Some may recall his infamous posting to the Bronze-beta board following the *Buffy* episode “Seeing Red,” in which a stray shot from Warren’s attempted murder of Buffy kills Tara:

I killed Tara. Some of you may have been hurt by that. It’s very unlikely it was more painful to you than it was to me. I couldn't even discuss it in story meetings without getting upset, physically. *Which is why I knew it was the right thing to do. Because stories, as I have so often said, are not about what we WANT.* And I knew some people would be angry with me for destroying the only gay couple on the show, but the idea that I COULDN'T kill Tara because she was gay is as offensive to me as the idea that I DID kill her because she was gay. Willow's story was not about being gay. It was about weakness, addiction, loss... the way life hits you in the gut right when you think you're back on your feet. *The course of true love never did run smooth, not on my show.* (“over,” emphasis added)

Whedon will write what he thinks the narrative needs, whether it means destroying beloved characters and relationships for more pathos, or giving us loony historical heroes for greater humor.

[10] In part three, Whedon and Moon use non-sequitur humor to avoid lengthy exposition—the page is already pretty heavy with it—and to shake the reader up just a bit. It is revealed that the intergalactic battle of the bands was a ploy to reunite Wade with the groupie for whom she was exiled. “But, why all this charade? Why endanger our lives, threaten the earth? Howcum? How?” asks Wade. Another sepia-toned panel interrupts the center of the page, with a narration box “Meanwhile, the god Pan...” introducing Pan having his hooves picked by an elderly gentleman in modern clothing, before the story resumes with Wade saying to her (still unnamed) beloved, “Oh, yeah, I guess that makes sense.” But why cut away to Pan?

[11] For a Joss Whedon text, a cutaway to Pan may not be as non-sequitur as it first appears. Pan is the god of rustic music, and also the originator of “panic,” irrational terrors. Joss Whedon is one of the masters of making humor—and terror—out of things that happen for no reason. According to Plato, Socrates also linked Pan to speech, storytelling, and tragedy: “The chorus of the primitive performances from which tragedy developed appeared as satyrs, clad in goat-skins. Hence the name *tragôidia* (goat-song). The adjective *tragikos* may mean either ‘goat-like’ or ‘tragic’” (“Pan”). Whedon drops references to goats, which he clearly understands to be associated with tragedy, in appropriate yet amusing locations. For example, Whedon’s lightly sarcastic post to the UPN Bronze board at the end of Buffy’s controversial “dark” sixth season promised to respond to fans’ “complaints” by “easing back on the goats” in season seven (“Everything”). And Angel, at the start of season five, finds himself head of Wolfram and Hart, a demonic law firm whose standard phone menu choices include ritually sacrificing goats, sacred to Pan (and tragedy):

Angel: (to phone) Um...can I get a cup of coffee or something?

Phone Menu Voice: You have reached ritual sacrifice. For goats, press one, or say goats. (“Conviction”)

Indeed, *Angel* season five will see numerous sacrifices and some tragic endings. The phone-menu voice, by the way, is Joss Whedon’s.

Battles

[12] It all started with Buffy being the “one girl in all the world chosen to fight the vampires.” Whedon famously gives us strong women heroes, and *Sugarshock!* is no exception. But it’s not always about violence, except when it is—I’m sure we all remember this exchange:

Buffy: I wasn't gonna use violence. I don't always use violence. Do I?

Xander: The important thing is *you* believe that. (“Inca Mummy Girl”)

But even in *Buffy*, “[s]olving...problems by sticking things with sharp objects” (“Selfless”) or lasers may not be the ultimate answer. While violence certainly plays a role in *Buffy*, *Firefly*, and other Whedon texts, the “big bads” are primarily defeated by other means: teamwork, self-sacrifice, love, and shared power. Similarly, in *Sugarshock!*, violence only results in greater violence, proves ineffective, or is tragic. The ultimate weapon is music and its universal power to influence emotions.

[13] When Dandelion plays the “Saddest Song in the World,” the intergalactic audience weeps helplessly until “Planet Flenders bows before the unstoppable might of the Earth’s great sadness” (*Sugarshock* 21)—except the squirrels, who “have no souls” (20)—because it sounds

sort of like Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings,” if it was written by Leonard Cohen and Paul Westerberg for Emmylou Harris, with a hint of the theme for that French film *Diva* in the underscoring...and a narrative of loss and emptiness and vibrantly agonized love, with lyrics—even syllables—too potent to print... (19)

Music conquers all—at least for a time—and this should come as no surprise. Joss Whedon loves music and has diversified tastes; both his work and his interviews reveal his interest. He wrote the *Buffy* musical episode, “Once More, with Feeling” (6.7), wrote the “Ballad of Serenity” theme for *Firefly*, and the score for *Much Ado about Nothing*. If you want to hear Whedon geek out, ask him about music, as Mike Russell does in this interview regarding the mix-tape he made to serve as an idea-source for the score for *Serenity*⁴:

Whedon: There were a couple songs from Nickel Creek, whom I adore—I love them with a fiery vengeance. There was some movie stuff: *Angela’s Ashes*, Elmer Bernstein’s theme from *Far from Heaven*—not because they were necessarily the right idiom, but because the themes were so incredibly indelible within the first twenty seconds.... Although, at the end of the day, it all became about cellos. The whole movie is CelloFest 2005. *Be there!* (Russell 120-21)

One suspects that some of the “cellos” on that mixtape might have been in Barber’s “Adagio for Strings.”

[14] But there are no epic wins in the Whedonverses, or at least, none that last for more than a frame or two—as Whedon says, “Things have to go wrong, bad things have to happen” (Robinson 31). The Sugarshockers are ready to “rock our world,” after Dandelion’s virtuoso performance, but when Dandelion insists on disputing the galactic contract, Planet Flenders replaces them with their nemesis, “Sensitive Guy...you know, if that’s cool with everybody.” It’s “a *shocking betrayal!*” Or is it?



(*Sugarshock!* 24 ©2003 Dark Horse Comics, Used with Permission)

Robot Phil replies that it is not—not shocking, at any rate, and perhaps not a betrayal, either—since the band has more or less voluntarily given up their prize by disputing the contract. Dandelion insists that it is, and here we see one advantage of the comic book medium over film or television: the “Editor’s Note: No, it’s not,” inserted in a textbox as if to settle any potential fan/reader conflicts.

[15] Despite this setback, we leave the band “still flying,” and ready for their next gig. The earth, for once, is *not* doomed, and is still where they left it. *Sugarshock!* is a comedic version of the *Angel* finale’s “Let’s go to work” against seemingly insurmountable odds—Joss says, “It’s not a cliffhanger! It’s a statement!! It does leave things open, there’s a lot to talk about, which is always good. A sense of closure with a sense of openture is the way I do this stuff.” (“Not Fade Away” 5.22; Faraci).

[16] In considering violent conflicts or “battles,” we should also examine parallels between heroic leaders Dandelion and Buffy. These include their fated enemies—Buffy is

chosen to slay vampires and demons, Dandelion hates Vikings for some mysterious reason, and since real Vikings no longer exist, they may be read as metaphorical, rather like the vampires who represent—whatever you like—there are many choices. Buffy derives her demon-fighting strength from some dark or demonic origin; similarly, anti-Viking, apparently Asian Dandelion wears “Don’t Be a Viking” and “No Vikings” t-shirts and insists she is “in no way” related to them, yet swears by Norse gods at moments of stress, saying “By Odin” and “Loki’s horns!” We never find out what caused Dandelion’s implacable opposition to Vikings. When Robot Phil asks directly, Dandelion reminisces about—potato-chips—she’s hungry, not listening. Nevertheless: for both Dandelion and Buffy, the subtitle/subtext is “don’t be a Viking/vampire,” although with all the absurd comedy in *Sugarshock!*, you may just have to take the cover’s word for it.

“Kissy th’ face”

[17] Dandelion’s sign-off phrase signifies the place of love and romance in the Whedonverses. As this spoilery transition between parts two and three suggests, some irony may be involved:

Will it work? Can the Earth be saved? Boot up next time and find out that it totally does, I play the saddest song ever and save the Earth, and then there’s a narrow escape and then Sensitive Guy betrays us all in a shocking twist! Ahh. Hmm. Uh, spoiler. Alert. Sorry.

Kissy th’ face!

—Dandelion

In *Sugarshock!*, romance is comically trivialized. As Whedon has said in more than one interview and commentary: stories are more interesting when love goes badly:

Often what the fan base wants is for two characters to get together romantically, but that often doesn’t leave the narrative with anyplace to go....That’s why we had Angel go bad when he and Buffy got together. Because—and I’ve gotten into so much trouble for this phrase: what people want is not what they need. (Miller 73)

Whedon’s twist on this trope in *Sugarshock!* is Wade’s romance with her groupie, whose name she either doesn’t know or can’t remember—a bad sign in itself. He’s devoted and handy (his revelation that he’s a mechanic when the band’s car needs repair causes Wade to dissolve into little pink hearts), and turns out to be Wade’s long-lost love in disguise—

what could be more romantic, even though she still can't remember his name? On the page with the foreshadowy nonsequitur cutaway to Pan, just as Wade and her man are reunited the final panel shows bodyguard L'lihdra's "FATAL STAB!" of Wade's prince with her laser-lathe (22). This is, in fact, the "narrow escape" teased at the end of part 1. L'lihdra explains to Wade:

I vowed to protect you against any threat. As queen of an unstable and war-ravaged empire with an inexperienced king ruled solely by passion for you[,] and also factoring in your 72% chance of committing adultery with some admirer twice within the first six weeks of the union[,] this represented a direct and inescapable threat.

Also, it's difficult to find a good drummer. (*Sugarshock* 23)

That makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Still, Wade replies, "You don't know me. I would never have cheated on whozis over there." This pretty much sums up a thousand fanfics, but indeed, by the time the band heads for home, Wade seems to make a full recovery. When L'lihdra apologizes, Wade replies, "All I'm saying is check with me first, ya chucklehead!" (24). Romantic love is not the be-all and end-all here, and this is one 'ship that sinks painlessly.

[18] We might expect Dandelion, as the central character, to have her own love-interest, but unlike Buffy⁵, Dandelion doesn't really love anyone but herself—she's almost completely self-absorbed, even in her moments of heroic risk (preparing to perform the "saddest song," she notes that she doesn't want to save "Viking mothers holding newborn Vikings" [18]), and exuberant affection (at one point, Dandelion hugs her bandmates and congratulates them on learning various irrelevant lessons, causing Robot Phil to ask "Were you even *here*?" [22]). Dandelion will never return Robot Phil's love—at least, that is one possible interpretation of his "Will I ever be able to tell her...?" response to the "saddest song." Like her creator, "heart, broken" in his "Dr. Horrible" commentary song, Dandelion is "so alone" at the end of this adventure, despite everything, yet still signs off with her cheery "Kissy th' face!"

[19] To sum up, *Sugarshock!* is Joss Whedon at play, a side of the creator readers and fans sometimes do not recognize sufficiently, although he has said, "I have tried to hide in my work....We are only the sum of our actions. Or our art" (comment on "Geek U"). The narrative, style, and characters are part of a quintessential Whedonverse, but one in which Whedon lets the wacky get just a bit wackier than usual, while still presenting us with attractive characters and tragedy that—isn't tragic. Milson acknowledges that the

Sugarshock! band members have their own quirks, yet they are recognizable as “typically Whedonesque: strong, punky, fresh, and, regardless of how fantastic, real” (335). In *Sugarshock!*, the style of the exposition and commentary passages, particularly, are reminiscent of Whedon at his most relaxed: when posting online and in some interviews, as the limited examples presented may indicate. Comedy reminds us not to take things—life, love, death—too seriously, and to have faith in ourselves and our world. We may also read female characters such as Dandelion, Wade, and L’lihdra as yet another variation on Joss Whedon’s 2006 “Equality Now” speech, in which he imagines interviewers repeatedly asking the question, “Why do you write these strong female characters?” to which his concluding answer is, “Because you keep asking me that question” (“So”). But it’s also perfectly fine just to enjoy *Sugarshock!* Their world doesn’t end. And lathes are the way. Kissy th’ face!

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Notes

¹ This paper began as a presentation at the 2012 Slayage conference in Vancouver, BC, in a session attended by two people, including the other presenter. Thanks to Joss in June, it received a second chance.

² *MySpace Dark Horse Presents* ended in 2010 after 36 issues, all of which were available free online until 2011.

³ Bill Cosby used to have a routine about this, but he was talking about real toddlers.

⁴ Whedon's five-page memo regarding music for *Serenity* is included in *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* (30-34).

⁵ Some might say "just like Buffy." That's a different essay.