

THESIS

“LOVINGLY TWEAKED”:

GENRE AND GENDER IN JOSS WHEDON’S DR. HORRIBLE’S SING-ALONG BLOG

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## ABSTRACT

“LOVINGLY TWEAKED”:

GENRE AND GENDER IN JOSS WHEDON’S DR. HORRIBLE’S SING-ALONG BLOG<sup>1</sup>

This thesis explores genre and gender in Joss Whedon’s web miniseries, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*. The plot of the web miniseries follows Billy, whose alter ego is the wannabe villain, Dr. Horrible. He spends the majority of the miniseries attempting to commit villainous crimes that will, he hopes, get him placed into the Evil League of Evil, falling for the woman he has a crush on, Penny, and avoiding his arch nemesis, the hero Captain Hammer. The web miniseries is representative of elements of Joss Whedon’s auteur signature, also holding implications for the director’s self-declared “feminist agenda.” This thesis utilizes genre theory and conversations about the musical genre to analyze how *Dr. Horrible* revises the musical genre. Furthermore, the differences between the musical and non-musical sequences serve to illustrate the duality of Billy’s character. The analysis also delves into the tensions between civilized, primitive, hysterical and hegemonic masculinities, as Billy/Dr. Horrible ultimately struggles with all of these forms. Although Billy/Dr. Horrible’s struggle with masculinity is central to the narrative of the web miniseries, the depiction of femininity and Penny’s character is also explored. Finally, after exploring the role of Whedon’s auteur signature, and genre and gender in the web miniseries, the thesis explores the relation between *Dr. Horrible* and convergence culture, and the role of the web miniseries in the evolution of the Internet as a mode of distribution.

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## **I. Introduction**

“Don’t!” Dr. Horrible, lying underneath his arch nemesis’s foot, shakes his head at Captain Hammer, urging him not to pull the trigger on the death ray. “I don’t have time for your warnings. You give my regards to Saint Peter, or whoever has his job, but in hell.” Captain Hammer maintains his stance, death ray pointed at Dr. Horrible’s face, not realizing in his usual ignorance that the weapon he is holding is damaged and unreliable. With a menacing grimace, he pulls the trigger anyway. The death ray explodes, sending Captain Hammer and bits of red and black shrapnel flying. Bystanders duck, narrowly avoiding death ray pieces embedding themselves into the walls.

Dr. Horrible coughs, waves smoke out of the nearby air, and then feels his face and chest, making sure he is still alive and well. As he begins to pull himself up, Captain Hammer begins to wail from another part of the room as he writhes on the floor: “Oh I’m in pain! I think this is what pain feels like! Oh, Mama...someone maternal! Get out of my way! I gotta get out!” Dr. Horrible watches as Captain Hammer shoves a bystander out of the way as he runs out of the room yelling. A small grin appears on Dr. Horrible’s face as he looks around the room at people cowering in fear, hiding behind chairs. He has finally done it—he has asserted his evilness, and his masculinity. Now no one will ever have reason to doubt his evil intentions again. Except, Dr. Horrible notices something across the room and a look of horror overtakes his face.

Penny has been struck by two pieces of shrapnel, and they are now embedded in her chest and stomach. She is breathing heavily. Dr. Horrible rushes over to her. “Penny—Penny! Penny?” She responds, making it clear she does not recognize Dr. Horrible, but rather her laundry buddy. “Billy, is that you?” He cannot believe what has just happened, and struggles to find a way to

save her, but it is too late. Penny reassures him that everything will be all right. “No, it’s okay. It’s okay. Captain Hammer will save us.” Dr. Horrible gasps, “Penny?” but she is already gone.

Dr. Horrible is in shock, his eyes are red, and he seems on the verge of tears. But he has come this far—his masculinity cannot be allowed to falter now. As he is questioned by reporters about his motives for killing Penny, he rises up off the floor. The music for the next song, “Everything You Ever” crescendos until he begins to sing: “Here lies everything/The world I wanted at my feet/My victory’s complete/So hail to the king.”

This scene is the culmination of Dr. Horrible’s attempts to assert his masculinity throughout the three acts of *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*. Finally, he achieves the status of evil villain, but it comes at a great price: the death of the woman he loves. Her murder is unintentional, but had he not been adamant about articulating his masculinity and being admitted into the Evil League of Evil, Penny’s death would have never taken place. Though he has finally achieved his goal, Penny’s final words reinforce the struggle Dr. Horrible experiences throughout the film. Not only has he been experiencing a crisis in masculinity, but this crisis has also pitted Dr. Horrible’s masculinity against Captain Hammer’s, representing the conflicts between civilized masculinity and primitive masculinity. This scene also illustrates the presence of parody in the film, an aspect that contributes to the way masculinity is represented in *Dr. Horrible*. Finally, but not least important, Dr. Horrible’s expression through music of completing his victory is significant in that it represents his ability to articulate his masculinity through musical sequences, highlighting the importance of the musical genre in this film.

## Identification of Text

As previously alluded to, the text that I analyze is the Internet miniseries *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. This 45-minute musical web miniseries was produced, written and directed by Joss Whedon, of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fame, with his two brothers Zack and Jed, as well as Jed's wife, Maurissa Tancharoen, during the Writer's Guild of America (WGA) strike of 2007-08. The plot follows Billy, whose alter ego is the wannabe villain, Dr. Horrible. He spends the majority of the miniseries attempting to commit villainous crimes that will, he hopes, get him placed into the Evil League of Evil, falling for the woman he has a crush on, Penny, and avoiding his arch nemesis, the hero Captain Hammer.

The context of *Dr. Horrible* is important to establish, as the miniseries' initial creation was untraditional due to the WGA strike, and has implications for distribution via the Internet versus through the major television studios. *Dr. Horrible* is a miniseries that had no outside funding, and in fact, "the entire thing was shot in 6 days for just \$200,000" from Joss Whedon's own budget (Catone, 2009). An important factor of the production is that had the WGA strike not been occurring at the time, Whedon and his crew would not have been able to film on the Universal Studios back lot, as the strike provided for the use of an empty and discounted set. Furthermore, Whedon decided to post the entire miniseries on the Internet for free.

Despite the miniseries being made on a tight schedule and budget, and after the initial airing of *Dr. Horrible*, products of the miniseries, including downloadable versions, DVDs and other merchandise reimbursed Whedon for more than the production costs: "We've been able to pay our crew and all our bills, which means a lot. What means more is proving that completely independent ventures can muscle their way through the blizzard of big-budget behemoths" (Catone, 2009). The context of this film is significant in that "the show's creators were explicit



that this distribution model was a way of subverting the studio system and making use of new media opportunities for distribution," and it was clearly a success financially (Lang, 2010). In addition to the initial profit of the miniseries, it remains available via distributors such as iTunes and Amazon in digital, DVD and Blu-Ray formats. Other *Dr. Horrible* merchandise, like comic books, T-shirts, and key chains, continue to be sold from numerous retailers, and the miniseries is set for a sequel in the next year or two, representing its continual success.

### **Justification**

The unforeseeable financial success of *Dr. Horrible* undoubtedly contributes to its status as a media text worthy of study, but what heightens its importance is the fact that it is part of the body of work of a well-established director known for creating nontraditional texts. Because Joss Whedon tends to create media texts that function to illustrate and simultaneously subvert traditional genre convention, exploring the role of *Dr. Horrible* within its category is helpful to broaden the application of theory, as well as to consider how particular genres are represented by and applied to film. *Dr. Horrible* reorders the use of song in film as masculine rather than feminine, contrary to traditional views of the musical genre being coded as feminine. Traditionally, the acts of song and dance in a musical make the stars of a musical a spectacle, and by becoming a spectacle, the star is thus placed "in the very position which the representation system of classic Hollywood cinema has traditionally designated as 'feminine'" (Cohan, 1993, p. 47).

"The hammer is my penis," arguably the most memorable line from *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, not only induces laughter, but draws attention to the crisis in masculinity at the heart of the miniseries. Though the dialogue throughout *Dr. Horrible* generally is not quite this

blatant, this line represents the depiction of masculinity in the film that is valuable to explore through a communication studies lens. Why does Captain Hammer feel the need to specify that by using the word “hammer,” what he really meant was his penis? While this line does little to endanger Captain Hammer’s masculinity, it begins to unveil Billy’s crisis in masculinity. Because Captain Hammer is clearly empowered by his own masculinity, Billy is emasculated when put up against his arch nemesis’ manliness.

Media representations of masculinity such as this one greatly affect how men and women understand masculinity and its role in society. The crisis in masculinity is explored through the use of the musical genre, utilizing the musical in a nontraditional way. Instead of musical sequences feminizing the male, Billy is emasculated in non-musical sequences. Furthermore, he is often able to articulate his masculinity in musical sequences, utilizing the musical genre’s split between musical and non-musical sequences. Rather than supporting or undermining the crisis in masculinity, it is how the crisis is represented, through the musical genre, which is of import to this study.

While there are many studies on the representation of masculinity in film, and even gender within the musical genre, *Dr. Horrible* provides for a more unusual exploration of these two themes, due to Joss Whedon’s unconventional use of the musical genre. More importantly, the existing research on modern film musicals is sparse, so this analysis serves to contribute to the updating of this research. Most scholarly research on the musical genre and film musicals regard older and more traditional examples, and I hope to provide a new perspective on an existing genre by exploring a more recent and less traditional text.

Though much of the literature pertaining to genre is discussed in the literature review, I would like to first illustrate the limitations of the existing literature to more fully demonstrate the

need for this analysis. For instance, Thomas Schatz's (1981) book, *Hollywood Genres*, gives a thorough explanation of the musical genre, specifically how it evolved into the 1960s, and its characterization as a genre of integration. However, there are obvious limitations to this scholarship due to its publication date, considering the musical genre has significantly evolved since the 1960s. Rick Altman's (1987) book, *The American Film Musical*, is a slightly more recent publication, and is wholly dedicated to the musical genre. Altman echoes some of Schatz's approaches to genre, but provides more practical application of genre theory in the bulk of the book. Though the analysis Altman provides is valuable and clearly illustrative of genre theory regarding the musical genre, it still constricts musicals to a narrowly defined structure. Finally, John Kenneth Muir's (2005) book, *Singing a New Tune*, provides a much more up-to-date account of film musicals starting in the 1980s, in addition to a brief history of the evolution of the musical. Furthermore, Muir's analyses open up the musical genre to consider more contemporary musicals and formats, including musicals on television. Though Muir's scholarship is more recent than previous research, seven years has still provided for change in the musical genre, as well as a change in the production and distribution formats of musicals.

## **Methodology**

For the analysis of this particular musical production, I use a critical approach, specifically textual analysis, to explore genre and masculinity in *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Textual analysis ultimately emerged from the period of British cultural studies in the 1960s-1980s, which utilized new ways of looking at media artifacts, including "[overcoming] the limitations of the Frankfurt School notion of a passive audience in their conceptions of an active audience that creates meanings and the popular" (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. xxiv). The idea of

an active audience is foundational to textual analysis, as it is an approach that would not be viable without assuming “audiences’ active negotiation of a multiplicity of multi-layered meanings encoded in media texts” (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. xxv). Otherwise, media texts would be assumedly monosemic and possess little purpose for analysis.

Despite his belief in the idea of an active audience, Stuart Hall also contended that media texts are representative of dominant societal ideologies and work to reinforce hegemony. Echoing Hall’s approach, “British cultural studies situated culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways that cultural forms served either to further social control, or to enable people to resist” (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. xxv). Particular forms of culture and identity, including race, gender, class, and sexuality, are often vehicles for power and ideology. Furthermore, these forms of culture and identity are at the center of British cultural studies-based critical approaches and analyses, including textual analysis, in order to show how these forms, as they are represented in various artifacts, allow for either domination or resistance.

Textual analysis, in its qualitative form, is first and foremost based in formalist literary criticism, which looks for the meanings, values, symbols, and stories in cultural artifacts “by attending to the formal properties of imaginative literature texts—such as style, verbal imagery, characterization, narrative structure and point of view” (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 13). Though concerned with formalist literary criticism, textual analysis is also largely concerned with semiotics, which “analyzes how linguistic and nonlinguistic cultural ‘signs’ form systems of meanings” (Hammer & Kellner, 2009, p. 13). For *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, I employ textual analysis in the formalist literary sense, as well as with semiotics. Because the text includes both visual and auditory aspects, I turn to both of these to inform my analysis, as the dialogue and lyrics, as well as the images and cinematography of the web miniseries serve to

help explicate meaning. The literature review, predominantly scholarship on masculinity, genre, and auteurship serves to bring to light the themes found throughout the analysis.

## **Literature Review**

**Auteur Theory.** To shed some light on how *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* fits in among other media texts, as well as how it fits into the rest of its creator's works, a discussion of Joss Whedon as an auteur is necessary. Auteur theory has been devised and revised by numerous people, and is most simply understood as an assertion that the films of some directors tend to embody an interior meaning or deep structure, and that interior meaning can be identified throughout that director's body of work, making the director the "author" of his or her work (Schatz, 1981, p. 9; Sarris, 2009, p. 453). Oftentimes this interior meaning is portrayed through the auteur's personal style, and comes through in the visual style, cinematography or editing in a film, not so much the actual story or plot of the film. It is how the story is portrayed or told that reflects a director's personal style (Schatz, 1981, p. 8). In this sense, the technical aspects of a film come into play, as the choice of editing, music, costumes, cinematography, script and many other aspects are what ultimately influence the look, feel and sound of a film.

Not only can auteur directors use the highly conventionalized forms of genre to impose their personal style onto through their technique, but also as Thomas Schatz (1981) states, "the auteur approach, in asserting a director's consistency of form and expression, effectively translates an auteur into a virtual genre unto himself, into a system of conventions which identify his work" (p. 9). When taking this approach, it becomes easier to categorize films by their auteur, rather than which film genre they may tend to fall into, because in some ways an auteur's films reflect his or her personality, or the way he or she thinks and feels (Sarris, 2009, p. 452).

Additionally, though it is important to recognize the auteur as his or her own sort of genre, it is also important to recognize the film genre the director is portraying. It is how the director reinvents the conventions of a film genre that helps to establish his or her style, and one must be familiar with the basic genre first in order to recognize stylistic changes to it (Schatz, 1981, p. 9).

Though personal style is undoubtedly part of what makes up an auteur's signature on a film, it is important to distinguish between an auteur and what Andrew Sarris (2009) calls a *metteur en scène* (p. 453). Peter Wollen (2009) elaborates on the distinctions between auteur and *metteur en scène*, explaining in regards to an auteur film:

The structure is associated with a single director, an individual, not because he has played the role of artist, expressing himself or his own vision in the film, but because it is through the force of his preoccupations that an unconscious, unintended meaning can be decoded in the film... (p. 468)

Within this explanation, Wollen asserts that it is the structure of a film that harkens back to its director or auteur, not the stylistic or artistic elements of it. Playing the "role of artist" is representative of a *metteur en scène*, and while personal style may be part of how the unconscious meaning is portrayed, it is ultimately the deep, thematic structure of a film that characterizes it as an auteur film. A further definition of auteur theory presented by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith may be helpful in understanding this distinction:

One essential corollary of the theory as it has been developed is the discovery that the defining characteristics of an author's work are not necessarily those which are most readily apparent. The purpose of criticism thus becomes to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs...is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another. (as cited in Wollen, 2009, p. 457)

Therefore, though there may be personal stylistic touches of a director immediately evident among his or her films, these alone do not denote an auteur. These touches can, however, be unintentional byproducts of the internal structure characteristic of an auteur's films.

Peter Wollen (2009) addresses the alteration to and reinvention of genre often attributed to auteur directors in his analysis of the films of Howard Hawks and John Ford. Though both Hawks and Ford have made westerns, each director's depiction of the genre is different. For example, while both directors are "concerned with the problem of heroism" and how there can be individual action that transcends the limit of death, the way each director portrays this dilemma is different (Wollen, 2009, p. 457). Hawks "seeks transcendent values beyond the individual, in solidarity with others," while Ford "finds transcendent values in the historic vocation of America as a nation, to bring civilization to a savage land, the garden to the wilderness" (Wollen, 2009, p. 457). Being able to identify these themes among each director's films illustrate their respective abilities to portray the same genre, but with different structural characteristics.

When analyzing an auteur's body of work, the themes underlying the structure of his or her productions become evident. For example, when comparing Roman Polanski's films, James Morrison (2007) concludes that the director is "not merely obsessed with the theme of repression, but that his true interest is in the concrete--what is out in the open--and in why it is so rarely seen," bringing to the forefront the underlying structure of this auteur's films. The same can be said of the films of David Lynch, as Justus Nieland (2012) argues that "plastic is at once a key architectural and interior design dynamic in Lynch's films, an uncertain way of feeling essential to Lynch's art, and the prime matter of Lynch's strange picture of the human organism." While it is obvious that there is a connection between an auteur film and its auteur, Wollen asserts that auteur analysis "consists of tracing a structure...within the work, which can

then *post factum* be assigned to an individual, the director, on empirical grounds” (2009, p. 468). Furthermore, Wollen (2009) explains that the directors, in this case Polanski and Lynch, are quite separate from “Polanski” and “Lynch,” the structures named after them (p. 468). Therefore, each of these directors can be considered auteurs in their own right, their films embodying structures that scream their auteur’s name, being easily distinguishable as “Polanski-esque,” or “Lynch-esque.”

“Whedonesque” is a website dedicated to providing updates about Joss Whedon’s past and upcoming works, while Whedonverse is a word used to describe everything related to the creator and director of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) and *Firefly* (2002), among other works. If it concerns Joss Whedon, it is part of the Whedonverse. While these two terms do not by any means sum up the career or impact of Joss Whedon and his creations, they do at least begin to grasp at the idea of Whedon as an auteur, something echoed by other authors, as well as the underlying structure and personal style evident flowing throughout the body of his work. Whedon’s recognizable body of work includes films and television series and episodes, some of which are produced using the musical genre.

**Genre Theory and the Musical Genre.** In order to fully understand *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* as a musical, it is imperative to explore the existing literature on genre theory, and more specifically, the musical genre. Thomas Schatz (1981) establishes that there are two types of films when concerning genre theory: genre films and non-genre films. He distinguishes a genre film as one that “involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern with a familiar setting” (p. 6). Schatz mentions westerns, musicals, screwball comedies, romantic comedies (what we now call “chick flicks”) and gangster films as



types of genre films prescribing to the predictable and formulaic qualities. Films such as these contain plots that may include some surprises within the body of the storyline, but ultimately end with a familiar and expected conclusion, at least to most audiences today, who are likely accustomed to tropes and motifs that have developed, evolved, and solidified over time within each genre. Schatz (1981) explains this idea, stating that the narrative components of a genre film, such as the characters, setting, and plot, “have prior significance as elements of some generic formula, and the viewer’s negotiation of a genre film thus involves weighing the film’s variations against the genre’s preordained, value-laden narrative system” (p. 10). In other words, the audience understands a genre film by how well or poorly the film follows the basic storyline of its genre, and if the formula works, the audience is bound to respond favorably. In turn, studios continue to produce films following these types of genre conventions because they sell tickets. Schatz (1981) explains that “filmic conventions have been refined through considerable variation and repetition,” implying that studios are ultimately learning from audience responses what range of adjustments to the basic conventions of a genre film will provoke a positive audience response for a genre film, and what will not (p. 6). Therefore, the audience is a key ingredient to creating narrative forms that will be financially viable; that audiences will want to watch.

In addition to establishing that the creation and maintenance of a genre is a process negotiated between the film creators and the audience, Schatz (1981) explains that this process is continual, further honing the makeup of the genre. What might have been considered a musical thirty years ago may be different from what is considered part of the musical genre today; the “vaguely defined amalgam of actions and attitudes, of characters and locales” of what makes up a musical has changed (Schatz, 1981, p.18). Furthermore, he explains that a genre is not so much

described or defined by individual films as much as it is “by its deep structure, those rules and conventions which render this film a Western and that film a musical” (Schatz, 1981, p.18). This “deep structure” varies from genre to genre, and is made up of different aspects. For example, the setting of a western film is central to it being coded as part of the western genre. Conversely, however, the setting of a musical film has very little to do with it being coded as part of the musical genre. It could take place on a stage or in a courthouse and still be considered a musical, because the structural factors that make it a musical lie in its other dramatic conflicts, not so much the setting. In describing the dramatic conflicts of a genre film, or its social problems, Schatz (1981) states, “we must look to the generic character types and the conflicts they generate in identifying any genre” (p. 25). Ultimately, the social problems the characters face in a genre film, as well as how those problems are resolved, are central to determining the specific genre of the film. However, different social problems can be rooted in different aspects of the generic community of the film. Whatever the social problem or dramatic conflict present in a genre film, Schatz (1981) argues that “the most significant feature of any generic narrative may be its resolution—that is, its efforts to solve, even if only temporarily, the conflicts that have disturbed the community welfare” (p. 30). Of course, how the conflicts are resolved vary depending on the genre of the film.

As described, overall structure of the film, including how it presents and deals with dramatic conflicts, contribute to what genre it is a part of. However, regardless of the specific genre, Schatz identifies two dominant narrative strategies of genre filmmaking that a specific genre can fall under: genres of order and genres of integration. A genre film of either of these two strategies possesses specific characteristics inherent to its overall strategy:

**Table 1: Characteristics of genres of order and genres of integration**

	<b>ORDER</b> <b>(Western, gangster,</b> <b>detective)</b>	<b>INTEGRATION</b> <b>(musical, screwball comedy,</b> <b>family melodrama)</b>
<b>hero</b>	individual (male dominant)	couple/collective (female dominant)
<b>setting</b>	contested space (ideologically unstable)	civilized space (ideologically stable)
<b>conflict</b>	externalized—violent	internalized—emotional
<b>resolution</b>	elimination (death)	embrace (love)
<b>thematics</b>	mediation—redemption	integration—domestication
	macho code	maternal-familial code
	isolated self-reliance	community cooperation
	utopia-as-promise	utopia-as-reality

(Schatz, 1981, p. 35)

For example, in a screwball comedy, the protagonist is generally represented by a couple whose opposing viewpoints are finally embraced by each other and their surrounding community when they form a romantic bond at the end of the film. Genres of integration represent and maintain different values than genres of order, causing the two strategies to employ differing resolution types to maintain their values. In a western film, the protagonist or hero is usually an individual male who must overcome more physical or setting-based obstacles, resolving the conflicts by physical means. The resolution in this type of film, a genre of order, involves elimination, usually death, so that the protagonist can maintain his individuality without conforming to the community's ideals.

The strategy of integration lends insight to the definition of the musical genre and how dramatic conflict or social problems are represented within musical films. Schatz distinguishes the problems typically inherent to musical films, as opposed to other genre films. He explains, “courtship and marriage are problems in the musical...[and] the principal characters in the musical compromise their individuality in their eventual romantic embrace and thus demonstrate their willingness to be integrated into the social community” (Schatz, 1981, p. 25). The main characters in a musical represent an attitude within a community, one that is typically in opposition to the worldview the community holds or in opposition to each other, that must be resolved in the film. Usually it is a potentially romantic couple, what Schatz (1981) describes as the “doubled” hero, typically brought together at the end of the film, not solely the musical numbers within the film that characterizes it as part of the musical genre (p. 26). These two aspects function together to define the film’s genre, by utilizing the musical numbers to express the process and resolution of the dramatic conflicts in the film. It is how the dramatic conflicts are articulated that characterizes the film’s genre. For a musical, the dramatic conflicts are expressed through music, and social integration is the typical theme of resolution of the dramatic conflicts in a musical film (Schatz, 1981, p. 29).

Gender is central to the characterization of a film as a musical. Not only is the musical genre as a genre of integration coded as feminine as opposed to the masculine genre of order, but the generic narrative of a musical centers on two characters rather than one: one male and one female. According to Rick Altman (1987), “instead of focusing all its interest on a single central character, following the trajectory of her progress, the American film musical has a dual focus, built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values” (p. 19). The tactic musical films use to reflect the gender binary is parallelism or symmetry between coupled

scenes, specifically “sets and situations, costumes and movement, even dialogue and shots are replicated in such a way as to telegraph the film’s structure” (Altman, 1987, p. 29). All of this is done to suggest the pairing of the main male and female characters, even if they are not yet actually seen together as a romantic couple. The structure reflects this gender binary, foreshadowing the eventual embrace of the primary male and female characters, per Schatz’s genre of integration approach.

The musical epitome of the gender binary in a film musical is the duet between the two main characters, and “serves the important function of crystallizing the couple’s attitudes and emotions” (Altman, 1987, p. 37). Throughout the film the couple engages in their own solos to express their emotions, though often the solo is paired with another from the opposite character, continuing the theme of parallelism and symmetry. The duet, however, serves to establish the eventual coming together of the two characters physically, by representing them coming together musically. The gender binary of the duet echoes the overall gendered nature of the musical genre.

**Masculinity.** Though genre, and specifically the musical genre are unquestionably important to the analysis of *Dr. Horrible*, masculinity plays another primary role in this particular analysis. Masculinity is a topic that is often discussed in the field of communication studies, and several theorists explore its representation, including its different types and its depiction in media. One of the most recurring types of masculinity in scholarship is hegemonic masculinity, which is described by Thomas DiPiero (2002) as “the figure of hegemonic stability to which all other forms of identity are explicitly or implicitly compared” (p. 3). Hegemonic masculinity is inextricably linked to and based on the concept of hegemony, which “involves the

production of meaning as a way of unifying and ordering people" and "quilts together portions or fragments of meaning from different realms, in the process forming a way of knowing that becomes a world view for a given community" (DiPiero, 2002, p. 12). Thus, hegemony, and therefore hegemonic masculinity, is contextual. The ever-changing nature of hegemony and hegemonic masculinity is the large part of the battle for men who attempt to achieve the standard, as it makes it almost impossible for men to reach a moving target. It is nearly impossible to live up to the standard of hegemonic masculinity, but it is nonetheless presented as something men must aspire to achieve if they are expected to be viewed by society as "men."

Though different characteristics have been identified in scholarship, it would be accurate to say that depictions of hegemonic masculinity are always changing, even if only slightly, because the tactics used to enforce hegemony are not static, as society and the status quo are not static. Because meaning develops and changes in society, the hegemony used to keep particular meaning structures in place must change, as well. However, hegemonic masculinity is often equated with stereotypes of masculinity, or manliness. Nick Trujillo (1991) identifies five features of hegemonic masculinity: physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality (p. 291). Additionally, masculinity is often viewed as being in contrast to femininity, or whatever a woman is, a man is not, and vice versa. Oftentimes these contrasting ideals between masculinity and femininity are represented by dualisms. Among stereotypes and these dualisms is the common "men are aggressive, women are caring" cliché, which echoes Trujillo's identification of a feature of hegemonic masculinity as physical force and control (Mansfield, 2006, p. 23). Others masculine/feminine dualisms include assertive/sensitive, frank/indirect, cold/warm, and loud/quiet (Mansfield, 2006, p. 23). Though

some of these stereotypes still ring true to hegemonic masculinity, there is no guarantee that these characteristics will endure.

The fluid status of hegemonic masculinity ultimately leads to the crisis in masculinity, which is the predicament that some men are facing today with the evolution of gender roles. The increase of women in the work force and an overall challenge to “the validity of white male privilege” contribute to this crisis, threatening the traditional societal roles of men, causing men to feel “disempowered and angry” (Rogers, 2008, p. 287). The crisis creates a need for resolution, and in attempting to find this resolution, more versions of masculinity are introduced into the pre-existing body of masculinities. The abundance of characteristics of masculinity accumulate, often conflict with each other, and ultimately confuse men by giving them a plethora of options of traits a man should possess in order to be masculine. Two types of masculinity are commonly referred to as being the basis of the crisis in masculinity: primitive and civilized masculinity. Primitive masculinity revolves around what are normally considered to be stereotypical masculine traits, and is “based on bodily strength, sexual virility, and a lack of moral control” (Rogers, 2008, p. 286). Civilized masculinity, on the other hand, is more in line with the capitalist Western society, and is “based on self-mastery and intellectual capacity” (Rogers, 2008, p. 286). Oftentimes, civilized masculinity is seen as feminizing men, but ultimately, both forms of masculinity function together to keep hegemonic masculinity in place with the ever-changing society.

In addition to hegemonic masculinity, DiPiero (2002) also discusses the concept of hysterical masculinity. At the heart of this type of masculinity is the act of questioning. Those indicative of hysterical masculinity are constantly asking the question, “What am I?” searching for confirmation from others of his masculine identity (DiPiero, 2002, pp. 110-111). Hysterical

masculinity revolves around this notion of affirmation. For one to justify his masculinity, he needs constant recognition of his masculinity. According to DiPiero (2002), "the hysteric is racked by an uncertainty of identity, continually testing its relationship to the master signifiers--the paradigms of knowledge--that gave rise to valorized and legitimized modes of being" (p. 148). These master signifiers are representations of masculinity, or the ideals a man is supposed to possess in order to be considered masculine. However, the hysteric is constantly questioning whether or not he lives up to these standards, therefore requiring confirmation that he does.

Though there are many characteristics and types of masculinity, no form is complete without the discussion of the penis, or phallus. The penis is considered to be a signifier of masculinity, but generally, larger penises are seen as more masculine. According to Anne Fausto-Sterling (1995), "for proper masculine socialization to occur, [a] boy must have a sufficiently large penis" (p. 131). This view often is seen as a part of masculinity as a stereotype, but is nonetheless important. The idea of having a penis is not only relevant when it comes to socialization as masculine, but when separating masculinity from femininity, and comparing masculinities, as well. Sigmund Freud asserts that the penis "somehow is naturally endowed with such a superiority" (DiPiero, 2002, p. 46). Having, using, and referencing one's penis, then, would illustrate a man's superiority, and a man's assertion of masculinity among other men. DiPiero (2002) sees the phallus as a signifier and abstract representation of the penis, or a "larger than life" alternative to the penis, and "[suggests] that the real penis cannot approach phallic dimensions not because of its size, but because of its very nature: it is flesh and blood" (p. 175). As the penis is a representation of assertion of masculinity, the phallus is too, but in such a way that substitutes the inability to possess masculinity, and assert a masculinity that may not have been attained by the man in the first place.



Masculinity as depicted in film and television echoes the sentiments of the previous discussion of masculinity. Steve Neale (1993) discusses the idea of a spectator engaging in narcissistic identification with the onscreen male, explaining that the male protagonist's "image is dependent upon narcissistic phantasies, phantasies of the 'more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego'" (pp. 11-12). Similar to the nearly unattainable hegemonic masculinity, narcissistic identification creates in the onscreen male a desired identity, one of "power, omnipotence, mastery, and control" (Neale, 1993, p. 9). Like hegemonic masculinity, this desired identity is also ultimately unrealistic and nearly unachievable, an "ideal [that] is something to which the subject is never adequate" (Neale, 1993, p. 13).

One of the primary manifestations of the onscreen male's identity of "power, omnipotence, mastery, and control" is, of course, the male body (Neale, 1993, p. 9). A plethora of films have represented the male body as one "of musculature, of beauty, of physical feats, and of a gritty toughness," harkening back to the predominant characteristics of primitive masculinity (Jeffords, 1993, p. 245). However, as Susan Jeffords (1993) argues, there has been a shift in focus from the physicality of male bodies, and "more film time is devoted to explorations of their ethical dilemmas, emotional traumas, and psychological goals" (p. 245). In contrast to the more physical representation of masculinity, this depiction of masculinity echoes that of civilized masculinity. Furthermore, the different depictions of masculinity films have to offer also represent the crisis in masculinity, and competitions and negotiations between primitive and civilized masculinities. Overall, these differing depictions of masculinity in cinema tend to reflect the ongoing conversations regarding masculinity outside of cinema.

This literature review serves to inform my textual analysis of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, but further than that, it helps to answer several questions: How has *Dr. Horrible* intervened

in the larger conversation about gender and genre? How are gender and genre related, and how have developments in genre made it possible to reconceive genre itself? In addition to these more basic questions, I also hope to begin to develop answers to some larger inquiries about the web miniseries: Why is the musical format conducive to Whedon's questioning of masculinity? How does parody or satire fit into this questioning of masculinity? Is it really possible to isolate masculinity without talking about femininity? Though some of these questions may require further research for sufficient answers, I hope to at least scratch the surface of the larger conversation about gender and genre that *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* intersects with.

## **Overview**

My analysis begins with Chapter One, which is an application of auteur theory to the works of Joss Whedon. This chapter will also delve into a discussion of Whedon's self-proclaimed "feminist agenda," and how the representations of women among his existing body of work, including *Dr. Horrible*, challenge this identification with feminism. Whedon's masculinization of the typically feminine musical genre further contradicts his statements of feminism.

Chapter Two utilizes genre theory and conversations about the musical genre to analyze how *Dr. Horrible* revises the musical genre. Using examples from the text, specifically song lyrics and visuals, that demonstrate how the musical sequences are masculinized in contrast to the non-musical sequences, I engage in textual analysis of the web miniseries to explore the revision of genre that takes place. Furthermore, the differences between the musical and non-musical sequences serve to illustrate the duality of Billy's character.

Chapter Three delves into the tensions between civilized, primitive, hysterical and hegemonic masculinities, as Billy/Dr. Horrible ultimately struggles with all of these forms. While he tends to express a more civilized masculinity, his goals and aspirations align more fully with primitive masculinity, illustrating the duality of his masculinity and thus his struggle to articulate it adequately. Billy/Dr. Horrible's struggle between civilized and primitive masculinities causes him to fall into hysterical masculinity in order to negotiate between the two, representing the magnitude of a struggle the impossible nature of hegemonic masculinity can cause. Although Billy/Dr. Horrible's struggle with masculinity is central to the narrative of the web miniseries, the depiction of femininity and Penny's character is also explored.

Finally, Chapter Four, the Conclusion, discusses the implications of this analysis for the field of communication studies, specifically convergence culture and web distribution. While the production and distribution context of *Dr. Horrible* coincides with some aspects of convergence culture, it simultaneously challenges others. This chapter also discusses possible areas for further research of *Dr. Horrible*.

Though each chapter allows for some distinctions between the main concepts of this analysis (auteur theory, feminism/femininity, genre, gender, and masculinity), it is important to note that these concepts are in some cases intertwined and nearly inseparable. For example, gender undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in the structure of the musical genre and its revision. Masculinity is indubitably tied to gender, feminism, and femininity, as well as the representation of the musical genre in this particular web miniseries. Though it is possible, to a certain extent, to analyze how these concepts function individually in *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, it is also critical to recognize their interdependence, as this interdependence is what ultimately ties the forthcoming analysis together.

## II. Whedonesque

Joss Whedon is responsible for creating the cult television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1996-2003), and writing and directing *The Avengers* (2012). Arguably the two most recognizable of Whedon's works, this series and film make up a small part of his career to date. Whedon is the creator of three other original television series in addition to *Buffy: Angel* (1999-2004), a spin-off of *Buffy*, *Firefly* (2002-2003), a space western, and *Dollhouse* (2009-2010), a science fiction drama. Regarding *Buffy* alone, Whedon has directed a total of 19 episodes, and written 22 episodes of the 144 episode series, and has written and directed several episodes of each of his created series. When not involved in the writing or directing of every episode in his series, Whedon is still "responsible for all the shows" as executive producer (Lavery, 2002). Whedon has also directed episodes of *The Office* (2005-) and *Glee* (2009-), and written episodes of *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and *Parenthood* (1990-1991). Though Whedon clearly has experience in the realm of television, his skill applies to film, as well, having written and directed *Serenity* (2005), the film adaptation of *Firefly*, illustrating him as a transmedia auteur. He also wrote the screenplay for *Alien Resurrection* (1997), and was a writer for *Toy Story* (1995) and *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011). Whedon wrote and directed an adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012), and is working on writing and directing *The Avengers 2* (2015).

### Life & Career

Joss Whedon was born Joe Whedon on June 23, 1964 to Tom Whedon and Lee Stearns. What is especially significant about Joss's family is that both his father and his grandfather, John Whedon, were television writers,<sup>2</sup> paving the way for Joss and his talent early on. Though he had many other influences in his life, Joss certainly learned a lot about television and scriptwriting

from his father, who encouraged Joss and inspired his passion for writing musicals (Havens, 2003, p. 3). Joss's mother was involved in "acting and singing in summer-stock productions," adding to the musical inspiration Joss experienced growing up. In addition to learning about writing, Joss developed his sense of humor around his father: "While I really enjoyed all of the funny things my dad was working on, it was really just being *around* someone who was that funny" (as cited in Longworth, 2011, p. 43).

Though coming from a line of television writers certainly contributed to Joss Whedon's interest and eventual success in film and television, he was not short of other influences. In addition to his father, Whedon grew up with two other males, his two older brothers. Later, after his parents' divorce, he would gain two younger stepbrothers, Zack and Jed, who both played a significant role in the creation and production of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Whedon was easily frightened as a child, and oftentimes the source of the terror was his older brother, which may help to explain some of the themes of horror underlying Whedon's works: "If you see big brothers being eviscerated on the show you'll know where that came from" (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 4). His brothers are not the only things that scared Whedon, however, as he claims that he "was afraid of the dark and everything, and [had] a vivid imagination" (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 4).

Whedon's imagination helped him to create stories and games as a child, and ultimately fueled his desire to seek out other worlds as an escape, through reading comic books and science fiction, which inevitably influenced the genres he would explore throughout his career. Ultimately, Whedon would most likely be classified as a loner and an outsider in the years before he broke into the television industry. His experiences as an outsider influenced his works later on in several ways. First, it further honed Whedon's sense of humor, because according to Whedon,

“there were times when I didn’t feel as though I was getting attention I deserved, and I learned that if you said something funny, people would stop and listen” (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 5). Second, Whedon’s outsider role in life echoes the outsider role of a lot of his characters in his shows.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Whedon experienced a difficult time in his high school years, and according to Candace Havens (2003), his “difficult high school experiences powered the angst and power of *Buffy*, particularly in its beginning years” (p. 12).

Though Whedon would most likely be classified as a loner and an outsider when he was younger, there was one person he would share his experiences and stories with: his mother (Havens, 2003, pp. 4-5). In addition to being influenced by his father, Whedon’s mother, Lee Stearns, also played a significant role in his life. In fact, if it were not for his mother going on sabbatical to England, Whedon would not have been able to go with her and attend his final years of high school at Winchester College (Havens, 2003, p. 10). Though his overall high school experience was not very enjoyable, he did gather some inspiration for his creations while in England, in addition to contributing to his love for “all things British” (Havens, 2003, p. 11). In particular, the idea for Rupert Giles, Buffy’s watcher in the TV incarnation of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, came from his experiences at Winchester (Havens, 2003, p. 11).

After experiencing a fairly difficult time throughout high school, Whedon attended Wesleyan University in Connecticut, enjoying life in college much more than in high school. College gave Whedon an environment in which “he could be himself and feel accepted,” but also allowed his creativity and imagination to thrive (Havens, 2003, p. 12). Unsurprisingly, Whedon studied film at Wesleyan, and was a student of and teaching assistant for the chair of the film studies program, Dr. Jeanine Basinger. Basinger played an important role in Whedon’s life, not

only because she and other professors left him “with some incredible insights into film,” but also because she is an inspiration and role model to Whedon (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 13).

Joss Whedon is a creator “with a self-declared ‘feminist agenda,’” and there are several women in his life that helped to inspire this identification in him, including his mother, Lee Stearns, his professor from Wesleyan, Jeanine Basinger, and his wife, Kai Cole (Havens, 2003, p. 6). According to Whedon, his mother “was an extraordinarily strong, independent, tough, uncompromising, cool, funny person,” and inspired an identification with feminism early on in his life (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 6). A characteristic that is common among the women in Whedon’s life is strength, and another woman who possesses this is Jeanine Basinger, who, according to Whedon, has a lot of similarities to his own mother (Havens, 2003, p. 8). Finally, Whedon finds inspiration in his wife, Kai Cole, who is “enormously strong...[and] is a complete self-starter” (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 8). Whedon chalks up his “feminist agenda,” and his desire to depict empowering women predominantly to these three women. However, another factor contributing to his identification with women is his “being small and fragile, and not taken seriously by anybody” (as cited in Longworth, 2011, p. 58). According to Whedon, because of his fragility and status of the youngest child in his family, “[he] could identify with the way [he] perceived women were being treated once [he] got out of [his] house, where they were treated like equals” (as cited in Longworth, 2011, p. 58).

After graduating college, Whedon took his new knowledge and experiences with him to Los Angeles, where he lived with his father and eventually began to work in television. Before finding a job in the industry, he worked at a local video store and as a researcher at the Film Institute in order to support himself. Whedon tried his hand at writing scripts, which turned out to be a talent and a passion for him. “He began sending scripts to everyone he knew in

Hollywood, including some of his father's friends," and accepted a job as a staff writer on the ABC series *Roseanne* (Havens, 2003, p. 18). He worked for the series for about a year, then the show *Parenthood*, all the while working on a film script for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in his free time. Finally, after working in film doing some smaller writing jobs, his script for *Buffy* was optioned to Sandollar Productions in 1988, and in 1991 it was picked up by Kaz and Fran Rubel Kuzui and made into a film (Havens, 2003, pp. 17-21). Unfortunately, Whedon was completely dissatisfied with how the film turned out: "I had written this scary film about an empowered woman, and they turned it into a broad comedy" (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 23). Whedon's attempt to incorporate feminist values into his film, as well as write a film within the horror genre, failed commercially due to the director's, Fran Kuzui's, interpretation of the original script.

Following the failure of *Buffy* the film, Whedon worked as a script doctor and writer for several films. Whedon's experience as a script doctor was somewhat enjoyable and lucrative, but he yearned to create something of his own from beginning to end. However, this stretch of time during Whedon's career helped to establish himself in the industry. While his father helped and encouraged him to break into the industry in the first place, and Kaz and Fran Kuzui gave his *Buffy* script life, his agent, "Chris Harbert of United Talent Agency, landed him the job of rewriting the script for *Speed*" (Havens, 2003, p. 25). Whedon's work on the script was recognized by some critics, who appreciated the clever dialogue, which was a large part of the revisions Whedon made. After working on *Speed* (1994), Whedon worked on the script of *Toy Story* (1995) as one of seven writers. *Toy Story* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, reflecting the quality writing of the film, partially due to Whedon's involvement.



While *Speed* and *Toy Story* certainly reflect some of Whedon's successes in the realm of writing, he also experienced and contributed to some less acclaimed projects. Whedon was hired by Kevin Costner as a script doctor for the screenplay of *Waterworld* (1995), which was a frustrating experience for Whedon due to the little influence he had the opportunity to offer the script. The film was too far into production for Whedon to improve the script much, and it ultimately failed commercially. Following *Waterworld*, Whedon was hired by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox to write the script for the fourth installment in the *Alien* franchise, *Alien Resurrection* (1997). Because of his love for the franchise, Whedon was ecstatic to work on the fourth film, and wrote a script he was proud of. Ultimately, "*Alien Resurrection* did well in the box office while receiving mixed reviews from critics," but Whedon was unhappy with the adaptation of his screenplay (Havens, 2003, pp. 28-29).

After a stretch of writing for various films, Whedon finally got to revive his beloved *Buffy* in a television adaptation of his original idea. Gail Berman, an executive with the company the original *Buffy* script was optioned to, Sandollar Productions, approached Whedon with the idea to make the concept into a television show. Whedon directed a "mini-pilot" of the show, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was picked up by the WB "as a midseason replacement on the fledgling network" (Havens, 2003, pp. 32-33). In the process of recruiting his writing team, he met Marti Noxon and David Greenwalt, who would be invaluable resources to Whedon in his television career. Noxon would eventually become an executive producer of *Buffy* and be involved in the production of *Angel*, while Greenwalt would become an executive producer of *Angel*.

Season One of *Buffy* began Whedon's official foray into television directing, as well as a long-term commitment to writing for television. *Buffy* aired for five seasons on The WB, followed by another two seasons on UPN, totally seven seasons. Though the series was well

received and had a notable cult following, only one of its episodes, “Hush,” was ever nominated for an Emmy (for Outstanding Writing for a Drama Series). Beginning during Season Four of *Buffy*, a spin-off series, *Angel*, began its first of an eventual five seasons on The WB. Following the premier of *Angel* in 1999, Whedon’s space western series, *Firefly*, aired on Fox in 2002.

Unfortunately, both *Angel* and *Firefly* were cancelled, though the latter was the more short-lived of the two, airing only eleven of the planned fourteen episodes of its first (and only) season.

Whedon was displeased with both cancellations: “With ‘Buffy,’ I was ready to end. ‘Firefly’ -- I went into such a state of denial, it caused a film. But with ‘Angel,’ it was like ‘Healthy Guy Falls Dead From Heart Attack’” (Jensen, 2004). *Serenity* was *Firefly*’s film continuation and

Whedon’s first major motion picture. His decision to make the film was based upon the large fan following of the series following its cancellation, and

he convinced Universal to take a risk on a relatively low-budget (\$40 million) film after a small but rabid group of fans calling themselves Browncoats snapped up somewhere north of two hundred thousand copies of a DVD set collecting the series. (Russell, 2011)

*Serenity* represents Whedon’s official cross over to the world of film after dedicating eight years to his own series in television. *Serenity* was significant to Whedon’s career because according to him,

they let me do the thing. They helped me, they guided me through it. It was my first movie, and the people at Universal were amazingly supportive at the same time as being instructive, but at the end of the day, I did my thing.

*Serenity* and Universal gave Whedon the opportunity to “do the thing,” or maintain creative control over one of his own projects for the first time in film. After the production of *Serenity*, Whedon transitioned into a two-year commitment to another television series, *Dollhouse*. This series befell the misfortune of being cancelled by Fox, much like *Firefly* did in 2002. Following the two-season run of *Dollhouse*, Whedon was given the opportunity to “do his thing,” to write

and direct the Marvel blockbuster *The Avengers*, giving him the biggest budget he had worked with yet, \$220 million. While it may not be immediately evident why Whedon was qualified for this job after having directed only one feature length film, Alex Pappademas (2012) comments on why he was a suitable choice:

What matters is that the geeks love Whedon, because Whedon comes across as someone who, if he hadn't become an acclaimed and occasionally successful TV show-runner, would just be one of them, another fan-man standing around the comic shop insisting that disreputable genres like sci-fi and horror and cape-and-tights comics have value, that they could occasionally reflect the condition of humans other than the neurotic-boy-outsider and grim-Wolverinian-vigilante types that tend to populate this kind of fiction—women, for example. (p. 1)

Whedon was a good fit for the project because he knows what the audience wants, because in a lot of ways, he is a part of it, not to mention his experience actually writing comics.<sup>4</sup> After having Whedon at the helm of the project, *The Avengers* ultimately broke the box-office record for opening weekend with \$200.3 million in the U.S. and Canada alone (“Box Office,” 2012). Whedon’s opportunity to direct *The Avengers*, and the film’s subsequent success ensured him another shot at writing and directing a big-budget film, as he will write and direct the sequel, *The Avengers 2*.

The way Joss Whedon thinks and feels comes out of the events that make up his life and career, reflecting the view of Andrew Sarris (2009), who explains, “the way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels” (p. 452). Whedon’s experiences not only shape him as a person, but help in forming the substance of his body of works, in both television and film. According to Phillip McIntyre (2012), the films of an auteur should represent and illustrate an identifiable signature, or “a unifying and identifiable trace of a particular director’s personality endowing it with an organic unity” (p. 136). Among Whedon’s creations, a unique signature can be identified, and it is a signature that is both characteristic of

Whedon's artistic and creative tendencies, as well as his life experiences. Not only can aspects of Whedon's signature be identified among his creative works, but within other scholars' analyses of his works, as well. Several aspects of this signature are evident among Whedon's work, including his choice and use of genre, employment of "outsider" characters, foregrounding of active female protagonists, and a tendency to kill off beloved characters.

## **Genre**

Though Whedon was "more into the sort of highbrow British stuff that [his] mother watched," when he was younger, he also spent a significant amount of time poring over science fiction books and comic books (as cited in Longworth, 2011, p. 51). In addition to his fascination with England, he filled his time reading material by science fiction authors like Frederick Pohl and Frank Herbert, as well as watching scary movies (Havens, 2003, p. 5). Undoubtedly, these early influences in Whedon's life affected the types of genres he utilizes among his television and film creations. Overwhelmingly, Whedon is a science fiction and horror auteur, writing and creating material that falls into one, or often both of these genres.

More than being an auteur of science fiction and horror, Whedon is an auteur of genres of order. According to Schatz (1981), "conflicts within these genres are externalized, translated into violence, and usually resolved through the elimination of some threat to the social order" (p. 34). After describing one of the primary characteristics of genres of order, it is clear that Whedon's creations indubitably fall under this category, and so do the genres of science fiction and horror. Additionally, as Barry Keith Grant (1996) states, horror films "bring us to an acceptance of the inevitability of death," echoing the theme of resolution through elimination in genres of order films (p. 6). Though Grant describes this characteristic as typical of horror films, it is a theme

that is recurring among Whedon's works, whether they are horror or science fiction. In Whedon's case, the "inevitability of death" is not unique to the horror genre, but a constant reminder among all of his creations.

In order to illustrate these common genre threads among Whedon's works, it is imperative to analyze how these genres are represented in his body of television series and films. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is Whedon's first television series, and also one that has received a substantial amount of critical claim and analysis. Havens (2003) compliments Whedon on his knack for maintaining continuity in his series, stating, "the most obvious aspect of this continuity was the season-long story arcs" (p. 41). In addition to providing the show with continuity, the story arcs in *Buffy* are notable for providing each season with an enemy, or "Big Bad" that Buffy and her Scooby Gang are challenged with throughout the season. The introduction and development of the Big Bad in every season characterizes *Buffy* as falling under a genre of order, for in order to resolve the threat of the enemy to Sunnydale, the city in which Buffy lives, she must defeat that threat. Usually, the defeat is in the form of Buffy slaying the Big Bad. Additionally, this setup echoes Grant's thoughts on the horror genre, not to mention the vampires and demons that are stock characters in horror film and television. In every season of *Buffy*, the "kill or be killed" dynamic ensures that death is indeed inevitable, whether for Buffy or her enemy.

It is important to provide a few examples of the "Big Bad" setup in order to truly illustrate how it reflects genre characteristics. The first season of *Buffy* sets up the generic plot well with the ancient vampire Big Bad, The Master. Not only is the enemy a vampire, again indicative of the horror genre, but he is also hell-bent on killing Buffy. The only obstacle standing in his way of rising to his full power is the Slayer, who, according to Slayer legend in

the series, “alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness.”

However, Buffy’s inevitable death is made more tangible when her watcher, Giles, discovers a prophecy that ultimately states that “Buffy will face the Master, and she will die.” For thirteen episodes, Buffy and The Master plot against each other, attempting to rid Sunnydale of one another. Near the end of the season, Buffy is drowned by The Master, but quickly revived by her friend Xander. Ultimately, Buffy succeeds in slaying The Master, restoring order to Sunnydale, at least until Season Two, when another Big Bad arrives. Season One, especially because it provides ample background information about the legend of the Slayer, is a great example of how *Buffy* is representative of a genre of order, as well as the horror genre specifically.

Following seasons of *Buffy* echo this same setup, but with variations. For example, Buffy is not always initially the immediate threat to the Big Bad, nor is the Big Bad always obvious from the start of the season. In Season Two, Angelus<sup>5</sup> is the Big Bad, but does not come into existence until Angel loses his soul early on in the season. Though Buffy defeats him by stabbing him and sending him into a hell dimension, he ultimately returns, soul intact, a few episodes into Season Three. Even with these variations, *Buffy* is still part of the horror genre, as Buffy must fight for her life against vampires, demons, and forces of darkness, in almost every episode. The high death toll is again indicative of the theme of elimination present in both the horror genre specifically, and genres of order. A spinoff of *Buffy* focusing on the vampire with a soul, *Angel*, has a similar setup. It is set in Los Angeles of the same world as *Buffy*, maintaining the same types of enemies present in the original series. However, Angel is the protagonist and hero, and the one who is responsible for defeating the enemies.

While *Buffy* has received a lot of attention, another of Whedon’s series, *Firefly*, though short-lived, has amassed a large fan following, as well as critical attention. *Serenity* is a film

continuation of the season long series. *Firefly* and *Serenity* focus on a band of nine misfits and veterans of the Browncoats, or the losing side of a civil war against the Alliance. The series and film take place around the year 2517, and “Serenity” is the name of the “Firefly-class” spaceship the crew flies through space and among other planets, exemplifying the science fiction genre of the series. Though future settings, space and travelling through it are common markers of the science fiction genre, represented in series like *Star Trek* (1966-1969), *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009), and *Stargate* (1997-2007), among others, the use of technology, especially futuristic types, are also part of the genre. J.P. Telotte (2012) comments on the self-reflexivity in the use of technology in science fiction media:

Calling attention particularly to sf films’ omnipresent video screens, holograms, and other media images, [Garett Stewart] suggests that we see them as consistently reflecting “the mechanics of apparition that permit these films in...the first place” (161) and [that] we read this form, one that is both about and sourced in technology, as almost invariably self-referential. (p. 128)

Telotte uses *Firefly* and its film adaptation, *Serenity*, as a representation of this idea that the plethora of technological images in science fiction calls attention to the medium in which the genre is represented: film and television. Ultimately, the depiction of technology in both *Firefly* and *Serenity* serves to reaffirm its grounding in the science fiction genre. Another of Whedon’s short-lived series, *Dollhouse*, is part of the science fiction genre, as well. Its futuristic and dystopian take on technology that programs human “dolls” to possess any desirable personality is clearly indicative of science fiction.

According to Havens (2003), with *Buffy*, “Joss set out to create a truly cross-genre show,” but this description does not solely apply to *Buffy* (p. 40). Though Whedon’s creations overwhelmingly fall under the horror or science fiction categories, he has a tendency to de-

familiarize established genres, and utilize genre mixing in order to create in his works something truly unique.

For instance, though *Buffy* is essentially a horror television series, the essential plot of the show does not follow the typical horror narrative, predominantly because of the gender of the protagonist. According to Grant (1996), “probably the most common image in horror movies...[is] the beast in the boudoir. Most often in such scenes...the monster is coded as male, the victim female,” and this image has come to represent the horror genre as a whole (p. 5). In *Buffy*, however, the depiction of gender is quite the opposite. Instead of the stereotypical female victim, Buffy is an empowered female hero who slays the monsters. According to Whedon, this twist on the horror genre “came from seeing too many blondes walking into dark alleyways and being killed...I wanted, just once, for her to fight back when the monster attacked, and kick his ass” (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 21). Not only does Whedon highlight the typical setup of a horror text, but he also explains how he wanted to de-familiarize the genre by creating this empowered female character. Additionally, the genre-mixing present in *Buffy* is well-explained by David Lavery, who cites an interview in which Whedon discusses his intentions for the series. According to Lavery (2002),

We know that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a recombinant hybrid of his obsessions: "We wanted to make that sort of short-attention-span, *The Simpsons*, cull-from-every genre all the time thing. You know, if we take this moment from *Nosferatu*, and this moment from *Pretty in Pink*, that'll make this possible. A little *Jane Eyre* in there, and then a little *Lethal Weapon 4*. Not 3, but 4. And I think this'll work."

Whedon's use of multiple genres in *Buffy* was fully intentional, and certainly not his last use of genre-mixing in a television series.

*Angel*, the spinoff series of *Buffy*, which still falls under the horror category, de-familiarizes genre in a different way, by mixing horror with the detective genre. Depicting Angel



as an occult detective, *Angel* often also adheres to the traditional tropes of detective fiction, with Angel and his gang working to “help the helpless/hopeless” people of Los Angeles, often in the form of clients of his detective agency, Angel Investigations. Instead of mixing horror with high school drama, *Angel* is a “darker, more adult version of *Buffy*, one that labors on the idea of redemption” (as cited in Longworth, 2011, p. 46).

Though the underlying plot of *Buffy* is representative of Whedon’s tendency to revise genre, his de-familiarization of genre is also illustrated by his use of genre mixing, both within overall narratives of series, and in individual episode narratives. *Firefly* and *Serenity* are prime examples of genre mixing within an overall narrative. As previously established, they both fall under the science fiction genre, but also possess an undeniable western edge, which makes them cross-genre texts. According to Telotte (2012), *Firefly* “most often recalls—both visually and in the idiom of its central characters—the post-Civil War American West, as it sought to create a genre pastiche inflecting the Western with space opera elements” (pp. 128-129). Though set in the future and depicting advanced technologies, both elements stereotypical of the science fiction genre, the imagery in *Firefly* and *Serenity* lends itself to the western genre, as well. In addition to pulling aspects from westerns, Whedon also mixes in a bit from the horror genre, with the inclusion of “violent, cannibalistic humans who inhabit a distant section of the galaxy and raid outlying settlements” called Reavers (Telotte, 2012, p. 128). With their cannibalistic behavior, sharp teeth, tendency to mob together, and often blood-covered faces and bodies, the Reavers are strikingly similar to zombies from a horror film. Even the fact that Reavers originate from normally functioning humans echoes the zombie theme, and therefore, horror genre. Overall, though *Firefly* and *Serenity* are predominantly texts of the science fiction genre, they both

possess hints and streaks of other genres, like the western and horror genres, adding originality to their narratives and representing Whedon's genre-mixing prowess.

In addition to creating whole cross-genre series, like with *Buffy* and *Firefly*, Whedon interweaves multiple genres, or de-familiarizes genre in individual episodes, as well. One of the best examples of genre-mixing in a Whedon series is the musical episode from the sixth season of *Buffy*, "Once More With Feeling." Depicting Buffy's everyday slaying of vampires and monsters, this episode is also a musical, complete with original songs and score, as well as dancing from the characters. In "Once More With Feeling," Whedon overlays horror with the musical genre, an unusual, but in this case, very effective and highly praised combination.

Another well-known episode from *Buffy* is "Hush," from Season Four of the series. This episode depicts monsters called The Gentlemen, who steal the voices from every person in Sunnydale, causing a significant portion of the episode to be void of dialogue. Though the monsters and their effects mostly enhance the horror feel in this episode, it still represents a tweak in the genre, specifically because it "starkly limit[s] storytelling parameters" (Mittell, 2006, p. 35).

Additionally, Whedon introduces a theme of children's television in the *Angel* episode "Smile Time." Admittedly, the addition of the demonic puppets mostly adds a creepiness factor to the episode, rather than making it child-friendly. However, within the episode Angel does get supernaturally turned into a puppet, making his endeavors as both a vampire and the owner of a law firm exceedingly difficult. In *Dollhouse*, Whedon's most recent series, the narrative breaks out of its flow at the end of Season One with an episode titled "Epitaph One." This episode takes place in the future, and centers on characters not previously introduced in the series, to depict the consequences of imprinting technology after the rise and fall of the Dollhouse.

Though certainly not an exhaustive list of series and episodes representative of Whedon's de-familiarization of genre and genre-mixing, these episodes serve to exemplify the way he plays with genre tropes both over the course of a season or series narrative, as well as within individual episodes. According to Jason Mittell (2006), though these series and episodes "may offer diegetic thrills and laughs, the more distinctive pleasure in these programs is marveling at the narrational bravado on display by violating storytelling conventions in a spectacular fashion" (36). Though *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and *Dollhouse* may be entertaining to watch, on a deeper level they serve to illustrate Whedon's storytelling expertise, particularly his use of genre mixing and de-familiarization of genre.

### **Outsider Characters**

While Whedon's genres of choice and how he uses them are reflective of his interests in media throughout his life, the types of characters he chooses to depict are representative of other experiences in his life, as well. Growing up and especially in high school, Whedon "felt that he was invisible, unimportant, and unappreciated," illustrative of Joss's outsider status through much of his younger years (Havens, 2003, p. 12). Though Whedon may not have enjoyed being an outsider in high school, the experience inspired the work in television and film he would eventually do.

The most direct representation of the isolation Whedon experienced in high school is the television incarnation of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. According to Whedon, "there were days when [he] wondered if anyone else in the world knew [he] existed. You'll see that plot a lot in the early days of *Buffy*, because that sense of isolation is in almost all of us" (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 12). Specifically, there is an episode in the first season of the series that depicts a

student “who was so ignored she literally disappeared,” taking the outsider character to the extreme (Havens, 2003, p. 12). Outside of this episode, the members of the Scooby Gang are outsiders in their own respect.

Rupert Giles, Buffy’s watcher, is literally an outsider, being a British man in California. His “British-ness” and connection with his home country is made obvious throughout the series, and is most especially prevalent in Season Six when he decides to return to England for a time. Additionally, for the bulk of the series, Giles is the adult among adolescents in the group. Xander represents the typical nerd or loser, while Willow is the bookish unpopular type, both outcasts in the high school scene. Even Buffy, though clearly a woman who “kicks ass,” is an outsider *because* of her slayer status. When Whedon wrote her character, he established that “she wouldn’t be able to fit into normal society because she had these powers and this job that kept her from being what she wanted to be” (Havens, 2003, p. 21). In fact, throughout the series it is made clear that not every resident of Sunnydale is aware of the presence of the supernatural. Therefore, those who are informed, predominantly members and friends of the Scooby Gang, possess a knowledge that makes it difficult for them to fit into the rest of society.

In *Angel* the theme is similar, in the sense that Angel and his gang are aware of the supernatural in Los Angeles, while others are not. However, Angel himself is alienated from the rest of society because he is a supernatural being himself. He physically cannot go outside in the daytime, as his being a vampire causes him to burn in direct sunlight, making him an outsider from normally functioning members of society.

The worlds of *Firefly* and *Serenity* do not contain the supernatural, but the characters of this series and film are outsiders in their own respect. The narrative of the series takes place after a civil war, which is known in *Firefly* as the Unification War. This war was between two sides:

The Alliance, who had control over the core planets in the universe, while The Independents sought control over the outer planets. The Alliance is depicted as possessing a large amount of technology and resources, utterly overwhelming the Independents, causing them to lose the war. Two of the primary characters of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, Captain Malcolm “Mal” Reynolds and Zoë Washburne, fought in the war on the side of the Independents, also known as the Browncoats. After the war, Mal, “a cynical, Han Solo-style mercenary,” purchased a Firefly-class transport ship and acquired a crew (Russell, 2011, p. 107). Primarily, the crew flies to different planets, picking up passengers to transport for pay. Additionally, Mal takes on jobs for pay, which usually consist of picking up and dropping off cargo, though the business deals he makes could easily be classified as questionable in the eyes of the law.

The crew’s way of life as depicted in *Firefly* and *Serenity* establishes the characters as outsiders, because they are nomads, travelling from planet to planet, transporting people and completing small jobs for money. The only place the crew could rightfully call home is their ship, which is isolated from civilization because it is most often flying through space and among other planets. The song that plays behind the opening credits, which was written by Joss Whedon especially for the series, echoes this thought: “Take my love, take my land/Take me where I cannot stand/I don't care, I'm still free/You can't take the sky from me...There's no place I can be/Since I found Serenity/But you can't take the sky from me.” These lyrics illustrate the idea that though Mal was on the losing side of the war, he still has a home “in the sky,” and on Serenity. Additionally, it alludes to the idea that Mal no longer has a place on his home planet, or no reason to be there anymore. Furthermore, Mal and his crew seek to work outside of the Alliance, as he still harbors opposition toward it from the Unification War. Not only does the

crew of *Serenity* have to work outside of civilization, but they have to work outside of the established system, as well, further establishing their outsider status.

*Dollhouse*, another of Whedon's science fiction series, takes place on Earth and not nearly as far into the future as in *Firefly* or *Serenity*. Its narrative centers on a business called the Dollhouse, in which humans, or "Actives," are "imprinted" with different personalities at the request of customers, and sent out to complete the job they are hired to complete. Once an Active completes his or her job, they return to the Dollhouse where they live, and their brains and memories are wiped clean and returned to a tabula rasa state. Actives are not normal functioning members of society. They complete their missions, then become physically removed from society, and mentally removed from it, as well, becoming constant outsiders from society. Dollhouse itself is underground, isolating it from the rest of the world to the point where very few people even know of its existence, therefore also isolating its inhabitants, who are unaware of themselves, let alone the building they inhabit.

Though every Active has a backstory for how they became employed by the Dollhouse, Whedon explains that he was trying to "create a situation in a science-fiction world where people gave themselves up for five years to the idea of, 'I don't care what happens to me. I won't know about it. And as long as I'm not hurt, go with God. It's fine'" (Press, 2011, p. 186). In many cases, the person volunteering themselves is trying to escape something that happened to them, whether it is a death in their life that is too emotionally painful to endure, abuse they are trying to forget, or actions on their own part, like murder or illegal activity, they would rather not remember. No matter the reason, once a volunteer transitions into being an Active, his or her body is separated from their personality, and the person becomes alienated from their own self.

One of the next big projects Whedon worked on after *Dollhouse* was Marvel's *The Avengers*. Though *The Avengers* depicts a pre-existing concept coming from the Marvel universe, Whedon wrote and directed the film, and was therefore involved in the adaptation of the comic's characters and events to the screen. Most superhero films revolve around outsider characters, and *The Avengers* is no exception. Having been familiar with the Marvel characters and even having previous experience writing for Marvel comics, Whedon was able to project his own interpretation of the characters onto the final product. Some of the characters fulfill the outsider description better than others, but by the end of the film, they are all recognized by society and people who saved their lives from an alien threat, ensuring that none of the Avengers will be looked at again as just another face in the crowd.

A few of the Avengers, like Hawkeye and the Black Widow, fit better into society than others before being recruited into the Avengers Initiative. Both are fully human with no mutant powers, allowing them to blend into society better than others. However, both are members of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division (SHIELD), and are mostly seen out on missions around the world. Though specific details about these two characters' lives are not depicted in the film, it is assumed they spend a significant amount of time on mission for SHIELD, therefore having little time for the social realm.

Iron Man is more accepted into society than most, but his alter ego Tony Stark flaunts that he is a "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist," and famous to boot. Also, society is well aware of Stark's identity as Iron Man, so he sticks out like a sore thumb. Throughout *The Avengers*, most of Stark's time is spent with his secretary, Pepper Potts, or the rest of the Avengers crew. Because of his elite status, Iron Man/Tony Stark is an outsider to everyday society. In depicting Tony Stark's character in *The Avengers*, Whedon explains that he sought to

give Iron Man/Tony Stark a new direction, one that differed from what his character had done in *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010). In narrowing down this new direction, Whedon explains the conversations he had regarding the character mostly concerned questions like,

“Where is Tony now?” Like, “Who is he now? Where is he [going] from ‘Iron Man 2’ towards ‘Iron Man 3’?” He is such a well-delineated character, so it was really a question of, “What do we want to stress and what do we want to say? We have said that, we have done that, so let's not go there.” (Davidson, 2011)

Though Iron Man/Tony Stark clearly had an established character before Whedon got a hold of him, it was still in the hands of his writing and direction to determine the character's representation in *The Avengers*.

While Hawkeye, Black Widow and Iron Man have humanity on their side, Hulk, Captain America and Thor do not. While Bruce Banner usually appears human, all it takes is a bout of anger to turn him into an “enormous green rage monster,” as Tony Stark describes him. Because of this side effect, Banner has literally outcast himself from society in *The Avengers* by isolating himself in an Indian slum. On writing the character of the Hulk, Whedon explains he is

the most difficult Marvel property because it's always about balance. Is he a monster? Is he a hero? Are you going to root for a protagonist who spends all his time trying to stop the reason you came to the movie from happening? (Franich, 2013)

While previous film adaptations of the Hulk have been widely criticized, it seems Whedon's exploration of the character paid off, as many critics echo the thought that, “Mark Ruffalo's Hulk was the one who absolutely smashed it...[and] all the best laughs in *The Avengers* featured CGI Ruffalo's no-nonsense, brutal and bombastic entanglements with friends and enemies alike” (Child, 2012).

Captain America, though mostly human minus his scientifically engineered super powers, is an outsider in the twenty-first century. Steve Rogers lived and fought as Captain America during World War II, but was frozen, preserved, and discovered by members of SHIELD in the



present day. Throughout the film, his ignorance regarding societal norms and technology is highlighted, showing that though he is a functioning man in the twenty-first century, he does not truly belong there. Whedon comments on his adaptation of *The Avengers* characters to film, explaining,

I set out with a very simple problem: There is no reason for these people to be in the same movie. So that's what my movie has to be about. So much of the movie takes place from Steve Rogers' perspective, since he's the guy who just woke up and sees this weird ass world. Everyone else has been living in it. (Caron, 2012)

Steve Rogers' outsider status allowed Whedon to more easily portray the narrative of the film. Because Rogers is new to the world represented in *The Avengers*, it allowed Whedon an opportunity to take advantage of this perspective in order to portray a believable plot: the audience is introduced to the Avengers and its heroes just as Steve Rogers is. Finally, Thor is displaced from his home planet. Though he loves a woman on earth, and will do anything to save the planet from harm, his friends and family live on a planet called Asgard, and at the end of the film, he does return there.

Though the Avengers are clearly the title characters of the film, it is important to also call attention to the villain of the film, Loki. He is Thor's adopted brother, and grew up with him on Asgard. However, he discovered that he is really from a different alien race, and feels betrayed by his family on Asgard. He separates himself from Thor, and pursues a different path for himself, one that will give him power and control over humans on earth. Loki's feelings of being an outsider from who he thought his family were, and subsequently his quest for power and a place to fit in are at the heart of *The Avengers*. Without Loki, his being outcast from Asgard, and determination for revenge, the Avengers would have little to fight for in the film. Tom Hiddleston, the actor who plays Loki, discusses how his character is portrayed in *The Avengers*:

the Loki of *Thor* is a confused and damaged prince and the Loki of *The Avengers* is somebody who understands his own power. He understands his own anger and is able to...suppress it. So you see that in a way he is more mischievous....I think that the way Joss has written Loki in *The Avengers* is that he is a mischief. (Weintraub, 2012)

Though Loki's character was established in *Thor* (2011), Whedon was clearly able to make subtle adjustments to the character in order to adapt him to the narrative of *The Avengers*.

Whether it is super powers, a nomadic lifestyle, or imprinting technology, the characters of Joss Whedon's works are outsiders one way or another. This does not mean that characters in Whedon's texts do not create a smaller community of their own after being outcast from their original society, but it establishes that there are few people outside of the primary characters' intimate setting that reflect the same thoughts, feelings and actions. Furthermore, the outsider status of Whedon's characters reflects his own experiences as isolated throughout his life, illustrating that the auteur's thoughts and feelings are reflected in his creations.

### **Female Protagonists**

Whedon clearly had his share of female role models while growing up, and their influence undoubtedly played a role in the form his creations have taken. Not only does Whedon confess to possessing "inherent and studied and strongly felt feminism," but also some critics feel that this feminism translates to film and television and is depicted onscreen (as cited in Havens, 2003, p. 8). Whedon is often portrayed as a feminist in popular media, or at least responsible for portraying progressive depictions of women by scholars and critics, and credited for his representation of women in media. For instance, Dina Georgis (2008) uses *Buffy* to "elucidate what a new feminism that is 'touched by loss' might look like." Rhonda Wilcox comments on the similarities between Whedon's *Dollhouse* and Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Explaining that the latter is seen as a proto-feminist work, she states, "the drama focuses on a

woman's individuation and claiming of her identity as part of dealing with guilt and responsibility," then explains that *Dollhouse* could be described by the same words (Wilcox, 2010). Though she also explains, "whether we are examining exploitation or participating in it is part of the question Whedon and Dushku put to us," (Wilcox, 2010) she explores how Whedon and Dushku's<sup>6</sup> own feminist agendas are represented in *Dollhouse*. Adam Vary (2009) also comments on Whedon's depiction of women, stating, "[Whedon's] name alongside the 'Created by' credit during the opening titles guarantees you are about to watch a show...as keenly attuned to its female characters as its male ones," representing only a few of the many critiques of Whedon's work as progressive for women.

The most commonly cited representation of Whedon's female empowerment is, of course, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The primary protagonist and title character of the show, Buffy, is often categorized as an empowered female character, or as Sherryl Vint (2002) puts it, she is:

a strong woman, a woman who saves the day herself rather than waiting for a man to do it for her, ... undoes the helpless-female stereotypes...the girls who got the hero but who never got to be the hero, [and is] a positive role model for young women, one which feminism should celebrate.

This is not the only analysis of *Buffy* that discusses the feminist themes present in the series and its title character, and oftentimes the discussion references the idea that the show contains its fair share of "ass-kicking females" (Epstein, 2011, p. 129). Carol Stabile (2009) echoes these thoughts, explaining, "only one television series...has proved revolutionary in terms of challenging masculinist fantasies of protection. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) was revolutionary in terms of superhero narratives precisely because Buffy defied the protection racket" (p. 90). Clearly, a large part of the reverence for *Buffy* is its depiction of strong female characters, namely Buffy.

Though Buffy is the only strong female protagonist with her name in the series title, Whedon's other series and works contain no shortage of empowered women. In *Firefly* and *Serenity*, for instance, the characters of River Tam and Zoë Washburne are especially significant in this sense. River is physically empowered and possesses "spectacular fighting skills," that are put on display near the end of *Serenity* (Amy-Chinn, 2006, p. 178). Much like Buffy, River's fighting skills are used to rescue her cohort, predominantly her brother, from the danger of imminent death by Reavers. In addition to possessing fighting skills, River is also mentally and supernaturally gifted, a genius with the power to foretell the future. Though she possesses no supernatural powers, Zoë is the captain's second in command, fights alongside other men (including with Mal during the Unification War), and "no one questions [her] credentials as a frontline soldier" (Amy-Chinn, 2006, p. 177). Though River and Zoë certainly hold their own on their ship and in the series, there are two other primary women in *Firefly* and *Serenity*: Kaylee and Inara. Kaylee is *Serenity*'s mechanic, and "there is no question of [her] competence as a mechanic, able to keep the 'ship' 'afloat,'" (Amy-Chinn, 2006, p. 177) representing her role as a significant, capable, and empowered woman, even if not in the physical sense. Finally, Inara runs her own business as a "Companion" in the removable shuttle on *Serenity*, and is depicted as "the most respectable of *Serenity*'s inhabitants, the only one able to make a living without resorting to illegal activities" (Amy-Chinn, 2006, p. 177). Clearly, *Firefly* and *Serenity* have their fair share of empowered female protagonists, perhaps even a more significant variety than those in *Buffy*.

Having played Faith, another Slayer in *Buffy* endowed with superpowers to fight vampires and demons, Eliza Dushku was well-versed in playing a character with fighting skills when she took on the role of Echo, the primary character in Whedon's series *Dollhouse*. Though "she may or may not be programmed with fighting skills," Echo, an Active within the *Dollhouse*,

evolves as a character throughout the two seasons of the series (Coker, 2010, p. 227). To say an Active in the Dollhouse has evolved as a character is quite a feat, considering Actives are humans whose brains are constantly being reprogrammed and wiped. However, along with utilizing her fighting skills on several occasions, Echo, unlike the majority of other Actives, begins to remember past missions and personalities she has been programmed with. Not only is she the primary character of the series, but Echo is also far more advanced than other characters, highlighting her capabilities as a female character in a setting where the majority of characters in her position possess little control over their minds, lives, and actions.

Though not every one of Whedon's creations includes a female title character, the range of female representations among his works illustrates the inclusion of female protagonists in his television series and films. Additionally, though not true in every case, these female protagonists are examples of empowered women, especially in the case of Buffy. Though Whedon's women characters cannot all be like Buffy, at least the creator has demonstrated that having strong female influences in his life definitely plays a role in his portrayal of women in media.

Though Whedon's works have gained much positive attention in regards to the way they portray women, I would like to posit that regardless of the director's self-proclaimed "feminist agenda," and other critics' confirmation of that agenda, the representation of women in his works are still often problematic, and cannot rightly be considered feminist. According to bell hooks (2000), "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (viii). Though perhaps not immediately evident, there is still an amount of sexism present in Whedon's works.

For instance, though Buffy possesses agency and has the physical ability to kick the butt of almost any other male, female, or demon in the show, all unconventional traits of a female

character, the fact that she is a woman is still exploited. Not only does Buffy often wear overly revealing and impractical outfits, but her character is originally written as a stereotypical “valley girl” high school teenager, concerned with partying, clothes and makeup, hardly bringing something new to the table for depictions of women in media, and most definitely not fulfilling a feminist approach to her character. These aspects alone cater to the male gaze, explained by Laura Mulvey (1975), who states, “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (p. 11). Though her character evolves through the seven seasons of the series, by the end of its run there still remain elements of Buffy not reminiscent of a “feminist agenda” that promotes female solidarity and social change.

In addition to *Buffy*, Whedon’s other series contain depictions of women that are not as progressive as they seem at first glance. *Dollhouse*’s Mellie, a sleeper doll, who at the whim of the technicians at the Dollhouse has been reprogrammed and can be made to perform any action they please, is literally not in control of her own actions. Dee Amy-Chinn (2006) explores the role of Inara in *Firefly*, explaining that despite Whedon’s attempts to challenge typical representations of a “whore,” “we get a traditional pre-feminist representation of femininity that places high value on artifice, nurturing, performing the role of care-giver, and that firmly endorses the link between romantic love and sexual monogamy, and views this as the site of a woman’s fulfillment” (p. 181). Furthermore, the even shallower and more stereotypical female *Buffy* character, Cordelia, transitions into the show’s spinoff series, *Angel* (1999), eventually evolving into a more likeable and personable character. However, as Elizabeth Rambo (2007) puts it,

It seems a little surprising and perhaps disappointing that the Angel writers could not think of anything for a smart woman with keen fashion sense and a head for finance to do as the seasons progressed except fall in love, get herself knocked up—twice, before they hit the jackpot with the devastating Jasmine—and progressively manifest such a super-human mix of maternal and erotic compassion that she would become a supernatural being.

In other words, it seems that oftentimes the portrayal of women in Whedon's productions is nothing short of conventional.

It would be unfair to say that Whedon has not contributed to creating a more progressive depiction of women in media, but I believe that instead of characterizing female representations in his productions as feminist, a more accurate explanation is needed. A better description of Whedon's portrayal of women would be that his productions tend to contain strong, active heroines, and he tends to provide his female characters with more agency than in other works of film and television. However, it is important to distinguish that this is not a universal description for all of his productions or female characters. There are exceptions to this description, as previously made apparent by the examples of Buffy, Mellie, and Cordelia, and in some cases, even though a female character may possess agency in a Whedon production, the same character may also possess other characteristics indicative of conventional and sexist depictions of women in media.

## **Deaths**

Though Joss Whedon has created a plethora of lovable characters, a notable amount of them female, it does not stop him from taking the life of a single one of them, much to the dismay of adoring fans. Vary (2009) explains Whedon's predisposition to killing off characters his audience loves, stating that Whedon's shows are "unafraid to Go There, from allowing the lead heroine or hero to make some profoundly unlikable choices to killing off a beloved

character.” Killing off characters and creating difficult circumstances in his creations are part of Whedon’s signature, and he does it to evoke emotion from his audience. According to Joss Whedon,

I do it because I want to keep [everyone] afraid. I want to keep people in suspense. I want people to understand that everything is not perfectly safe...One of the things that people always shy away from is killing a sympathetic character...But it does inflame emotion sometimes, but that is, in fact, what I’m trying to do. (as cited in Bianculli, 2011, p. 10)

Especially within the horror genre, it is important for Whedon to establish for his audience that nothing is safe, and killing a beloved character solidifies an audience member’s attachment to that character. Though Whedon does admit he is “very tired of being labelled as ‘the guy who kills people,’” the death toll of likeable characters among his series and films is apparent (as cited in Hughes, 2012).

For a creator who writes within genres of order, character deaths are not unusual occurrences. However, Whedon not only kills off minor characters in his series and films, but major ones, as well. Additionally, though *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is a horror series, the usual slaying of vampires and demons may not faze the audience, but Whedon surprised his audience several times throughout the series with the death of longer-term characters. Probably the most important death of the series is that of its title character, Buffy. By the end of the series, she had died twice: once, near the end of Season One, and a second time, at the end of Season Five. However, due to the supernatural undertones of the show, Buffy was brought back to life both times. Though the death of Buffy may have been a more impactful death, especially for the other characters in the series, she does return, and she is not the only character to return to the series in some capacity. Jenny Calendar, a computer teacher at Sunnydale high school, and eventually Giles’s girlfriend, dies in Season Two of *Buffy*. However, Whedon explains, “Jenny Calendar worked more episodes probably after she died than she did before because on our show



everybody's a ghost, everybody's a whatnot" (as cited in Bianculli, 2011, p. 10). Even Angel, who is stabbed and sent to a hell dimension at the end of Season Two, finds his way back within a year of the series. Clearly, some characters are killed in *Buffy*, but have reason to return, at least in some capacity.

Because of the ability of dead characters to return, it makes the deaths of those that do not much more impactful. Ultimately, Ms. Calendar returns as a figment of Giles's imagination for only a short time, and does not return afterward. One of the biggest deaths in *Buffy* occurs at the end of Season Six, when Willow's girlfriend, Tara, is shot and killed. According to Judith Tabron (2004), "Tara's death...resulted in one of the great fan outcries of recent memory," and accordingly, "several web boards and thousands of fans mounted an organized protest." In addition to Tara's death, there are two other main characters killed in *Buffy*: Spike and Anya. Though it does not diminish the importance or impact of their deaths to adoring fans, it is important to note that both of these deaths occurred during the final episode of the series, during an apocalyptic event in Sunnydale. In other words, it was highly unlikely that all of the members of the Scooby Gang would survive such an ordeal. Clearly, through the death of Tara and other characters, Whedon draws on the emotions of his audience members—the death of a *Buffy* character is no small occurrence.

The death of major characters occurs not only in *Buffy*, but also in its spin-off series, *Angel*. The first major death occurs partway through the first season of *Angel*, and it is the death of Angel's premonition-endowed demon friend, Doyle. Because his death occurred so early in the series, it added to the impact of the character's passing, because it was more unexpected. In addition to Doyle's death, the most impactful deaths in the series occur in its final season. Cordelia, a character who transitioned to *Angel* after having appeared in three seasons of *Buffy*,

dies during the one hundredth episode of *Angel*, much to the dismay of Angel, who had fallen in love with her. Additionally, Fred, a kindhearted character who was rescued from another dimension in Season Two, dies near the end of Season Five. According to Jes Battis (2005), “Fred's sudden and violent death, like Tara's on *Buffy*, forces the crew to re-cohere as a family,” illustrating that though Fred's (and Tara's) death may have been heart wrenching for both the characters and the audience, it provided a reason in the narrative for the characters to grow closer to each other. Finally, Wesley, who was in love with Fred and is, like Cordelia, another character that transitioned from *Buffy*, dies in the final episode of *Angel*.

The characters of *Firefly* do not experience the death of any major members of the cohort until the film incarnation of the series, *Serenity*. The two major deaths that occur in the film were devastating to the audience. Though both Shepherd Book and the pilot of *Serenity*, Wash, die in the film, the biggest fan reaction was to the death of the latter. However, according to B. J. Keeton (2010), “a major character's death was integral to the film *Serenity*'s narrative, and no other character's death would have left a void that could have been filled so easily, if not as deftly, as Wash's.” Keeton argues that though Wash was a loved character, he did not fulfill a role in the series or the film that was not easily replaceable by someone else on the ship. As described earlier, Whedon does not purposelessly kill of his characters, so though both the deaths in *Serenity* were devastating to fans, they fulfilled a narrative purpose in the film.

Providing a list of major characters that lost their lives in a Whedon series or film helps to illustrate how common of an occurrence it is for this creator. Most of these deaths did provoke emotional reactions from fans, but Whedon maintains that though his death toll is high, it is still for the good of the narrative in each of his texts.

Killing off major characters is just one of the several factors representative of Joss Whedon's signature among his works. He has a tendency to create worlds within genres of order, specifically and most often in horror and science fiction. Though he uses particular genres for his series and films, he does stray from the tropes offered by these genres, utilizing genre-mixing and other techniques to de-familiarize the genres he uses. Whedon's tendency toward these genres harkens back to his love of horror and science fiction as a child. The characters within the narratives he creates are most often outsider characters, reflecting Whedon's sense of isolation throughout his childhood and adolescence. In addition to creating outsider characters, Whedon projects his love of empowered women onto his series and films, often writing female protagonists into his narratives, as exemplified by characters such as Buffy, River, or Echo, while also warranting criticism for some of his other less progressive depictions of women. Finally, though he clearly has a love for the characters he creates, it does not stop him from ending their lives when pertinent to the narrative of the text. All of the aspects of his signature are illustrative in some capacity of his life, career, and experiences, showing that, in Whedon's case, "the way a film looks and moves" does indeed "have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels" (Sarris, 2009, p. 452).

### **III. De-Familiarizing *Dr. Horrible***

Though it is his first formal experimentation with web distribution, *Dr. Horrible* is not Joss Whedon's first foray into the musical genre, as he worked on a musical episode of *Buffy*, titled "Once More With Feeling" (OMWF). While in *Buffy*, the musical format of OMWF represents and allows for the articulation of hidden tensions among Buffy and her friends concerning her recent death and resurrection, the use of the musical format in *Dr. Horrible* brings to life Billy's struggle to articulate his masculinity within a world of arch nemeses and laundry buddies. Like OMWF, a musical episode in the middle of a horror genre television series, *Dr. Horrible* is reminiscent of Whedon's love for genre revision and genre mixing. In *Dr. Horrible*, Whedon revises the musical genre by re-gendering some sequences as masculine rather than feminine. This revision serves to highlight Billy's struggle with masculinity via the juxtaposition of musical and non-musical sequences. Though gender plays a large role in Whedon's revision of the musical genre in *Dr. Horrible*, the web miniseries is also representative of the auteur's affinity for mixing genres, incorporating aspects and tropes of different genres to create a less predictable and recognizable specimen of the musical genre.

#### **Restructuring the Musical**

Musicals tend to portray a specific narrative, and as a genre of integration, Thomas Schatz (1981) posits that generally, the hero of a musical is a female dominant romantic couple, and ultimately, "after a period of initial hostility, the couple find themselves in a final embrace" (p. 34). Based on this assumption that the primary protagonists of a musical are two lovers, Rick Altman echoes this thought concerning the "dualistic structure" of musicals. Altman (1987) proposes four elements that define the structure of musicals, the first of which is that "the

spectator must sense the eventual lovers as a couple even when they are not together, even before they have met” (p. 28). This is predominantly represented through the use of parallelism, oftentimes with similar camera placement and shots of each of the two lovers, in order to connect them to each other. Another way of establishing this parallelism is through dialogue from one lover that implicates the other, whether explicitly or implicitly. Not only does the overall narrative represent the duality present in musicals, but also “the sexual duality is reinforced throughout” the musical through five realms, including the setting, shot selection, music, dance and personal style (Altman, 1987, p. 33). A primary part of how the dualistic structure is reinforced throughout is the use of the duet, which Altman (1987) states is “the musical’s center of gravity” (p. 37). The sexual duality present in film musicals also helps to reinforce a secondary dichotomy that is characteristic of the musical genre. Altman (1987) explains, “self-conscious of its status as ‘only’ entertainment in a world where work alone merits full value, the American film musical has adopted society’s work/entertainment dichotomy as its own thematic center,” though he admits that this is a “rather radical hypothesis” (p. 49). Altman’s (1987) final element of the musical film structure provides a resolution for the sexual dichotomy, as well as between the work/entertainment theme: “The musical’s typical romantic resolution, which depends on the harmony of a couple originally at odds, is thus matched by a thematic resolution in which opposite life styles or values merge” (p. 51).

After establishing the basic structure of the typical musical, it is important to analyze how well *Dr. Horrible* represents this structure. First is the establishment of two lovers, which is hinted at by signifiers in the web miniseries. Before Billy and Penny are even seen together in *Dr. Horrible*, a connection between them is established during Act One. “My Freeze Ray” is indicative of Billy’s affection for Penny, setting up the dichotomy between the two characters.

Billy directly implicates his crush on Penny, echoing this dichotomy. Additionally, Billy and Penny seem to be opposites, striving for radically different goals. While Billy seeks to become a dreaded super villain, Penny's goal is to provide housing to the homeless. Though the narrative of *Dr. Horrible* fulfills the first element of Altman's musical structure, it is important to note that the story does not adhere to Schatz's assumption that the hero of a musical is a female dominant couple. Billy, or his alter ego, Dr. Horrible, is the primary protagonist, as he is the title character, as well as the one who gets the most screen time, and overwhelmingly so compared to Penny's few appearances throughout the web miniseries.

While the initial aspects of the web miniseries seem to support Altman's first structural element, the second element is represented a bit more problematically. While Billy and Penny's activities and goals certainly illustrate their sexual duality, the settings used in *Dr. Horrible* do not seem to contribute to this dichotomy. Altman (1987) explains that musicals tend to associate "each of the main characters with a specific and highly differentiated locale and activity" in order for the settings to highlight the dichotomy present in the musical film (p. 33). However, while the activities of Billy and Penny are differentiated, what with Dr. Horrible committing heists and Penny collecting signatures for homeless housing, the settings do not function similarly. While Billy's home is depicted throughout the web miniseries, the only places Penny inhabits are the laundromat, an outdoor alley, a homeless shelter, a park, and the town hall, none of which are her own personal space. Though Billy and Penny often inhabit the same locations, the overall settings of the web miniseries do not contribute to the depiction of an opposition between the two characters. Similarly, while film musicals often contain duet shots "in which all the performers are paired off," or solo shots of one sex paired with another solo shot of the

opposite sex, no such pattern can be identified in *Dr. Horrible*, with the exception of several shots during the web miniseries' duet (Altman, 1987, p. 35).

In a musical, the duet functions as its “center of gravity, its method of summarizing in a single scene the film’s entire structure” (Altman, 1987, p. 37). “My Eyes” is this sequence for *Dr. Horrible*, though it functions differently in this web miniseries than in the traditional film musical. First, “My Eyes” provides the web miniseries with the alternating solo shots missing from the rest of the production. As Billy and Penny alternate singing verses of the song, the shots echo this alternation, switching between solo shots of Billy and Penny, finally culminating the song with a split screen two-shot of both characters. “My Eyes” most certainly echoes the sexual duality between Billy and Penny in both its visuals and its music and lyrics. Altman (1987) explains,

Among duets, none is more effective in setting up the male-female duality than the many songs which are delivered in echo fashion: one line for him, one line for her, and so on alternately until the voices merge in a final embrace. (p. 38)

Though Billy and Penny alternate verses instead of lines, the voices of “My Eyes” certainly “merge into a final embrace,” as Billy and Penny share the final verse of the song. While the form of “My Eyes” certainly reflects the traditional form of the duet, the lyrics tell a different story. Altman (1987) explains that “the duet serves the important function of crystallizing the couple’s attitudes and emotions,” and the differentiation between Billy’s and Penny’s lyrics highlights precisely this (p. 37).

While Billy sings about the world spiraling downhill, Penny’s half of “My Eyes” is especially optimistic about her life and other people. The final stanza of each verse characterizes this opposition exceptionally well. In fact, the song ends with a vocal embrace between Billy and Penny as they sing markedly different versions of this stanza, though their voices musically

complement each other. While Billy sings his negatively toned stanza, “I cannot believe my eyes/How the world’s filled with filth and lies/But it’s plain to see/Evil inside of me is on the rise,” Penny optimistically sings, “I cannot believe my eyes/How the world’s finally growing wise/And it’s plain to see/Rapture inside of me is on the rise.” As Penny’s relationship with Captain Hammer contributes to her own happiness, it also most certainly impacts Billy’s negativity in this scene. The stark difference between these variations on the final stanza of “My Eyes” serves to solidify the separation between Billy and Penny. Furthermore, though a split screen two-shot of Billy and Penny accompanies the singing of this stanza, a shot that would normally contribute to the representation of the duality between the characters, a solid line down the middle of the screen highlights the separation between the two characters, implying that despite Billy’s love for Penny, the two will never be together.

“My Eyes” certainly illustrates the role of the duet in a musical as explained by Altman, but *Dr. Horrible* fails to illustrate the fourth aspect of dance. It is important to call attention to the lack of dancing in *Dr. Horrible*, as it is an element typical of the musical genre, but also a factor not present for nearly the entirety of the web miniseries.<sup>7</sup> Laura Mulvey (1975) explains that “the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium...” and ties this discussion of the woman on display specifically to the performing woman or show-girl, stating, “the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis” (pp. 11-12). While the presence of dancing in musicals contributes to the exhibition of the primary protagonist, whether male or female, therefore serving to feminize that character, the absence of dancing in *Dr. Horrible* certainly inhibits the feminization of Billy’s character, contributing to his ability to articulate his masculinity through some musical



sequences. The final aspect, personal style, is demonstrated by Whedon's choosing of Neil Patrick Harris for Billy/Dr. Horrible, and Felicia Day for Penny. While Harris provides Billy/Dr. Horrible's musical sequences with power, most likely due to his experiences on Broadway, Day portrays Penny through song as a somewhat more demure character, again highlighting the sexual difference between Billy and Penny throughout the web miniseries.

Element three, that of the work/entertainment dichotomy, does not seem to hold a place in *Dr. Horrible*, at least not between Billy and Penny. Billy takes his role as super villain just as seriously as Penny pursues helping the homeless. Though there is a differentiation between each of the two characters' goals, their dedication to those goals are equally noteworthy, and neither Billy nor Penny seem to spend much time doing entertainment based activities. In fact, Billy and Penny's dedication to their own choice of work is highlighted by the fact that both achieve their goals. Dr. Horrible does become part of the ELE, and Penny does get her homeless shelter. The accomplishment of these two goals transitions into Altman's fourth structural element, the resolution of the couple.

Though Dr. Horrible does finally live his dream and become part of the ELE, he does not end up with Penny. The couple in *Dr. Horrible* are not united, and do not live happily ever after. As "My Eyes" highlighted the separation between the two characters, the events of Act Three solidify this separation. Penny is killed near the end of the final act of the web miniseries, representing the revision of the typical ending of the musical genre. In direct contrast to the typical resolution of a musical, a genre of integration that typically ends in the embrace of the primary couple, the resolution of *Dr. Horrible* is reminiscent of a genre of order, because it ends in elimination, or death. Though *Dr. Horrible* is characterized as a musical, and Whedon follows several of the structural elements inherent to most musicals, the alteration of a few important

elements represents the revision of the musical genre in *Dr. Horrible*, ultimately de-familiarizing the web miniseries for the audience, making it far less predictable as it does not adhere to all of the usual genre tropes.

Due to the nature of the revisions in this web miniseries, Whedon may have in fact made *Dr. Horrible* into a more masculine version of a musical. First, Billy is the primary protagonist, going against the typical setup of a musical in which a female is the dominant character. Additionally, the web miniseries ends with elimination, harkening back to a genre of order, which typically portrays a male dominant hero. Through the restructuring of the narrative elements typical of the musical genre, Joss Whedon revises and de-familiarizes the musical genre in *Dr. Horrible*, overall making it a masculine depiction of a stereotypically feminine genre.

### **Genre Mixing in *Dr. Horrible***

Though *Dr. Horrible* is predominantly a musical, Joss Whedon has added tropes of other genres into the mix, employing genre mixing, in order to de-familiarize the musical genre further. An auteur who has created series and films of several genres, including horror, science fiction, and drama, some of which contain genre mixing themselves, Whedon is familiar with a multitude of genres, several of which are represented in *Dr. Horrible*, including the western and horror genres, and the superhero narrative.

**The Western.** Whedon has undoubtedly experienced producing entertainment that falls under the western genre, predominantly with his space western series, *Firefly*, and its film counterpart, *Serenity*. Even *Firefly* and *Serenity* themselves are examples of genre mixing, as they predominantly fall under the category of science fiction, but contain images characteristic of

the western, such as the clothing the crew wears, as “the inhabitants most often dress in costumes that recall the Old West (linen dusters, boots, leather, and wool),” the guns they fight with, and the often frontier-like settings episodes take place in (Telotte, 2012, p. 129).

Similar to *Firefly* and *Serenity*, *Dr. Horrible* portrays images of the western genre, but on a much smaller scale. According to Neale (2000), “the visual conventions of the western are both highly distinctive and highly coded” (p. 133). For instance, “the single most evocative location for Western filmmaking...is Arizona’s Monument Valley, where awesome stone formations reach up to the gods but the desolate soil around them is scarcely suitable for the rural-agricultural bounty which provided America’s socioeconomic foundation” (Schatz, 1981, p. 47). Furthermore, the clothing worn by the characters in *Firefly* are also indicative of the visual conventions of the western, in addition to images of horses and men riding horses. Unsurprisingly then, the visual conventions of the western in *Dr. Horrible* are quite easily distinguished from the rest of the web miniseries. The image most clearly associated with the western in the musical is that of the trio of cowboys who sing the “Bad Horse Chorus.” Though they are only seen three times throughout the web miniseries, they clearly stand out against the modern musical backdrop of *Dr. Horrible*. Wearing cowboy hats, bandanas around their necks, and sporting handlebar moustaches, the Bad Horse trio seems to have come straight out of a western film. Even more, by being messengers of Bad Horse, a horse, they serve to represent another symbol of the western genre. Taking the Bad Horse trio as representatives of the ELE as somewhat illustrative of “the Western’s essential conflict between civilization and savagery,” Bad Horse, the Thoroughbred of Sin, serves to represent the latter (Schatz, 1981, p. 48). This central conflict of the western genre is especially relevant to *Dr. Horrible* as Billy/Dr. Horrible struggles between civilized and primitive masculinities.

In addition to fulfilling the imagery of the western genre, the Bad Horse trio is also responsible for two musical numbers in the web miniseries, “Bad Horse Chorus” and its reprise. Both songs serve as a message to Dr. Horrible from the head of the Evil League of Evil, Bad Horse. The first song is a confirmation of Dr. Horrible’s application for the ELE, and an encouragement of villainous crime: “He got the application that you just sent in/It needs evaluation, so let the games begin/A heinous crime, a show of force/(a murder would be nice of course).” The reprise is similar, but puts emphasis on the type of crime Dr. Horrible must commit in order to be considered for the ELE: “And now assassination is just the only way/There will be blood, it might be yours/So go kill someone/Signed: Bad Horse.” Though there is clearly humor behind the concept of three men spontaneously bursting into song as Dr. Horrible reads his mail from Bad Horse, the message behind these songs reinforce the implied resolution behind a production of the western genre. According to Schatz (1981), the western is a genre of order, which typically involves a resolution of elimination, or death (p. 35). By encouraging Dr. Horrible to not only commit “a heinous crime,” but also “go kill someone,” the Bad Horse trio reflects primary characteristics of the genre of order it is modeled after, resolution by elimination, and the “essential conflict between civilization and savagery” (Schatz, 1981, p. 48).

**The Horror Genre.** Dr. Horrible, donning his sterile white lab coat and goggles, is reminiscent of the mad scientist cliché, an image often representative of the horror genre. There are varying characteristics that make up the stereotypical image of the scientist:

The scientist is a man who wears a white coat and works in a laboratory. He...wears glasses...He is surrounded by equipment: test tubes, Bunsen burners, flasks and bottles...Though he works for years, he may see no results or may fail, and he is likely to receive neither adequate recompense nor recognition...His work may be dangerous. Chemicals may explode. (Frayling, 2005, pp. 12-13)

Though there are a multitude of characteristics that make up the shared image of the scientist, the above aspects are especially pertinent to the character of Dr. Horrible, as throughout the web miniseries, he embodies these. In addition to the typical scientist garb, Dr. Horrible's home is filled with the equipment stereotypical to the image of the scientist. While blogging, he is seen in front of what looks like an in-home laboratory, complete with a plethora of tubing and bottles, as well as unidentifiable liquids in several flasks and other containers. Furthermore, the idea of failure is not new to Dr. Horrible, who is familiar with defective freeze rays and foiled plots, and even his death ray explodes near the end of the web miniseries.

In addition to the shared image of the scientist, there are several iterations of the scientist throughout literature described by Roslynn Haynes. Dr. Horrible most accurately represents the image of the alchemist, who according to Haynes, "seeks arcane forbidden knowledge, works in secret and alone or with a single assistant...is driven by mania for power or gold and tends to be intellectually arrogant" (as cited in Frayling, 2005, p. 35). Dr. Horrible is clearly bent on ruling the world, actually references a time when he stole gold with his transmatter ray in Act One, and is quite confident in his intellectual abilities, no matter how many times his plans are foiled. The alchemist is a variation of the scientist quite similar to the mad scientist, a character typical of horror films. According to Christopher Frayling (2005), "a detailed survey of more than a thousand *horror* films...reveals that mad scientists or their creations have been the villains/monsters of 31 per cent of them" (p. 41). Stereotypical and shared image of the scientist, mad scientist or alchemist, Dr. Horrible as villain clearly illustrates the representation of the horror genre in *Dr. Horrible*, as he embodies negative, dreaded, and dangerous characteristics of the scientist, rather than positive ones.

**The Superhero Narrative.** Though the genre of *Dr. Horrible* is musical, the narrative underlying the genre is reminiscent of the typical superhero story arc. Dr. Horrible is the villain and Captain Hammer is the hero, and to each other, they are arch nemeses, much like the typical setup of a superhero narrative. What is unique about *Dr. Horrible*, however, is that Dr. Horrible is the protagonist of the story, not Captain Hammer. In fact, oftentimes it seems that Dr. Horrible fulfills more characteristics of the hero than Captain Hammer does. According to Richard Reynolds, “the set of values [superheroes] traditionally defend is summed up by the Superman tag of Truth, Justice and the American Way” (as cited in Fingerioth, 2004, p. 17).

While Captain Hammer clearly fulfills his duty of “beating the bad guy” several times throughout the web miniseries, it is unclear what he really stands for, other than himself. Throughout the web miniseries, he is portrayed as a self-indulgent jerk, whose only interests are humiliating Dr. Horrible and bragging about himself while simultaneously putting other people down. In fact, the first time Captain Hammer is seen, his first lines (or lyrics) are, “Stand back everyone, nothing here to see/Just imminent danger, in the middle of it, me/Yes, Captain Hammer’s here, hair blowing in the breeze/And the day needs my saving expertise.” Instead of expressing concern for those in danger, he sings about his own greatness, flaunting his good looks as he shows off his superhuman abilities to nearby observing women. Even near the end of *Dr. Horrible*, when Captain Hammer sings “Everyone’s A Hero,” which is meant to inspire ordinary citizens to do great things, the lyrics are clearly self-absorbed: “Everyone’s a hero in their own way/Everyone’s got something they can do/Get up, go out and fly/Especially that guy – he smells like poo/Everyone’s a hero in their own way/You and you and mostly me and you.” Though Captain Hammer “[possesses] skills and abilities normal humans do not,” it seems his character represents little else typical of the traditional superhero.

In contrast to Captain Hammer, Dr. Horrible, though characterized as the villain, seems to have a much greater interest in the alteration of society. Though his method for solving societal issues and ultimate goal of ruling the world may be flawed, his concern for the world is clear from the beginning. Before signing Penny's petition during Act One, Billy sympathizes with her concern for the societal system that causes homelessness, explaining that he is interested in "an overhaul of the system. Putting the power in *different* hands." In "My Eyes" he sings about the downward spiral humanity seems to be taking, "Any dolt with half a brain/Can see that humankind has gone insane/To the point where I don't know/If I'll upset the status quo/If I throw poison in the water main," expressing his incredulity at how he does not know if anyone would even notice or protest if he performed an act as terrible as putting poison in the water main. Though Dr. Horrible is clearly interested in ruling the world, "All the cash – all the fame/And social change/Anarchy – that I run," his motivation for accomplishing such goals is rooted in his disapproval of and concern for the current nature of society.

As Danny Fingeroth states, "[the] most obvious things [characteristic of a hero] are: some sort of strength of character (though it may be buried), some system of (generally thought-to-be) positive values, and a determination to, no matter what, *protect* those values." Furthermore, he explains, "as the saying goes, every decent villain thinks of himself as a hero" (Fingeroth, 2004, p.17). Clearly, both Captain Hammer and Dr. Horrible think of themselves as the hero of their story. Captain Hammer is labeled as the hero, but Dr. Horrible is the only one capable of thinking of the world outside of himself. Dr. Horrible certainly possesses strength of character, though it is also certainly buried and emerges in musical sequences, and near the end of the web miniseries. His determination to rule the world is mixed in with evidence of a conscience, however. For instance, when his roommate, Moist, explains their friend "Hourglass says she

knows a kid in Iowa that grows up to become president. That'd be big," Dr. Horrible insists, "I'm not gonna kill a little kid." Additionally, when a viewer of his blog writes in to say that he "waited at Dooley Park for forty-five minutes" to do battle with him, Dr. Horrible refuses, following up with, "besides, there's kids in that park." Though Dr. Horrible wishes to become a super villain and commit a multitude of crimes, he still seems to be defending some positive values, which are indicative of Fingerioth's explanation of a hero. Still, though neither Captain Hammer nor Dr. Horrible may be entirely representative of the typical hero or villain of the superhero mythos, Dr. Horrible's dual identity, the labeling of the characters as "hero" and "villain" (as well as the obvious contestation between the two), and their possession of superhuman qualities (Captain Hammer's strength and Dr. Horrible's scientific intelligence), contribute to earning the story arc the label of superhero narrative, further illustrating Whedon's mixing of genres in *Dr. Horrible*.

### **Duality in the Musical**

As Altman (1987) explains, one of the defining features of the musical genre is its dualistic structure (p. 33). As previously discussed, the web miniseries utilizes aspects of the musical genre that aim to enhance the duality typically inherent to its structure, such as implying Penny as a romantic interest for Billy, and thematically reinforcing those roles through the use of "My Eyes" as a duet sequence. However, the enforcement of the dualistic structure in *Dr. Horrible* is flawed in that it fails to fulfill other features typically serving to enforce the dualistic structure in the musical, by foregrounding Billy as the primary protagonist, including elements of genres of order, and otherwise de-familiarizing the musical genre in the web miniseries. Altman (1987) states that when this dualistic structure is not upheld in the traditional manner, and "a



single individual manages to hold the spotlight throughout, it is usually because he is himself considered as a schizophrenic, divided like Fredric March in Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* into two radically separate and opposed beings" (p. 331). In *Dr. Horrible*, instead of there being "two centers of power, two sexes, two attitudes...[and] two protagonists," the dual focus is shifted from the male and female protagonists to the two parts of the primary protagonist: Billy and his alter ego, Dr. Horrible (Altman, 1987, p. 19). The two egos are certainly opposed at times, but there is fluidity between the two, suggesting that perhaps the character of Billy/Dr. Horrible is not schizophrenic, but certainly divided. For instance, though Billy utilizes the persona of Dr. Horrible to commit villainous crimes, establishing a separation between Billy and Dr. Horrible, both entities are clearly in love with Penny, illustrating a degree of connection between them, as well. Because the traditional dualism of the musical genre is centralized on one character, Billy/Dr. Horrible, he takes on both masculine and feminine characteristics, substituting the "parallelism between male and female leads" typical of the musical genre (Altman, 1987, p. 107). Billy stands in as the more feminine half of the lead character, as he is the one relying on the status of his alter ego to achieve his goals, while Dr. Horrible exudes more masculinity, pursuing his work through the villainy he commits.

The dualism within the character of Billy/Dr. Horrible is further enhanced by the protagonist's performances between musical and non-musical sequences. While Billy struggles to articulate his feelings about Penny to her face at the laundromat, his alter ego, Dr. Horrible, has no trouble singing that for Penny, he's "the guy to make it real." According to Joss Whedon,

The thing about musicals is you sing what you can't say...The heart of the matter—what the person is feeling, what the person needs to communicate, the great revelation, the denouement, whatever it is—all of this should be expressed through song, or there is no reason to have a song. (as cited in Muir, 2005, p. 278)

Throughout *Dr. Horrible*, the songs within the narrative serve to allow Billy/Dr. Horrible to articulate his feelings, while through simple dialogue, his character lacks this ability. From the beginning of the web miniseries, when Billy can hardly mumble the phrase, “love your hair” to Penny before correcting his words to “I love the air,” to the final scene when Dr. Horrible belts out to his rivals, “Now the nightmare’s real/Now Dr. Horrible is here/To make you quake with fear/To make the whole world kneel,” music gives Billy/Dr. Horrible the power to sing what he feels. Ultimately, the musical form of *Dr. Horrible* serves to represent the duality of Billy/Dr. Horrible’s character, allowing him to articulate his emotions in musical sequences, while being unable to stand up for himself in non-musical sequences. In addition to this, lyrics and imagery within musical sequences serve to enhance this theme.

While “some genres...(like the melodrama and the musical) have traditionally been defined as aiming at a ‘female’” audience, this is but one of the reasons the musical is typically seen as a feminine genre (Neale, 1980, p. 56). The concept of spectacle is what truly allows for the categorization of the musical genre as feminine. According to Stephen Neale (1980), “in the scenes of singing and dancing which are the moments of spectacle *par excellence*, there is a strong tradition in which it is women alone who are subject to the choreography of the look,” and are therefore put on display and subjected to the male gaze (p. 60). Traditionally, through the song and dance of a musical, “the show setting equates femininity with spectacle; it crystallizes [a female’s] position as a static icon of male desire” (Cohan, 1993, p. 46). However, when a man assumes this role, he has been placed “in the very position which the representation system of classic Hollywood cinema has traditionally designated as ‘feminine’” (Cohan, 1993, p. 47). Typically, as the primary protagonist of a musical production, *Dr. Horrible*’s Billy would be considered a feminized man. Though there are traditional feminine musical sequences, Penny’s

performances in particular, due to Whedon's tailoring of the musical genre in *Dr. Horrible*, some of the musical numbers are actually precisely what help to masculinize Billy/Dr. Horrible's character, rather than feminize it.

Though there are clearly elements of masculinity inherent to this exploration of *Dr. Horrible*, this particular discussion is predominantly about the de-familiarization of genre, not gender. Gender does, of course, contribute to the representation of the musical genre, and *Dr. Horrible* provides a different way of talking about masculinity, but the depiction of masculinity itself is nothing short of traditional. Billy experiences typical struggles with hegemonic masculinity, and between primitive and civilized masculinities. The structure of the narrative through the musical genre, by breaking up Billy's character between musical and non-musical sequences, is what facilitates his masculinity, not the other way around. However, it is important to discuss the depictions of masculinity in these scenes in order to explain how, in this case, the musical genre is masculinized in some sequences. Furthermore, Dr. Horrible's articulation of masculinity in musical sequences helps to illustrate half of the dual-focus Billy/Dr. Horrible represents as a primary character. Throughout *Dr. Horrible*, Billy struggles to articulate his masculinity in two ways. The first concerns Billy's pursuit of Penny, his crush at the laundromat, while the second involves his quest as Dr. Horrible to defeat his arch nemesis, Captain Hammer, and become a super villain worthy of joining the Evil League of Evil (ELE). Both situations help to illustrate the separation between Billy and Dr. Horrible, consequently elucidating the role of Billy/Dr. Horrible as the fractured primary protagonist taking the place of the musical genre's traditional male/female duo.

Billy's affection for Penny is established near the beginning of the web miniseries, while he is blogging as Dr. Horrible and a viewer e-mails him asking, "You always say on your blog

that you will ‘show her the way, show her you are a true villain.’ Who is ‘her’ and does she even know that you’re...” Immediately, Dr. Horrible transitions into the first song, “My Freeze Ray.” He does not attempt to respond to the inquiry through dialogue, but rather, he needs a musical sequence to depict and explain his crush on Penny. The structure of this particular musical sequence enhances the duality of Billy’s character, as it crosscuts between Dr. Horrible singing in his laboratory as he blogs, and Billy in the laundromat singing. Furthermore, the lyrics given to Dr. Horrible most often concern his freeze ray and the imposition of power, while the lyrics sung by Billy most often regard his feelings for Penny, illustrating gendered differences between the two egos as Dr. Horrible is portrayed as more masculine and Billy more feminine.

Dr. Horrible begins with “With my freeze ray I will/find the time to find the words to,” as Billy continues with, “Tell you how/How you make/Make me feel/What’s the phrase?/Like a fool/Kinda sick/Special needs.” Dr. Horrible exhibits his freeze ray weapon in a macho display as he sings about enacting his agency on Penny, while Billy sings how Penny makes him feel as he does his laundry. Here, the masculine and feminine sides of Billy/Dr. Horrible are clearly displayed as Dr. Horrible displays his weapon in his laboratory, while Billy engages in the feminine and domestic activity of doing laundry. Another portion of this sequence further elucidates this theme. Dr. Horrible embodies the more masculine half of his dual character even further as he sings, “I’ll bend the world to our will/And we’ll make time stand still,” lyrics that emphasize his interest in power and agency, while he pretends to engage and use his freeze ray. An orange-hued dream sequence of Billy and Penny dancing together in the laundromat directly follows these lyrics, calling attention to Billy’s femininity in the only instance of dancing in the entire web miniseries.

The lighting of “My Freeze Ray” also serves to enhance the gendered duality of Billy/Dr. Horrible’s character. According to Louis Giannetti (1990), feminine genres such as “comedies and musicals...tend to be lit in high key, with bright, even illumination and few conspicuous shadows,” while the more masculine genres utilize low-key lighting and often high contrast (p. 14). While Billy sings in the high-key lighting of the laundromat, a feminine space in feminine genre lighting, Dr. Horrible performs in the low-key lighting of his laboratory, harkening back to the lighting techniques of more masculine genres.

In addition to singing about his feelings for Penny, Billy is also able to directly compliment her in this musical sequence, as he sings to her, “Love your hair.” Following the compliment, however, Penny inquires, “What?” implying that though Billy can articulate himself through song, the musical format does not allow for Penny to adequately receive this communication. While these lyrics clearly express what Billy feels for Penny, the imagery of “My Freeze Ray” also helps illustrate this sequence as one in which Billy can express himself. After he brings his laundry into the laundromat, the musical setting allows Billy to perform actions he would not normally be able to, such as freezing Penny in time as she pours her laundry into a washer, or dancing with Penny in an orange-hued dream sequence. What he cannot articulate through dialogue, he explains thoroughly through song, depicting the first evidence of the idea that Billy relies on musical sequences to express himself, because he cannot do so through mere dialogue. Additionally, Billy is also able to enact his desire to have a relationship with Penny for this particular song, representing his possession of agency in musical sequences, and inhibition in dialogue-based ones. “My Freeze Ray” also establishes and depicts Billy as the more restricted and feminine half of his dual character. Overall, “My Freeze Ray” is representative of the traditional integrated musical sequence, particularly of Schatz’s (1981)

MGM-style integrated musical, which serves to “celebrate courtship, romantic love, and the promise of utopia,” as illustrated in films like *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) and *Easter Parade* (1948), among others (p. 205). However, rather than solely focusing on Billy’s lyrics and fantasizing of Penny in the laundromat, Dr. Horrible’s performance in this sequence brings in an element of masculinity, as well.

Billy’s inability to connect with Penny is reflected in other scenes, such as when his roommate and fellow villain, Moist, asks Billy, “You talk to her?” Billy explains his failure, stating, “So close. I’m just a few weeks away from a real, audible connection.” Billy does eventually make a “real, audible connection” with Penny, but not in the romantic sense. While attempting to complete a heist of Wonderflonium for his Freeze Ray, he runs into Penny on the street, as she is attempting to collect signatures in order to open a new homeless shelter in town. The significance of this scene is that Billy is finally given an opportunity to connect with Penny, but it comes while he is trying to complete his heist and assert his masculinity as Dr. Horrible, in order to join the ELE. Billy expresses his frustration with the bad timing, saying, “She talked to me. Why did she talk to me *now*?” Billy’s inability to make a romantic connection with Penny during this scene has consequences for the rest of the web miniseries, putting him in Penny’s “friend zone,” rendering him unable to express (and still incapable of expressing) his feelings to her, especially as she dates his nemesis, Captain Hammer. Billy’s two goals of winning over Penny and getting into the ELE are put head to head in this scene, and by choosing to focus on the heist and his responsibilities as Dr. Horrible, he ultimately puts a potential relationship with Penny on the back burner, and banishes all feelings toward her to the musical realm.

In fact, Billy (as Dr. Horrible) is also incapable of preventing Captain Hammer and Penny from pursuing a relationship with one another, as his objections are also voiced in song.

As Penny serenades Captain Hammer with “You came from above/I wonder what you’re Captain of/My heart is beating like a drum/Must be, must be in shock/Assuming I’m not loving you to death,” Dr. Horrible attempts to bring clarity to Penny’s misguided affection, singing, “Are you kidding?/What heist were you watching?/Stop looking at her like that/Did you notice that he threw you in the garbage?” Though he is clearly trying to voice his opinion during the end of “A Man’s Gotta Do,” his message is lost on Penny and Captain Hammer, much like his compliment of Penny’s hair was lost in translation during “My Freeze Ray,” reinforcing the duality of Billy’s character in, and separation between musical and non-musical sequences throughout *Dr. Horrible*. Though Billy manages to “friend zone” himself, it is clear during the last song of Act Two, “Brand New Day,” that he has not yet given up hope for having a romance with Penny. While he sings about how Penny will finally learn to see and appreciate him as Dr. Horrible: “And Penny will see the evil me/Not a joke, not a dork, not a failure,” he caresses a framed photo of her, reinforcing the idea that his feelings for her are still intact, regardless of her relationship with Captain Hammer and Dr. Horrible’s dedication to becoming part of the ELE.

In contrast to Billy’s expression of affection for Penny in song, Billy’s inability to receive returned affection is shown in several scenes. After performing the first half of “A Man’s Gotta Do,” Dr. Horrible objects to Captain Hammer pushing Penny into a pile of trash in order to remove her from the direct path of an oncoming courier van, stating, “You almost killed her.” However, Captain Hammer disagrees, explaining, “I remember it differently.” Dr. Horrible attempts to inquire further, asking, “Is she--?” but is interrupted when Captain Hammer grabs and squeezes his neck, causing Dr. Horrible to gurgle. While able to sing about his affection for Penny, and even fully object to Captain Hammer’s actions in song, Dr. Horrible’s concern for Penny’s well-being is cut short by an interruption by Captain Hammer, further illustrating

Billy/Dr. Horrible's inability to attain a reciprocal romantic relationship with Penny because of his lack of articulation in non-musical sequences.

In addition to the scene during "A Man's Gotta Do," Billy's failed attempts to win Penny's love continue in Act Two. Though Penny is already dating Captain Hammer, Billy continues to try to dissuade Penny from pursuing her relationship any further, but is unsuccessful because of his inability to effectively communicate his feelings. During a scene in the laundromat, Billy tries to appeal to Penny by trying to point out similarities in their personalities. First, after expressing that to him, laundry is a "stunningly boring chore," Penny expresses that she is "a fan of laundry." Billy quickly changes his original response to "Psych! I love it." Billy also pretends to have accidentally received two frozen yogurts from a frozen yogurt store, though he actually purposely purchased two, in order to downplay the fact that he is trying to cater to Penny's preferences. Though these certainly provide for an awkward encounter between Billy and Penny, they reinforce the idea that Billy cannot explicitly communicate his feelings to Penny through dialogue.

Because Billy expresses his feelings through song, it would be difficult to glean how he felt throughout the web miniseries without the presence of musical sequences, demonstrating his reliance on song for expression. Lyrics and images in "My Freeze Ray," "A Man's Gotta Do," and "Brand New Day" bring to light Billy's feelings about Penny throughout *Dr. Horrible*. Billy's hoped for romance with Penny is but one of the dilemmas facilitated by the musical format, however. The split between musical and non-musical sequences that concern Billy/Dr. Horrible's affection for Penny not only help to elucidate the fracturing of his character, but it also emphasizes the substitution of the musical genre's traditional prominent male/female duo with a single, fractured primary protagonist. The duality of Billy's character is also demonstrated



by the musical format through his determination to become a member of the ELE as Dr. Horrible, and in turn, defeat his arch nemesis Captain Hammer.

Billy harbors some hostile feelings toward Captain Hammer because he ends up dating Penny, but Hammer is also a source of consternation for Billy as Dr. Horrible, as he attempts to fulfill his dream of joining the Evil League of Evil. In this context, rather than being an outlet for Billy to express his feelings, musical sequences more often allow for him to assert his masculinity as Dr. Horrible. The beginning of “A Man’s Gotta Do” illustrates Dr. Horrible’s desire to become a dreaded super villain, as well as his dedication to that goal: “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do/Don’t plan the plan if you can’t follow through/all that matters: taking matters into your own hands/Soon I’ll control everything, my wish is your command.” While Dr. Horrible struggles to carry out his evil plans flawlessly in dialogue-based scenes, as he is seen being choked by Captain Hammer following this song, these lyrics represent Dr. Horrible’s ability to articulate his devotion to becoming a super villain through song. The visuals of this section of “A Man’s Gotta Do” contribute to the duality of Billy/Dr. Horrible’s character, as well. Billy begins the verse, and as he sings, “all that matters taking matters into your own hands,” he is hidden from view for a short time, and when he reappears he is dressed in his Dr. Horrible garb. This transition illustrates Billy’s reliance on his alter ego for villainous exploits, because after all, it is Dr. Horrible who will be inducted into the ELE, not Billy. The difference between the lyrics Billy sings, “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do/Don’t plan the plan if you can’t follow through,” and those Dr. Horrible performs, “Soon I’ll control everything, my wish is your command,” serves to enhance Billy’s reliance on Dr. Horrible and the duality of the protagonist. Billy’s lyrics suggest that he is trying to convince himself that he is a man, and that he put this plan into place, so he has no choice but to follow through with it. Dr. Horrible’s

lyrics, on the other hand, are much more convicting and powerful, and there is no element of self-doubt within them as there is with Billy's.

The theme of Dr. Horrible's dedication to the ELE and Captain Hammer's standing in the way of that goal is echoed by "Brand New Day," in which Dr. Horrible sings about eliminating Captain Hammer once and for all. The lyrics and visuals of "Brand New Day" are particularly informative, and serve to illustrate this musical sequence as more masculine than others in the web miniseries. Significantly, Billy begins the song in the laundromat, but as he completes the first verse and rendition of the chorus, he exits the laundromat. Though Billy is already singing about defeating Captain Hammer, this action simultaneously signifies his departure from the domestic and feminine sphere, and the remainder of the song is performed by Dr. Horrible. This song is particularly important because it reflects Dr. Horrible's previous inability to defeat Captain Hammer: "All the birds are singing/That you're gonna die/How I hesitated/Now I wonder why/It's a brand new day." Dr. Horrible is aware of his failures to defeat his arch nemesis, but the lyrics illustrate his newfound dedication to finally carrying out this task. Additionally, Dr. Horrible links his goal of defeating Captain Hammer to being inducted into the ELE: "I'm gonna shock the world/Gonna show Bad Horse/It's a brand new day." The force of this sequence, its focus on villainy, and Billy/Dr. Horrible's symbolic departure from the domestic sphere make "Brand New Day" stand out as masculinized.

Dr. Horrible's streak of confidence and articulation of masculinity continues through Act Three, with "Slipping." He manages to freeze Captain Hammer with his freeze ray, and celebrates with a song that depicts his victory, making a commentary on the deceptive nature of society. The lighting in this sequence is very dark with many shadows, utilizing the high contrast and low-key lighting techniques of typically masculine genres. According to Giannetti (1990),

darkness can be used to suggest fear, evil, and the unknown, and this sequence utilizes darkness and shadows in the same way, foregrounding Dr. Horrible as a threat and a source of fear and intimidation (p. 15). Additionally, several of the shots are slanted at an oblique angle, “suggest[ing] tension,” while some are angled up at Dr. Horrible as he “looms threateningly over the spectator, who is made to feel insecure and dominated” (Giannetti, 1990, pp. 13-14). The oblique angle and low angle shots serve to depict Dr. Horrible as a figure of power and masculinity in “Slipping.”

At a pivotal point in the song, Dr. Horrible pulls out his death ray and proceeds to shoot death beams around the room, frightening the guests and causing them to hide and cower in fear. Not only is Dr. Horrible imposing his power, villainy and masculinity on the audience, but also this musical sequence portrays their direct reaction of fleeing from this threat. The lyrics and visual aspects of “Slipping” help to illustrate this sequence as masculine rather than feminine. While Dr. Horrible maintains his position of power during this song, it is important to note that directly following the song’s performance, the freeze ray fails, and Captain Hammer is once again mobile, proceeding to immediately punch Dr. Horrible in the face. “Slipping” allows Dr. Horrible to maintain his position of power and control over both Captain Hammer and innocent bystanders, but once the musical number ends, so does his articulation of masculinity. This scene helps to elucidate how some musical sequences tend to facilitate Dr. Horrible’s articulation of masculinity while dialogue scenes do not.

The role of musical sequences in *Dr. Horrible* is significant. While unable to express his feelings during dialogue scenes, songs give Billy the power to do so. Billy clearly experiences a struggle with masculinity both in his desire to kindle a romance with Penny, and in his goal of being inducted into the Evil League of Evil, and the musical format facilitates this struggle. In

*Dr. Horrible*, the musical genre allows for a depiction of the duality of Billy's character, as well as the clear separation between musical and non-musical sequences in the web miniseries. Furthermore, this duality serves to call attention to the masculinization of Dr. Horrible and thus the feminization of Billy in comparison to the performances of his alter ego. The gender separation between Billy and Dr. Horrible also calls attention to the web miniseries' revision of the dualistic structure of the musical genre by centering on Billy/Dr. Horrible as the sole primary protagonist, rather than a male/female lead couple.

Through the de-familiarization, re-gendering, and restructuring of the musical genre, the use of genre mixing, and the musical format's facilitation of the duality of Billy's character, Joss Whedon has created something truly unique to the musical genre in *Dr. Horrible*. *Dr. Horrible* does not follow all of the structural elements typical of the musical genre, illustrating Whedon's revision of the genre throughout the narrative. Though Whedon certainly de-familiarizes the genre by altering the tropes of the musical, he furthers this de-familiarization by incorporating other genres, including the western genre, the horror genre, and the superhero narrative, through genre mixing. While Billy/Dr. Horrible is able to articulate himself better in musical sequences, he struggles with this ability in non-musical sequences, representing the duality of the character and highlighting the important role the musical genre plays in the web miniseries. The musical genre also facilitates the gendering of Billy/Dr. Horrible, as some sequences allow for the masculinization of his character rather than feminizing him. Finally, instead of subscribing to the traditional dualistic structure of the musical genre, Billy/Dr. Horrible stands in for the male and female protagonists as the primary, but fractured protagonist.

#### **IV. A PhD in Horribleness: Studying Masculinity**

While Joss Whedon alters the traditional use of the musical genre in *Dr. Horrible*, and uses this genre to facilitate the representation of masculinity, the portrayal of masculinity in the web miniseries is typical of much literature on the topic. In this chapter, I will explore the depiction of masculinity as it pertains to Billy/Dr. Horrible's character, specifically his struggle with or crisis in masculinity. Though there are many ways a man can struggle with his masculinity, and several forms of masculinity a man can strive to embody, this analysis will focus on a specific few. Billy/Dr. Horrible ultimately struggles between two forms of masculinity, specifically primitive and civilized masculinities. While at the beginning of the web miniseries he more accurately embodies civilized masculinity, his desire to become a super villain and a member of the Evil League of Evil, as well as his romantic desire for Penny, represents his yearning to embody a more primitive form of masculinity. Though this is Billy/Dr. Horrible's central struggle with masculinity, both hegemonic and hysterical masculinities also play a role in his crisis. Billy/Dr. Horrible's struggle between primitive and civilized masculinities, and thus hegemonic and hysterical masculinities, is reflective of the ongoing struggle with masculinity of white middle-class men, a struggle that is brought to light by both scholarship on masculinity and the narrative of *Dr. Horrible*. Finally, Billy/Dr. Horrible's embodiment of hysterical masculinity has implications for the representation of femininity in the web miniseries, specifically for the character of Penny.

#### **Primitive, Civilized, Hegemonic, and Hysterical Masculinities**

Like for Billy/Dr. Horrible, there have been struggles and tensions between different forms of masculinity throughout the history of the Western world. One of the predominant

tensions is between primitive and civilized masculinities. Primitive masculinity is most often associated with bodily strength, sexual virility, and a lack of moral control (Rogers, 2008, p. 286). Additionally, primitive masculinity tends to focus on the male body itself, as a site exuding and representing power and virility. This focus on the male body is exemplified by the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries boxing match, which “was framed as a contest to see which race had produced the most powerful, virile man” (Bederman, 1995, p. 3). Jack Johnson, a black man, ultimately won the prizefight, representing the anxieties the white race was beginning to develop regarding the credibility of the masculinity of their men. Thus, civilized masculinity was advanced as a reaction to and discipline for primitive masculinity.

Civilized masculinity was advanced along with the rise of the bourgeois class in the 19th century, and as male professions changed and white middle-class power and authority were challenged, a new form of masculinity was needed (Bederman, 1995, p. 11). Instead of a focus on the male body and strength, civilized masculinity provided corrections to primitive masculinity that would jibe with a focus on the different roles of middle-class men. Self-mastery, intellectual capacity and a focus on manly character were central to civilized masculinity, and related to primitive masculinity in that these qualities were meant to establish control over the theme of impulse inherent to primitive masculinity (Rogers, 2008, p. 286; Bederman, 1995, p. 11). According to Gail Bederman (1995), “by gaining the manly strength to control himself, a man gained the strength, as well as the duty, to protect and direct those weaker than himself: his wife, his children, or his employees,” highlighting the role of the middle-class white man in a patriarchal society (p. 12). Ultimately, “the power of manhood, as the middle-class understood it, encompassed the power to wield civic authority, to control strife and unrest, and to shape the future of the nation” (Bederman, 1995, p. 14).

Though civilized masculinity was meant to assert white masculinity over other racial minorities, it created a tension between it and primitive masculinity rather than solving any inferiority issues. Anxiety arose regarding civilized masculinity, and “the principal fear was that men, especially white professionals, were overcivilized to the point of impending extinction” (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003, p. 6). Part of this anxiety was also due to the growth of the female population in the public sphere (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003, p. 7; Bederman, 1995, p. 14). Because of this fear, aspects of primitive masculinity were paired with parts of civilized masculinity in order to create a balance between the two, in the hopes of remaking and creating the perfect masculinity.

The tensions between primitive and civilized masculinities and the desire to create the perfect form of masculinity represent the primary ideas behind hegemonic masculinity. Ultimately, hegemonic masculinity functions as a fluid representation of the expectations of men in society. As Bederman (1995) states, “gender...implies constant contradiction, change, and renegotiation,” highlighting the ever-changing nature of hegemonic masculinity (p. 11). Within hegemonic masculinity there are certain adjectives or qualities that can be identified, but they represent the change and renegotiation of what constitutes a man throughout Western culture. For instance, Nick Trujillo (1991) explains that a feature of hegemonic masculinity is physical force and control, and more specifically through “physical strength, force, speed, control, toughness and domination” (p. 291). Already these features can be attributed to both primitive and civilized masculinities, with control and domination being more closely associated with the latter. Furthermore, Trujillo (1991) identifies four more features of hegemonic masculinity: occupational achievement and familial patriarchy, which both have ties to civilized masculinity, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality, which is related to primitive masculinity as it correlates

with both sexual virility and the male body (p. 291). Trujillo (1995) also discusses the heterosexuality feature of hegemonic masculinity in relation to both the penis and the phallus as symbolism of male sexuality (p. 292).

The fear of the overcivilization of men in the 19th century caused what Bederman (1995) calls the “neurasthenic paradox,” which concerned the idea that

only civilized white men had the manly strength to restrain their powerful masculine passions. But what if civilized, manly self-restraint was not a source of power, but merely a symptom of nerve exhaustion and effeminacy? What if civilized advancement led merely to delicacy and weakness? (p. 88)

According to Sally Robinson (2000), Elaine Showalter explains that this neurasthenic paradox could also be described as “the late nineteenth-century version of ‘executive hysteria,’” and “for middle-class men the preferred treatment for neurasthenia was travel, adventure, vigorous exercise” (p. 169). If civilized masculinity caused the feminization of men, the way to balance out overcivilization was to compensate with features of primitive masculinity. The tension between masculinities was ultimately considered a form of hysteria, one that is echoed by Thomas DiPiero (2002), who describes this hysteria as

a concern with fragmentation premised both on the anxiety of never being able to embody completely the identifiers associated with Western hegemony and on maintaining the other as fragmented and hence desirous in a manner that is possible to manage. (p. 135)

Furthermore, this hysteria can be demonstrated in one of two ways: “either individuals who identify with the dominant position implicitly or explicitly so identify by inquiring of their others who they are; or they find in those others a morphological instability, a physical and psychic lack with which they identify” (DiPiero, 2002, p. 185). Ultimately, hysterical masculinity is a concern on behalf of a man with fulfilling the hegemonic requirements of masculinity, and the need for



validation from others, specifically those who do not fulfill those requirements, that that man indeed fulfills the requirements of hegemonic masculinity.

Hysterical masculinity is rooted in hysteria, a disorder that was originally “believed to develop when the female reproductive system was inactive or ungratified over time” (Micale, 2008, p. 5). The origin of hysteria as a disorder only a woman could develop created consequences for the representation of the disorder, typifying it as a feminine disorder. If a man displayed symptoms typical of hysteria, it was often labeled otherwise, such as “nerve exhaustion” or “neurasthenia” (Micale, 2008, p. 7).<sup>8</sup> Though eventually men were diagnosed with hysteria, it was still construed as a feminine disorder, projecting these values onto hysterical men. For example, the rise of men being diagnosed with hysteria was directly related to the rise of civilized masculinity. Typically, “men are fundamentally unfeeling, and thus insulated from nervous susceptibility,” but with the rise of civilized masculinity, “the circle of masculine emotions’ had widened, thereby creating more and more cases in males” (Micale, 2008, p. 92). Though the label of hysteria is applicable to both men and women, its feminine connotations still remain, causing a man to be represented as feminine if characterized as hysterical.

### **A Horrible Struggle with Masculinity**

From the beginning of the web miniseries, it is clear that Billy/Dr. Horrible’s struggle with masculinity mirrors the one of middle-class white men Bederman discusses. While Billy/Dr. Horrible seems to embody a more civilized form of masculinity in his characteristics and actions, his goals and aspirations, as well as some of his language, seem to depict a more primitive masculinity. For instance, though his desire to be inducted into the ELE, a group of villains with values akin to a terrorist group in their lack of morality, reflects primitively masculine goals, Dr.

Horrible's intellectual prowess and failure to flawlessly commit crimes reflects his civilized masculinity. As described in the previous chapter, Dr. Horrible's character echoes the mad scientist archetype, and this similarity along with his inventions, like his freeze ray and death ray, serve to heighten the perceived intellectual capacity of his character with a focus on his achievements in science. Dr. Horrible also has a passion for changing the status quo, and "putting the power in different hands," specifically by ruling the world himself. This echoes Bederman's (1995) thought on middle-class men understanding civilized masculinity as wielding civic power, controlling strife and unrest, and shaping the future of the nation, as Billy believes it his civic duty to solve current social issues by any means necessary (p. 14). Dr. Horrible's penchant for ruling the world, however, specifically by becoming a dreaded super villain, is indicative of the militancy and lack of moral control inherent to primitive masculinity.

Though aspects of Billy/Dr. Horrible's character certainly contribute to his civilized masculinity, his actions also serve to enlighten his masculinity. A central aspect of the web miniseries and its title is Dr. Horrible's blog. He records his blog from a computer in his kitchen, from which some scientific equipment, as well as several pots and pans can be seen in the background. These both reinforce his aptitude for science, as well as the domestic space he is blogging from. Furthermore, his refusal to commit certain crimes, like when he denies Johnny Snow a fight at Dooley Park because, "besides, there's kids in that park," echoes Bederman's (1995) idea that men articulating civilized masculinity have a responsibility to protect those weaker than themselves (p. 12). This theme is also represented near the end of the web miniseries, when Dr. Horrible is about to shoot Captain Hammer with the death ray, he expresses concern for Penny, singing, "No sign of Penny/Good/I would give anything/Not to have her see." Dr. Horrible's penchant for civilized masculinity is expressed here, as he hopes to protect Penny

from witnessing his villainous act. Both Dr. Horrible's refusal to fight Johnny Snow in a park and his desire to protect Penny from harm elucidate his civilized masculinity, and highlight his self-control, a primary feature of civilized masculinity. Another example that illustrates Dr. Horrible's self-control is his refusal to engage in suggestions from his roommate, Moist, to "smother an old lady" or kill a kid who will grow up to become President.

Dr. Horrible's ability and determination to refrain from engaging in overly violent activities contribute to the self-control he exhibits. Not only is self-control a feature of civilized masculinity, but it is also a feature specifically not inherent to primitive masculinity, as the lack of moral control and theme of impulse inherent to primitive masculinity were features the movement toward civilized masculinity sought to temper. While Dr. Horrible's character qualities help in understanding his expression of civilized masculinity, exploring the character of Captain Hammer, outwardly a primitively masculine man, also helps to illustrate the civilized characteristics of Billy/Dr. Horrible's masculinity by way of comparison.

In comparing Captain Hammer to Billy/Dr. Horrible, it becomes clear that instead of embodying the intellectual capacity Dr. Horrible does through scientific prowess, Captain Hammer possesses bodily strength, a component of primitive masculinity. He is physically muscular, and also seems to possess super strength, as Dr. Horrible recounts an event on his blog that "Captain Hammer threw a car at my head." The feature of bodily strength inherent to primitive masculinity is taken to the extreme through Captain Hammer in *Dr. Horrible*. Additionally, in comparison to Dr. Horrible's intelligence, Captain Hammer seems to possess almost no intelligence or altruism at all, spouting lines like, "It's curtains for you, Dr. Horrible. Lacey, gently wafting curtains," or singing, "Everyone's a hero in their own way/You and you and mostly me and you." Like his bodily strength, it seems Captain Hammer's lack of civility

and moral control has been taken to the extreme, as well. Though it may be associated with his muscular nature and physical strength, Captain Hammer also possesses sexual virility. He alludes to his numerous sexual exploits during Act Three of the web miniseries, as he sings, “This is so nice/I just might sleep with the same girl twice/They say it’s better the second time/They say you get to do the weird stuff.” Furthermore, Captain Hammer accomplishes through his sexual virility what Dr. Horrible cannot manage to do: win over, date, and sleep with Penny.

Though Captain Hammer seems to represent several aspects of primitive masculinity, he is still portrayed in the web miniseries as the hero, regardless of how he is perceived by Dr. Horrible. Whedon certainly satirizes the role of his character, but ultimately, Captain Hammer’s moral imperative as a law enforcement hero is representative of civilized masculinity in the sense that it echoes Bederman’s (2005) thought that “by gaining the manly strength to control himself, a man gained the strength, as well as the duty, to protect and direct those weaker than himself” (p. 12). No matter how tactless Captain Hammer is in his heroic exploits, he still believes saving citizens and upholding the law is his civic obligation. Like Billy/Dr. Horrible, the title character in the web miniseries, Captain Hammer also experiences a personal struggle between primitive and civilized masculinities.

Just as men of Western culture struggle with the feminization of civilized masculinity, and Captain Hammer struggles between two masculinities, so does Billy/Dr. Horrible in *Dr. Horrible*. Though Billy/Dr. Horrible exhibits features of civilized masculinity throughout the web miniseries, there are aspects of his expression that serve to feminize his masculinity, or otherwise compromise it. First, Billy’s name, though generic, says much about his character. There is a reason it is the more boyish version, “Billy,” rather than “Bill” or “William,” as it serves to temper the masculinity of his character. Second, though there is laboratory equipment

that can be seen in the background while Dr. Horrible blogs to his viewers, it is also clear by the hanging pots and pans in the background that he is blogging from his kitchen, a domestic and typically feminine space. According to Kendra Leonard (2010), “here two traditionally feminine areas overlap: that of communication and speech and that of the kitchen” (p. 278). Additionally, besides attempting his villainous exploits, Billy spends a significant amount of the web miniseries at the laundromat doing laundry, another domestic and typically feminine activity.

One of the major issues Billy/Dr. Horrible experiences with articulating his masculinity is that his goals of becoming part of the ELE and winning over Penny require a more holistically primitive masculinity, rather than some of the civilized masculinity characteristics he possesses. The Evil League of Evil is an organization that has a focus on villainy, specifically, heinous crimes, shows of force, and murder. While Dr. Horrible attempts to commit crimes, his plans could hardly be considered heinous. For instance, his first villainous exploit is to steal a case of Wonderflonium from a courier van, a crime he likens to taking “candy from a baby.” While this event demonstrates Dr. Horrible’s determination to break the law, reflecting a demonstration of primitive masculinity, it simultaneously problematizes that demonstration, especially as perceived by the ELE, by being a milder crime as compared to shows of force or even murder. Furthermore, Dr. Horrible bristles at the idea of murder, explaining, “Killing’s not elegant or creative. It’s not my style.” According to Leonard (2010), “the concepts of elegance and creativity in relation to his work further cast Horrible into the traditional feminine sphere,” highlighting his desire to adhere to the articulation of his civilized masculinity (p. 282).

While the mission of the ELE to engage in heinous crimes, shows of force, and murder is certainly representative of primitive masculinity, what is perhaps more symbolic of the form of masculinity it exudes is represented by the organization’s leader, Bad Horse. Rather than being a

humanoid super villain, as depicted by one of the final shots of the web miniseries, Bad Horse is, in fact, a horse.<sup>9</sup> According to Kari Weil (2006), horses and men riding horses are symbolic of masculinity and virility, “revealing man himself as something of a thoroughbred” (p. 89).<sup>10</sup> As the leader of the ELE, Bad Horse represents and embodies primary aspects of primitive masculinity, imbuing his organization with the same qualities. Thus, when Dr. Horrible, a specimen of civilized masculinity, desires to become part of the ELE, he experiences frustration with the articulation of his masculinity, because he embodies a different form than the organization he aspires to be a part of does. This tension also serves to highlight the crisis experienced by middle-class men attempting to articulate civilized masculinity, finding that in some ways when compared to primitive masculinity, it can be construed as more feminine and “overcivilized.”

In addition to being pitted up against a primitively masculine organization, Billy’s other goal of winning over Penny requires a primitive form of masculinity. While Billy eventually manages to make a “real, audible connection” with Penny by talking to and sharing frozen yogurt with her in the laundromat, he does not succeed in creating a romantic connection with Penny. Rather, “he speaks to her as a female friend rather than an interested male,” failing to express or assert virility and the “sexually aggressive masculinity” required of primitive masculinity for successful sexual and romantic exploits (Leonard, 2010, p. 89).

Billy’s lack of sexual virility is also brought to light by a discussion of the penis and the phallus. According to John Fiske (2010), “the phallus is a cultural construct: it bears a culture’s meanings of masculinity and attempts to naturalize them by locating them in the physical sign of maleness—the penis.” Furthermore, “the actual penis can never...measure up to the phallus” (p. 212). In the web miniseries, Dr. Horrible attempts to compensate for his lack of sexual virility

through his use of phallic objects, specifically his freeze ray and death ray. Using these gadgets serves as Dr. Horrible's attempt to articulate primitive masculinity, however artificially. However, both rays ultimately fail him, rendering Dr. Horrible gadget-less and lacking in primitive masculinity against Captain Hammer several times throughout the web miniseries. The first time Dr. Horrible blogs about his failure, stating, "the freeze ray takes a few seconds to warm up," implying that both Dr. Horrible and his freeze ray have been rendered impotent in the presence of, and in comparison to, Captain Hammer. While Dr. Horrible's phallic gadgets fail him several times, Captain Hammer manages to clearly articulate his virility in Dr. Horrible's presence several times, but most poignantly during Act Two. Captain Hammer flaunts his sexual conquest, telling Dr. Horrible, "Penny's giving it up, she's giving it up hard. 'Cause she's with Captain Hammer." As he raises his gloved fists he states, "And these are not the hammer. The hammer is my penis." While Dr. Horrible fails to articulate primitive masculinity through the use of phallic and substitutive objects, Captain Hammer has mastered the use of his naturally given penis by articulating his sexual virility and thus primitive masculinity. Although Dr. Horrible may be attempting to gain the upper hand by utilizing the "larger than life" phallus, Captain Hammer's inferior but natural member functions correctly, while Dr. Horrible's substitute does not.

Because of this struggle with the feminization of his masculinity, Billy/Dr. Horrible seeks out ways to articulate a more primitive type of masculinity in order to compromise between the two masculinities. This renegotiation of his masculinity mirrors the crisis and compromise of white middle-class men to redefine and assert their masculinity after having subscribed to both primitive and civilized masculinities. The inspiration for Billy/Dr. Horrible's transition to adhere more fully to primitive masculinity stems both from his desire to become part of the ELE and

spark a romantic connection with Penny, but it also comes from his determination to defeat his nemesis, Captain Hammer. Throughout the web miniseries, Captain Hammer repeatedly foils Dr. Horrible's villainous attempts, antagonizes him, wins over Penny, and ultimately helps to demonstrate that Dr. Horrible "is repeatedly shown to be the weaker or more 'feminine' of the two men" (Leonard, 2010, p. 279). Like white middle-class men attempting to eradicate the masculine competition from supposedly inferior men, Dr. Horrible needs the primitively masculine exterior Captain Hammer possesses, and a lack of moral control in order to accomplish a murder (Captain Hammer's) that will simultaneously get him into the ELE and give him primitively masculine qualities, and sexual virility that will allow him to begin a romantic and sexual relationship with Penny.

Billy/Dr. Horrible experiences a breaking point at the end of Act Two in which he makes clear his decision to renegotiate his masculinity by succumbing to features of primitive masculinity. In "Brand New Day," Billy/Dr. Horrible sings about how he has finally realized that ridding himself of his moral control in order to murder Captain Hammer is the only way to defeat his nemesis. Though Billy/Dr. Horrible vows to give in to primitive masculinity, it is clear that he still struggles with this decision. Yes, he commits to murder and attempts to defeat Captain Hammer with his death ray, but there is still evidence of his civilized masculinity as shown by his concern for Penny's presence in the town hall, as well his obvious display of emotion after her death.

Possibly the most telling shot regarding Billy/Dr. Horrible's adherence to primitive masculinity is the final shot of the web miniseries. After accidentally killing Penny and finally becoming a super villain, Dr. Horrible sings "Everything You Ever," which denotes the phrase, "everything you ever wanted." Before the final shot of the web miniseries, Dr. Horrible is seen



walking into a room in which members of the ELE sit, waiting for him, and he sings, “Now the nightmare’s real/Now Dr. Horrible is here/To make you quake with fear/To make the whole world kneel.” Dr. Horrible has articulated his primitive masculinity in order to be accepted into the ELE, and he is a true villain. However, the final lyrics, “And I won’t feel/A thing” are paired with a solitary shot of Billy sitting in his home laboratory displaying a solemn facial expression. The contradictory nature of the lyrics and this shot together speak to Billy/Dr. Horrible’s struggle with masculinity. In order to be primitively masculine, he must not betray his emotions. However, his facial expression and earlier depiction of Penny’s death make clear that though he has just accomplished “everything he ever wanted,” he is still caught within his struggle with masculinity. Perhaps Billy/Dr. Horrible accomplished little through his embodiment of civilized masculinity, but his articulation of primitive masculinity cost him the life of the woman he loved. Both forms of masculinity are insufficient, highlighting the impossible nature of hegemonic masculinity, and the hysteria it causes.

Billy/Dr. Horrible’s struggle to effectively articulate his masculinity speaks to both hegemonic and hysterical masculinities. Though he starts out as a civilly masculine character, he eventually realizes that his masculinity as it stands is insufficient to achieve the goals he has set out for himself. He cannot fully identify with the requirements of hegemonic masculinity, and this tension is manifested as hysteria. Billy/Dr. Horrible continually seeks validation from his peers throughout the web miniseries, as his primary goals are rooted in validation. Being inducted into the ELE means being accepted and validated by the organization, and accredited as a truly evil super villain. Even when he sets out to kill Captain Hammer, his intentions are to “shock the world” and “show Bad Horse” that he is worthy of their acceptance. Billy/Dr. Horrible also seeks validation from Penny in a romantic sense, to imbue his virility with

credibility. In “My Freeze Ray” he sings that he’s “the guy to make it real,” and in “Brand New Day” he yearns for Penny to “see the evil me/Not a joke, not a dork, not a failure.” Billy/Dr. Horrible’s hysteria “hinges...on an anxiety of insufficiency,” as he seeks out validation from others (DiPiero, 2002, p. 197).

According to Marlene Goldman (2009), “women edge toward madness whenever they fail to balance the two antithetical roles of the True Woman and the Ideal Mother,”<sup>11</sup> suggesting that hysteria can be manifested out of duality (p. 994). Not only does Billy/Dr. Horrible struggle with the antithetical roles of civilized and primitive masculinities, but he exhibits a duality in identity between “laundry buddy” Billy and Dr. Horrible, as well. Billy/Dr. Horrible’s inability to negotiate these roles causes him to use hysteria “as means ‘to redefine or restructure [his] place’” in society as a man (Goldman, 2009, p. 994). Billy/Dr. Horrible also demonstrates other symptoms of hysteria in the more medical sense. According to Mark Micale (2008), the primary symptoms of hysteria include eye twitches, a symptom that Billy/Dr. Horrible displays repeatedly throughout the web miniseries (p. 150). Billy/Dr. Horrible’s struggle illustrates the difficulties inherent to hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is an unachievable goal, but men try nonetheless to live up to its example, as exemplified by Billy/Dr. Horrible’s constant struggle to articulate and renegotiate his masculinity. He needs the validation from the ELE and Penny in order to be secure in his masculinity, and to know that he is demonstrating the manliness he seeks to embody.

### **A Penny is Almost Worthless**

Though Billy/Dr. Horrible certainly demonstrates an experience with hysteria due to his struggle between civilized and primitive masculinities, as mentioned previously, hysteria is

typically manifested in women rather than men. According to Mary Ann Doane (1987), “disease and women have something in common—they are both socially devalued or undesirable, marginalized elements which constantly threaten to infiltrate and contaminate that which is more central, health or masculinity” (p. 38). This establishes the unsurprising idea that men and masculinity are central to most narratives, and *Dr. Horrible* is no exception. Doane (1987) explains that when disease comes into play in the narrative, however, “a narrativization of the woman which might otherwise be fairly difficult...is facilitated by the association of women with the pathological” (p. 39). The presence of the hysterical woman in a narrative allows for more than just the typical representation of woman and female body as spectacle. Instead of the fetishization of the female body “[implying] that there is no attribution of an interiority whatsoever and hence no ‘characterization,’” the presence of disease or hysteria gives the female body functionality in that it is symptomatic, “a delegate of the unconscious” (Doane, 1987, pp. 39-40). While women most often possess no characterization in a narrative, hysteria gives the woman an unconscious, and she therefore becomes a character.<sup>12</sup>

While hysteria provides women with characterization in a narrative, in *Dr. Horrible* it is the male character, rather than the female, who portrays the hysterical condition. By taking on the hysteria typically belonging to the female, Billy/Dr. Horrible consequently takes away any characterization Penny could have had within the narrative of the web miniseries, ultimately leaving her with a body that cannot symptomatically signify her unconscious and merely functions as an image to be gazed upon, a woman with a lack of character and agency. Furthermore, as “the man who is feminized by his constitutional predisposition...will be prone to experience hysteria,” therefore typifying hysteria as a feminine disorder, Billy/Dr. Horrible replaces femininity and assumes the feminine role in the narrative (Micale, 2008, p. 72-73).

Throughout the three acts of *Dr. Horrible*, viewers hardly get to know Penny, though she is the primary female character in the web miniseries. She is introduced in Act One as the woman on whom Billy has a crush, and it is discovered later in that act that she has an interest in helping the homeless and building a new shelter. In addition to these details, what else is there to know about Penny? According to Budd Boetticher,

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (as cited in Mulvey, 1975, p. 11)

Penny's portrayal in *Dr. Horrible* echoes this thought. She holds little to no importance in and of herself, but rather serves as an object that Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer can fight over. Even before Captain Hammer is introduced to Penny, she serves only to "inspire" Billy, and holds no identifiable value as an individual.

The first song in *Dr. Horrible*, "My Freeze Ray," illustrates Penny's inspiration function well, as Billy sings, "I will/find the time to find the words to/Tell you how/How you make/Make me feel/What's the phrase?/Like a fool/Kinda sick/Special needs/Anyways." Within this first verse of the song, Penny is only discussed in reference to how she affects Billy, and in affecting Billy, there is no discussion of *how* she affects him, just that she does. Penny is the catalyst of Billy's feelings and actions. Further into the song, Billy continues his serenade of Penny: "I just think you need time to know/That I'm the guy to make it real/The feelings you don't dare to feel/I'll bend the world to our will/And we'll make time stand still." At this point, Billy has moved on from explaining how he is affected by Penny, and transitions into singing about himself, and how he is the missing link in Penny's life. These lyrics are a perfect illustration of the lack of agency in Penny's character, as Billy is literally singing about how without him, Penny cannot experience anything "real," nor can she feel certain emotions without him in her

life—she is incomplete. Billy makes several claims about how his life will be affected by Penny, and in turn, how he will affect and improve her life, but there is still little information provided about Penny as a person. In fact, throughout the whole song and sequence of “My Freeze Ray,” there is only one reference to a characteristic of Penny herself, and that is her hair, which is, after all, a physical characteristic of Penny, and one that merely reinforces her role as a woman on display, “[connoting] *to-be-looked-at-ness*” for Billy (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11).

In addition to hearing from Billy how Penny serves to inspire him, this theme is echoed by Penny’s primary solo in *Dr. Horrible*, “Penny’s Song.” Frankly, however, the title of this song is a bit inaccurate, for though it starts out with Penny singing “Here’s a story of a girl/Who grew up lost and lonely/Thinking love was fairytale/And trouble was made only for me,” the bulk of the song serves to inspire Billy, and to make him feel more capable of accomplishing his goals. Two lines of the song speak to this directly, as Penny sings, “Dreams are easy to achieve/If hope is all I’m hoping to be,” which implies that the purpose Penny is working to serve is giving hope and inspiration to other people. Finally, her song ends with “So keep your head up Billy, buddy,” implying that the entirety of her song is meant to encourage Billy, serving a purpose for Billy, rather than herself. “Penny’s Song,” however ironically titled, gets at the idea that Penny “stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man,” specifically Billy/Dr. Horrible, “can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of the woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 7). Penny ultimately implies meaning for Billy/Dr. Horrible and his masculinity, as she serves as an object functioning to help him articulate his manliness, but serves no purpose for herself.

During “My Freeze Ray,” the audience sees Penny for the first time, but only within the context of Billy fantasizing about her, upholding the idea that “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly,” as parts of the song sequence depict Billy’s desire to be with Penny (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). The first time Penny is seen in real time, she is standing at a street corner trying to get signatures for a petition to use a building for a new homeless shelter. As she is trying to catch the attention of passersby, she sings her first of two solos: Will you lend a caring hand/To shelter those who need it/Only have to sign your name/Don’t even have to read it/Would you help... No? How about you? For a solo, this song is exceedingly brief, but it does introduce Penny and her seemingly only goal in the entire web miniseries: to help the homeless. However, while she sings, she fails to gain the attention of any of the people passing by her, making her seem invisible. Her invisibility to other people illustrates her role as “bearer of meaning” for Billy, but for no one or nothing else.

While this scene alone may not be enough to illustrate Penny’s lack of agency in *Dr. Horrible*, once it is linked with later scenes, the dominance of the primary male characters in the web miniseries, in comparison to Penny’s more trivial role, becomes clear. It is not until Penny meets Billy and Captain Hammer that her efforts to help the homeless truly pay off. After Penny spends time “hunting down wild signatures,” Billy signs Penny’s petition, though it is assumed he only does so because of his crush on her, in the hopes that she will like him back. Again, rather than Billy serving a purpose for Penny, it is the other way around, re-establishing Penny’s helping role in Billy’s life. Additionally, what Penny could not do alone, get the city to donate a building to the Caring Hands Homeless Shelter, Captain Hammer accomplishes easily, which he makes sure to flaunt in front of both Penny and Billy: “Who wants to know what the Mayor is doing behind closed doors? He is signing over a certain building to a Caring Hands Group as a

new homeless shelter...Apparently the only signature he needed was my fist. But, with a pen in it. That I was signing with.” Not only is Penny an object of inspiration for Billy, but also she cannot accomplish her own goals without the assistance of a man.

Throughout *Dr. Horrible*, there are several more examples contributing to the illustration of a lack of agency in Penny’s character, and therefore her role as “bearer of meaning” to others. In addition to not being able to secure a new homeless shelter by her own volition, Penny also cannot maintain safety in her own life without the help of Captain Hammer, who saves her from being hit by a speeding van in Act One. When Captain Hammer pushes Penny out of the way of the van, it not only upholds the conventional “damsel in distress” stereotype for women as she had plenty of time to move out of the way herself, but it also demonstrates how much, or rather how little, value Penny truly holds to Captain Hammer. When he pushes her out of the way, he hardly glances at her, and the push is quite forceful, sending Penny flying into a large pile of trash bags. At this point, Penny is merely trash to Captain Hammer, someone or something to be used and thrown away. She is just a way to save the day, and in addition to that, *in* the way of saving the day, as he sings, “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do/Seems destiny ends with me saving you/The only doom that’s looming is you loving me to death.” Hammer is only interested in saving Penny because it is what he’s “gotta do,” and he looks at Penny falling in love with him as “doom,” or an inconvenient byproduct of his job of being a hero. Unfortunately for Penny, Hammer reinforces the lack of value he sees in her as a person, as he continues to treat her as an object: one he can save to maintain his heroic reputation, and one he can sleep with to uphold his masculinity, and maintain his sex life, all features of the primitive masculinity he subscribes to.

Captain Hammer's subsequent relationship with Penny fulfills an aspect of narrative as discussed by Laura Mulvey (1975), who explains that women function to evoke castration anxiety from men holding the gaze of the female figure. She states that men must escape this anxiety, and one way is to "[turn] the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (p. 14). Captain Hammer reconciles his castration anxiety by engaging in a romantic relationship with her, but only for the sexual pleasure it provides. His desire for Penny as a sex object is exemplified by his focus on the physical aspects of their relationship throughout the web miniseries, and especially his announcement to the multitude of onlookers in the town hall during Act Three, "So I thank my girlfriend Penny/(yeah, we totally had sex)."

As mentioned earlier, Penny ultimately serves as a device of tension between Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer, though it is unclear *why* exactly she provides this tension, as she does not seem to hold much inherent value as a character. Several times throughout the web miniseries, Billy/Dr. Horrible expresses his love for Penny, and dedication to accomplishing his goals for her. For example, near the beginning of Act One, Dr. Horrible reads an e-mail from a fan that states, "You always say on your blog that you will 'show her the way, show her you are a true villain,'" which introduces Penny as the motivation for Dr. Horrible's actions. First, this implies that Penny does not already know "the way," or is misguided in some sense. Second, this establishes Billy's crush on Penny, and therefore the opportunity for her to be the center of tension between Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer once she is introduced to the latter.

It is important to note that though Billy likes Penny before she even meets Captain Hammer, he is unable to make a "real, audible connection" with her. It is not until Hammer desires Penny that Billy becomes upset and fights against Captain Hammer for the affections of



Penny, much like a child fights over a toy once that toy is desired by another child. According to Kendra Preston Leonard (2011), Penny “is secondary to the story of the two men whose war of egos ultimately lead to her death; ultimately, she is a mere object in the story of Horrible’s origins as a supervillain” (p. 277).

It is clear that Penny is treated as an object throughout the web miniseries, and there are a few examples that exemplify the treatment of her character, including a scene in the laundromat near the end of Act Two. After Captain Hammer announces he has gotten the Mayor to sign over the building over to the Caring Hands group, he takes Billy aside and threatens him, ensuring that he recognizes his true identity as Dr. Horrible: “You got a little crush, don’t you Doc? Well that’s gonna make this hard to hear...I’m gonna give Penny the night of her life. Just because you want her, and I get what you want.” This scene reinforces the idea that Penny as a person means very little, if anything, to Billy, and especially Captain Hammer. What both of the men really want is to endanger the other man’s ego and masculinity, and if Penny is the method for doing that, then that is the route they will take. Neither man is interested in pursuing Penny for who she is, but rather what pursuing her will accomplish: the fall of their competitor.

While *Dr. Horrible* certainly “swings for the fences,” “tackles Big Ideas and Big Themes without skimping on Great Entertainment,” allows “the lead heroine or hero to make some profoundly unlikable choices [and kills] off a beloved character,” it may not be one of Whedon’s productions that is “as keenly attuned to its female characters as its male ones,” (Vary, 2009). The narrative of *Dr. Horrible* unfortunately serves to further the presence of misogyny in popular media, but the representation of masculinity in the web miniseries mirrors the real-life struggle of white middle-class men, illustrating the difficulty of impossibility inherent to hegemonic masculinity. Though Billy/Dr. Horrible’s struggle between civilized and primitive

masculinities, and thus with hysterical masculinity ultimately displaces the potential narrative importance of Penny, the web miniseries presents a very real struggle with masculinity. *Dr. Horrible* gets at the heart of masculinity: striving toward it is an endless struggle wrought with sacrifices, and the end point is ultimately unachievable.

## V. Conclusion

*Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is certainly representative of Joss Whedon's experimentation with both genre and gender in a production. The juxtaposition of the musical genre with an exploration of masculinity allows for a unique, re-gendered depiction of the musical genre, and one that illustrates Whedon's inclination to de-familiarize genre, a characteristic of his auteur signature. Furthermore, the depiction of masculinity in the web miniseries, that which highlights Billy/Dr. Horrible's struggle to win Penny and the Evil League of Evil over, is representative of the bulk of literature on the topic. However, the stereotypical nature of Billy/Dr. Horrible's struggle with masculinity ultimately serves to highlight and call attention to the structure in which this struggle takes place, through lyrics and music, and the musical genre.

While Joss Whedon's status as auteur, as well as the use of genre and gender in *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* are clearly important and worthy of analysis, there are other aspects of the web miniseries that stand out as worthy of import. One of these aspects is *Dr. Horrible's* status as a web-disseminated production. The web miniseries' context of production and distribution has significant implications for not only the future of web distribution, but consequently for the future of television and film distribution, as well.

### ***Dr. Horrible* and Convergence Culture**

While *Dr. Horrible* is considered a successful case study of web distribution and has implications for this new, emergent mode of distribution, it is important to first consider how this web miniseries relates to other arguments surrounding the Internet as a medium. In his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins (2006) optimistically explores the relationship the Internet

provides “between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture” (p. 243).

Jenkins (2006) argues that the Internet has opened up a two-way space of interactivity between these two cultures, specifically in the realm of popular culture, and that different groups will continually learn how to participate and collaborate with each other in the future (pp. 245-246).

In addition to being a space of interactivity, this new convergence culture also gives users the opportunity to adapt available content: “No sooner is a new technology...released to the public than diverse grassroots communities begin to tinker with it, expanding its functionality, hacking its code, and pushing it into a more participatory direction” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 244).

*Dr. Horrible*’s existence as an Internet distributed web miniseries is largely indicative of Jenkins’ view of the collaboration between corporate media and participatory culture.

Significantly, *Dr. Horrible* was created out of the context of the WGA Strike, and not only did the strike concern the new movement toward conglomerates using the Internet as a distribution source, and “how profits [would] be made on digital formats,” but Whedon used the strike and the creation of *Dr. Horrible* as an opportunity to prove that there are other production and distribution models that work (Banks, 2010, p. 22). Part of the model of web distribution inherent to *Dr. Horrible* concerns the participatory culture Jenkins discusses. Before *Dr. Horrible* debuted, the opportunity for participation from fans and potential viewers was sparked by paratextual hype of the web miniseries, as “the lines of communication with fans were kept open through announcements and updates on Twitter, on the Dr. Horrible website, and also through postings on fan sites” (Lang, 2010, p. 367). Additionally, the form of the web miniseries as being released in three separate acts affected the participatory nature of *Dr. Horrible*, sparking discussion from viewers before and after each act was released, highlighting the fluid nature of the discussion surrounding this particular text. According to Anouk Lang (2010), the unique

distribution context of *Dr. Horrible* “offers a unique reception context: the chance to ‘freeze-frame’ audience reaction at particular points in the narrative and thereby gain insight into the ways readers engaged with different features of a story” (p. 368). Even the title of the web miniseries, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, encourages participation from its viewers in the form of singing along to the songs in the musical. The mutual participation on behalf of the *Dr. Horrible* cast and crew and its fans and viewers is representative of Jenkins’ idea that the Internet is more increasingly becoming a two-way space of interactivity.

While Jenkins’ view is optimistic, and *Dr. Horrible* is certainly representative of this participatory culture that he discusses, there are still ways the web miniseries is problematic as an example of convergence culture. *Dr. Horrible* demonstrates the immense potential of both independent-type ventures and fandom, but ultimately, the web miniseries is neither fully independent nor separated from corporate culture. Whedon and the *Dr. Horrible* venture have ties to corporate culture, which problematizes the web miniseries’ facilitation of mutual participation from top-down and bottom-up cultures. Whedon worked in Hollywood for a number of years in order to establish his talent, fan base, and corporate connections, allowing him the resources necessary to create this web miniseries in the first place. Granted, though Whedon has clear ties to corporate culture, he is known for interacting with and listening to his fanbase more consistently than other directors in Hollywood. Although the web miniseries was originally distributed online, it still has DVD and soundtrack album sales that illustrate the traditional promotion and sales models of horizontally-integrated media corporate culture.

While the distribution context of the web miniseries encourages participation in the form of discussion from its fans and viewers, it is not as convincingly indicative of Jenkins’ exploration of the adaptation of media by consumers. Although there are examples of

reenactments of the web miniseries by fans, illustrating the potential for adaptation *Dr. Horrible* presents, the creators are specific in the legality of such reenactments in the sense that they specify, “no license requests are being reviewed or granted with respect to performances of Dr. Horrible,” establishing restrictions on bottom-up participation (“Dr. Horrible,” 2008). This is not the only aspect that highlights the role of corporate culture in the web miniseries, as fans are welcome to purchase *Dr. Horrible* goods from the website, including T-Shirts and figurines, representing the monetary goals of the venture. Even its recent debut on television via the CW distances the web miniseries from its more independent features, more closely associating it with corporate culture through traditional distribution channels. *Dr. Horrible* is a step forward for convergence culture and independent ventures, but it is also impossible to separate from its corporate culture roots. In the aforementioned book, Jenkins (2006) states that he is “trying to point toward the democratic potentials found in some contemporary cultural trends” rather than predict the future. *Dr. Horrible* is illustrative of these democratic potentials and trends, but not a perfect example of a fully independent venture (p. 247).

## **Implications**

**Genre and Gender.** Though the previous chapters predominantly provide insight into the use of genre and gender in *Dr. Horrible*, the exploration of both of these factors also speaks to the reputation and creative tendencies of Joss Whedon. Although *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tends to be seen as promoting a progressive portrayal of women in the sense that the protagonist “kicks butt,” *Dr. Horrible* provides a completely different and problematic portrayal of women. Penny’s agency-less character is only one example of the misogyny present in several of Whedon’s works; the sexualization of Scarlett Johansson’s Black Widow in *The Avengers* is another. While

Whedon is certainly a creative auteur in Hollywood, utilizing women protagonists to revise genre, his reputation as a feminist cannot rightly be upheld, especially when taking into consideration the relative worthlessness attributed to Penny in *Dr. Horrible*.

While Whedon's portrayal of women in *Dr. Horrible* is nothing short of traditional, his use of genre is unconventional. By applying the musical genre to *Dr. Horrible*'s super villain narrative, Whedon expands the application of the genre. Foregrounding a male as the primary character of the musical and including elements of elimination typical of other genres helps to break the duality between, and combine features of genres of order and integration, providing a site of further discussion and potential revision of genre theory. The use of the musical genre also calls attention to the struggle with masculinity that is central to the narrative of the web miniseries.

The web miniseries' portrayal of masculinity is also traditional, and Billy/Dr. Horrible's struggle between civilized and primitive masculinities serves to highlight the impossibility of attaining hegemonic masculinity. Though reaffirming much of the arguments in masculinity literature, *Dr. Horrible* reiterates the problems inherent to societal expectations of masculinity and contributes to the ongoing debate of the topic. Just as women should have significantly more value than a body to be gazed upon, rather than never being "good enough" or aspiring to live up to a nonexistent ideal, men should be granted the validation that allows a confidence and security in their masculinity outside of an unattainable and unrealistic ideal.

**Viability of Internet Distribution.** Ultimately, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* represents several factors related to the Internet and its viability as a distribution outlet. First, the Internet as a distribution outlet provides an alternative to professionals who are disillusioned

with the production and distribution processes as typically handled through the major film and television studios. It provides an alternative to filmmakers who are interested in maintaining creative control over their productions, as well as experimenting with production without the constraint of the studios and having to have their ideas and scripts “green-lit” before going forward with them.

Second, the low cost of distribution on the web provides an opportunity for filmmakers to also engage in lower budget production. The financial return on these productions may not be as high as those produced and distributed through the major studios, but they also do not have to be, because the costs to pay back are not as substantial. Additionally, these professional filmmakers are not necessarily interested in these types of productions for the profits they may glean from them. The intrinsic rewards that come from this alternative method of production and distribution often compensate for the loss of monetary reward.

Third, the Internet is a collaborative medium, and the relationships professional filmmakers make, both from their time in Hollywood, and while utilizing web distribution, are important for production and distribution of web content. It takes more than one person to produce a film, and the relationships created and maintained through networking and relationship building are what substantiate the cast and crew of a production. However, already established, professional filmmakers are likely to have created and maintained these types of relationships well before their interest in web distribution, contributing to the viability of this outlet for professional filmmakers. Also highlighting the collaborative nature of the Internet is the fan following and social support that is irrefutably pivotal to the success or lack thereof of any web distributed content, as illustrated by *Dr. Horrible*. Again, professionally established filmmakers will most likely already have some sort of support prior to venturing into Internet distribution.



The collaborative nature of the web suggests that the major film and television studios may play a necessary role in professional filmmakers' utilization of the Internet as a distribution outlet. Without the experience and relationships taken from time "paying their dues" to the Hollywood system, professionals would not have the relational and financial foundation necessary to move into web distributed ventures. In this context, the major film and television studios become a "necessary evil" in the independent, Internet distributed endeavors of professional filmmakers.

Finally, Internet distribution provides an outlet for a plethora of production and distribution models. There is no "magic" way to produce or distribute a film or series, in fact, there are multiple possibilities, as exemplified by the many different examples of web distribution. Additionally, there are varying degrees of independence involved in these productions, ranging from the fully independently funded *Dr. Horrible* to the iTunes released film, *Bachelorette* (2012), which was funded by a subsidiary of the Weinstein Company.

***Dr. Horrible as an Exemplar.*** Among other examples, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* stands out as an exemplar of web distribution. The web miniseries stands out in many ways, but first and foremost in its financial success, most notably in comparison to its low cost of production and distribution and lack of outside funding. By late July of 2008, Joss Whedon was reported to have raked in an estimated \$2.6 million from the sales of one million iTunes downloads of *Dr. Horrible* (Love, 2008). Five years later, with an inevitable increase of iTunes downloads and DVD, soundtrack and merchandise sales, there are no specific numbers regarding the financial success of the web miniseries, but it is safe to assume it has made Whedon and his cohorts far more than \$2.6 million. Regardless of the exact amount of profit made by *Dr. Horrible*, Whedon clearly illustrated that monetization of the Internet is possible, and formulated

a feasible method for this process from which to build off of. Additionally, this method also illustrates that compensating the creative personnel in a production is not something that needs to be worked around, even for lower budget ventures.

In addition to its financial success, *Dr. Horrible* is an exemplar of Internet distributed media in the sense that it was an Internet phenomenon. Not only was the web miniseries successful in the creative sense, but also according to Felicia Day, it was before its time:

Even to this day, there is not anything that's been released on the Internet to equal it as far as reach and revolutionizing and showing people what digital *could* be... you [have] a lot of experienced Hollywood producers and creators entering the space because they see the creative freedom, all the different distribution points that are possible and they see the reach you can get with global audience. If anything, *Dr. Horrible* was extra before its time in showing what the potential was. (as cited in Goldberg, 2012)

Though the WGA strike provided the space for experimentation with the Internet as a distribution outlet, Joss Whedon snatched up this opportunity and went above and beyond in illustrating the true potential of the Internet. Whedon and his production staff's decision to produce *Dr. Horrible* as a direct reaction to the strike contributes to the exemplary nature of the series in comparison to other examples in that the context of its creation was truly unique: Whedon had the advantage of and seized the "opportune moment," while other productions were mostly in reaction to this moment. Whedon had opportunities available to him during the strike that would not have been possible otherwise, including the availability of shooting locations and cast and crew members' time.

### **Further Research**

The implications *Dr. Horrible* has on the future of Internet distribution are numerous, and though further research in this area could prove beneficial, the web miniseries is worthy of study in other ways as well. While its representation of masculinity broaches the topic of gender, this is

not the only discussion of gender to be had pertaining to the web miniseries. While in my analysis I consider Billy and Penny to be the couple of the web miniseries, it is also possible, through a queer reading, to see Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer as the central couple of the web miniseries. An analysis of their “dueling masculinities” could further *Dr. Horrible’s* representation of masculinity. The over-performativity of masculinity in the web miniseries, specifically pertaining to Captain Hammer’s character, could prove fruitful, especially if considering a tie to parody and camp. Furthermore, Neil Patrick Harris’ portrayal of Billy/Dr. Horrible’s struggle with masculinity would be an interesting topic of analysis, as well, considering Harris’ status as a homosexual actor in Hollywood, and one who has the reputation of making queer mainstream, particularly through his repeated presence at the Tony Awards.

An analysis of Whedon’s use of genre and gender in *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* proves fruitful in that it represents Whedon as an auteur, and illustrates the relationship between genre and gender in the web miniseries. Without the format provided by the musical genre, *Dr. Horrible’s* exploration of masculinity and Billy/Dr. Horrible’s character would not take place, as the juxtaposition of both musical and non-musical sequences brings clarity to both of these aspects. Additionally, the foundation of the web miniseries being a struggle with masculinity highlights the use of the musical genre in the text. Furthermore, *Dr. Horrible* is an exemplar of web distribution, and it is ultimately the culmination of near perfect circumstances that is at the root of *Dr. Horrible’s* exemplary nature. The web miniseries was not funded by a major studio, and distribution of the series was also done independently, on the Internet, though despite these factors it still inevitably possesses ties to corporate culture. Despite these circumstances, and because of Whedon’s immense fan following and high production quality of the production, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* persevered, and continues to thrive financially and critically.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The phrase, “lovingly tweaked,” is inspired by a portion of Adam Vary’s (2009) article titled “Joss Whedon: Master of Cult TV,” in which he states, “[Whedon’s] name alongside the ‘Created by’ credit during the opening titles guarantees you are about to watch a show that swings for the fences; a show as keenly attuned to its female characters as its male ones; a show that tackles Big Ideas and Big Themes without skimping on Great Entertainment; a show that is unafraid to Go There, from allowing the lead heroine or hero to make some profoundly unlikable choices to killing off a beloved character; a show that is steeped in genre tropes yet also lovingly tweaks them; and a show that has a tone, style, and voice so singular that it’s earned its own adjective: *Whedonesque*.”

<sup>2</sup> Joss’s grandfather, John Whedon, wrote for *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966), *Room 222* (1969-1974), and *Kilroy* (1965). Joss’s father, Tom Whedon, worked on *Golden Girls* (1985-1992), *Alice* (1976-1985), *Electric Company* (1971-1977), *Captain Kangaroo* (1955-1992), *The Dick Cavett Show* (1968-1974), and *Benson* (1979-1986).

<sup>3</sup> In particular, there is a *Buffy* Season One episode titled “Out of Sight, Out of Mind” that depicts a girl who is so ignored in school that she becomes invisible.

<sup>4</sup> Whedon wrote 24 issues of *Astonishing X-Men*, introducing several new characters into the Marvel universe. He was also one of the writers for the Marvel comic *Runaways*, and was also involved in the writing of Dark Horse Comics adaptations of *Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Serenity*.

<sup>5</sup> Angelus and Angel are played by the same actor, David Boreanaz, but the names are used to differentiate between when Angel has his soul intact and is considered good, and when he is soulless and considered evil and dangerous—technically the two are considered separate characters, but inhabit the same body.

<sup>6</sup> Eliza Dushku is the lead character in Whedon’s series *Dollhouse*.

<sup>7</sup> During “My Freeze Ray” there is a brief dream sequence that portrays Billy and Penny dancing together in the laundromat.

<sup>8</sup> Men with cases of “shell shock” in World War I also brought attention to the existence of nervous disorders in men.

<sup>9</sup> Though Bad Horse is referenced throughout the web miniseries (most often as “The Thoroughbred of Sin”), his existence as an actual horse is an unexpected narrative feature that is revealed near the end of Act Three.

<sup>10</sup> Weil discusses men and equestrian culture as it pertains to France’s Third Republic.

<sup>11</sup> Goldman discusses the issue of hysteria as it is represented in Robertson Davies’ *Fifth Business*.

<sup>12</sup> In medical discourse films in which a woman is considered hysteric or otherwise mentally compromised, her body functions as a symptom of her interior. A doctor, usually a man, is required to decipher the woman’s inner self, and thus becomes “the site of knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity,” turning the erotic gaze into the medical gaze (Doane, 1987, p. 43).

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