All I REALLY need to know I learned from *Firefly*™

By James Laird Davenport

For those poor unfortunates who missed its brief life on television, **Firefly** was one of the best gaming series ever produced. While it wasn't about gamers per se, it was quite easy to envision that we were watching the adventures of a gaming group, in this case in a space opera campaign. The show had an engaging ensemble of characters, great stories, and a unique vision of the future. What more could you ask from a gaming campaign?

DANGER: ***SPOILERS INCLUDED.***

If anxiety or annoyance is experienced, discontinue use.

To understand the examples below, here's a quick synopsis of the **Firefly** series: Set 500 years in the future, the story is science fiction with a distinctive flavor of the American Old West, after the Civil War. ***Malcolm Reynolds***, veteran of the losing side of a galactic war for unification, owns and flies his own spaceship, an unassuming Firefly-class transport named Serenity. Once an idealistic leader-of-men, he's now playing the part of an anything-for-hire smuggler.

This combination of situations has made him a scoundrel trying to ignore his "heart of gold", his mercenary intentions competing with the better instincts and morals of his past.

With the scoundrel captain is the proverbial motley crew: Wash, the easy-going, wise-cracking pilot; Jayne, the anything-for-a-buck mercenary; Kaylee, the eternally-optimistic ship's engineer, and Zoe, Malcolm's first mate and comrade from the war. (At first blush, it's almost like you could see their character sheets off to the side.)

Also along for the ride is 'Inara', a member of an exclusive ***Guild of Companions***.

She's more than a classy prostitute; she's a romantic-interest for the hardened Malcolm. Criminals when necessary, the crew seeks 'to keep fuel in the tanks and food on the table'.

At the beginning of the series, they pick up three passengers who become de facto members of the crew: Simon, the doctor; River, Simon's mentally-addled, fugitive sister; and Shepherd Book, the preacher looking to experience life outside the monastery.

After watching and enjoying this series immensely, I realized that the shows were trying to teach me important lessons about story-telling and gamemastering. I've collected those lessons here.

Lesson 1: Don't Ignore the Origin Story

Many television shows (and even more gaming groups) gloss over the beginnings of a group of characters, making such tired assumptions as 'Hey we're all in the same bar looking for work." Rarely is a good reason is established for the characters to join each other, risking their lives for the fellow they met yesterday.

The better TV shows (and gaming campaigns!) give you a good pilot to set the scene and the characters, to establish these relationships.

In **Firefly**, we get a two-part pilot, **Serenity** - Part 1 & 2, beginning with a flashback to the end of Malcolm's time in the war and then a first adventure with his crew. The three passengers are introduced to the ensemble. We learn enough to know who everyone is and what their role will be moving forward. This is the establishment of the adventuring party, player characters and non-player characters alike.

Creation of the campaign theme ("We'll all be rebels flying around in a freighter taking whatever jobs keep us flying."), creation of the characters' motivations, and creation of the pilot setting should occur together. All are equally important to a rich and satisfying campaign for you and your players.

As with good screenwriting, the pilot should start "when the story starts and not a moment sooner". If they will all be traveling together in a space ship, it will be the first time that they all get on the ship at the same time. If they will all be fighting in the goblin wars, the pilot should occur when they are assigned to the same unit. If they all just want to adventure, then they must all be present when the adventure hook appears.

Lesson 2: Give them a Reason to Be Together

When you are creating the pilot episode from Lesson 1, you'll need to determine why these characters are together. When they meet, it must be the right time and place for each of them to join the group, motivated either by what they are looking for or what they are running from. In **Firefly** the characters are generally escaping from something, whether it is a bounty on their heads or the oppressive authority of the galactic government. The spaceship provides the best means of escape for them, drawing the characters to it and even binding them to its fate.

On a character level, it makes some sense for the preacher to join the scoundrel. They answer a need in each other. The preacher needs someone to save and the scoundrel wants to be saved. Inara sells love to strangers, but is really only looking for love from Malcolm.

Once the characters have been thrust together by circumstance, don't let logic draw them apart. Chance may throw them together for their first adventure, but there should be a compelling reason why they don't just fragment once the immediate pressure is off. People least likely to join the group through common interests, must join because of more dire needs or greater opportunity.

Everyone on the Serenity has their reasons to stick with the group, most of them less tangible than the opportunity for profit. Setting up those less tangible reasons can bond a group more than the chance for loot ever will. If the chemistry of your campaign is right, these characters will bond in a deep way, forging ties similar to soldiers under fire. These characters will fight and die for each other. They become a family.

Some of those less tangible reasons: The Need to Escape, The Need for Freedom, A Love Interest, the Need to Belong, the Need for a Home, and the Need to Care for Something.

Lesson 3: Create a Mixture of Characters to Encourage Role-playing

The crew of the Serenity is a real mixture of opposites and contrasts. Some characters are in love or may one day be in love with each other. Others can barely tolerate each other. They come from all walks of life, from the upper-class doctor to the backwater ship's engineer. The group has their man of God and more than enough sinners.

Jayne exemplifies the mercenary outlook, disdaining considerations outside the money to be made. He appeals with mixed success to Malcolm's practical side. Several characters encourage Malcolm's more civilized and altruistic side, from the preachings of Shepherd Book, to the unrelenting sunshine views of his ship's engineer. These contrasts and frictions create role-playing opportunities and give the characters depth.

But be careful that you don't create too much friction. They have to have some common beliefs, attitudes, or sympathies or else there is no foundation for their bonds. In **Firefly** everyone on board is seeking to escape something and tolerates the crew's forays on the wrong side of the law. Even the 'innocent' passengers are soon active members in the crew's various jobs and schemes. It would be awfully hard to have a party of smugglers and thieves team up with an icon of law and order.

Some interesting character traits: optimism, pessimism, civility, barbarity, piety, agnosticism, calm with killing, treasures all life, law-abiding, law-bending, law-breaking, quiet, loud, high class, low class, rich life, poor life.

Lesson 4: Great Theme Music

While I've toyed with having soundtracks to my gaming sessions, it becomes too difficult to manage timing mood music to the right events in the game without great control of the music source. Just throwing in a multi-pack with the soundtracks to Conan the Barbarian, the Gladiator, and Lord of the Rings doesn't add that much to the campaign. In fact, it can be more distracting than helpful when the battle music comes on in the middle of a quiet scene. You almost feel obligated to have a band of orcs crash in on whatever's going on.

But the right music, used at the right times, can be very effective. I like to have a campaign theme that can be played whenever we get together to game. It signals to the players that the game is starting. When chosen well, the song can be a rallying cry for the party.

This is the same effect as the theme song to **Firefly**, a western-feeling ballad penned by the show's creator, Joss Whedon. It's probably our TV-infused culture that has taught us that the theme-song "starts the show". Use that to your advantage. With a few minutes of music, you can focus attention and remind everyone of the campaign's intended mood.

You can bring music in later in your gaming session by using brief bits of music to cover changes of scene, changes in mood, or entire cut-scenes that you want to read to them. Just like television shows, these musical cues can be very powerful in setting our players' expectations.

For music, try to find an evocative piece from the genre you're using: TV Show Themes, rock music, a medieval or renaissance piece, or something from the soundtrack of a movie with the same genre. "**Bad Company**" by the band of the same name would be fun for an Old West campaign. The soundtrack to "**2001: A Space Odyssey**" might be appropriate for a gritty Traveller campaign.

Lesson 5: Get Started with a Bang

In the best television and movie fashion, **Firefly** begins each episode by laying the groundwork for the story and stopping just when you realize things are going to be more interesting than you expected. Then the opening theme and credits roll. In movies this is usually an action sequence or something to grab the audience before we bore them with the opening credits.

In gaming, the same technique can be used to get the adventure started off with a bang. Get your players' minds off their day at work or how long it will take for the pizza to arrive by using events that really grip their attention.

It is important to master the cliffhanger technique as well. When you begin the adventure and get to the bang, stop the action. Play your campaign theme music. Let them stew on it a little bit before jumping back in to resolve things. This lets the surprise sink in and have more of an effect on them. If you resolve the "bang" before the theme music pause, you've released the tension you were trying to achieve.

Some "bang" suggestions: setup a typical start but zing it with a twist to get them terrified, excited, paranoid, or at least concerned about the

health and future of their characters and goals; start with them doing something mundane and then attack them, or unveil a challenging character or blast from the past to get their brains moving.

Lesson 6: Give Them Refuge

Everybody needs some place they feel safe. For our friends in **Firefly**, their ship is their haven, the place they can escape to (and escape in). Without a refuge, there is never anyplace for the characters to relax and be themselves, no place for them to escape the dangers of their world.

Once they've passed through the gates of their haven, they are safe. Just as Frodo made it to the sanctuary of Rivendell in dramatic fashion in the Lord of the Rings, your heroes should have someplace to go when the dangers are too great or their plans just aren't panning out.

Once you've created the party's safe place, they'll be very attached to it, and probably very protective of it. Most of the members of the Serenity's crew would fight to defend the ship, most having an attachment to it as strong as love. In the episode Out of Gas, we learn how Malcolm fell in love with his ship. Kaylee declares her love of the ship in many episodes. Even River finds the ship so well-suited that she declares that it has been more of a home to her than anywhere else ever was (**Objects in Space**).

A good refuge is highly dependent on the era and flavor of a campaign, but some suggestions include: their favorite bar, their shared home, a fortress, a ship, a school, a religious site, their home village, their home planet, their home city, their neighborhood, the home of their order, or a guildhall.

Lesson 7: Invade Their Refuge

So what better thing to threaten than something you've gotten the characters (i.e. your players) fiercely attached to? Where else will the players fight with as much fervor and emotion than in their home?

In the **Firefly** series, control of the ship is threatened in many episodes; none so much as in **Objects in Space** where a high-tech bounty hunter invades the ship 'at night' to capture River and the doctor. He locks most of the crew in their cabins, threatens Kaylee the engineer with unspeakable acts, and has control of the ship for a time. With the edge between life and death so narrow in deep space, losing control of your ship generally portends fatal consequences.

It is just these sorts of situations that bring the best out of characters. Some of the more creative battle plans and spirited fights have occurred defending or recapturing control of the party's refuge.

A refuge can be threatened in many ways: incidentally during larger destructive events like wars, specific invasions by elite characters such as bounty hunters, more forceful invasions by armed groups, threat of authority to take it away with malign intent or simply through the inexorable movements of bureaucracy.

Lesson 8: When Characters Split Up, Create Mini-Plots for Each Group

It was common in the **Firefly** episodes for the ship to land on a planet, some of the group to leave the ship to take care of business, while others stay behind to keep an eye on things. The show did a good job of finding sub-plots to pursue for both groups. Devising sub-plots can be critical to keep your players from being out of the action all session. Don't feel guilty for taking a 5-minute game break to devise an appropriate sub-plot when you didn't see the need coming beforehand.

Sub-plots enable the players to exhibit more free will. They won't feel like they'll have to keep all characters together all the time just to keep the game moving.

In the Jaynestown episode, the Shepherd and River, the doctor's crazy sister, were left behind on the ship. That odd pairing allowed those two characters to interact in a personal way and discover things about each other. The best campaigns encourage growth of characters, not just stats or wealth. (Side-note: Having a character or non-player character with sporadic mental problems is a wonderfully flexible device for creating interesting situations.)

In writing scripts for movies and television, these separate threads are known as the A Plot and B Plot. The A Plot is the important one, the job the group has taken on, for instance. The B Plot is not important to the job, but is more a chance to explore and develop characters.

Some seeds for sub-plots include: having to deal with a minor problem unrelated to the main plot, permitting two characters who experience friction to resolve some of that friction in direct dialogue, allowing characters to pursue private agendas.

Lesson 9: The Past Comes Back to Haunt Them

In the episode **The Message,** we meet Tracy, another person from Mal and Zoe's past, bringing danger and adventure with him. We get a flashback to see how they met in the past and then it's 'on with the show'. In the Jaynestown episode, the crew visits a planet that Jayne had visited before he'd joined Serenity. What he remembered as a failed bank-heist had grown into Robin Hood-like proportions by the local workers who'd found the stolen money.

Don't be afraid to introduce new elements in character's pasts. If you don't, you're cutting off half or more of their life from the possibilities of introducing plots, characters, hopes, dreams, and nightmares. Unless the player specifically objects, filling in parts of their character's past should be a great opportunity. Just make sure that the past brings good with the bad or players won't "fall for it" very often.

Putting a twist on a common theme, like "old enemies" in Jaynestown, draws characters out of their comfort zone. Twisting a character like Jayne is fun because they begin fairly one-dimensionally and have the most empty canvas to work with. This makes their growth more interesting and enjoyable to role-play.

The piece of the past you bring up should not be something trivial to the character, but something they can sink their teeth into; something that illuminates the roads the character has traveled before. Whenever possible, have their pasts tied up with "Big Things". In **Firefly**, Zoe and Mal fought in a galactic war six years before. Giving characters a role in history (even as a foot soldier) gives them depth and a lot more raw material for the game master to use in future adventures.

Lots of adventure hooks can come from the past: Loves, Friends, Enemies, Opportunities, Rivals, Failures, Successes, Family, Old Jobs, and Things that were Lost.

Lesson 4: Take Death Seriously

In the world of role-playing games, it is all too common to have divine 'mulligans' for characters who die, often with little fanfare and insignificant consequences. The universe of **Firefly** is not so forgiving. Many wounds are life-threatening and if you die, you're dead.

In campaigns where death is permanent, it provides much more fertile ground for role-playing for those who were left behind. In The Message, the crew receives a body via the mail. The solemnity and gravity of the crew as they return his body to his home and family is stirring.

Death brings up many issues for characters to deal with: finding the killer, establishing their own innocence, treating the body with respect, finding the proper final resting place, meeting others with a stake the death of the character, and fulfilling deathbed requests.

Lesson II: Support your Mood

In **Firefly** with its purposeful Old West feel, some guns are styled like six-shooters worn on gun belts. There's definitely a "wide-open spaces", agrarian feel to the human settlements in the region. The crew

transports cattle for one episode and in another they rob a train.

The characters are echoes of western stereotypes (the doctor, the preacher, the whore, the gunslinger, the ex-soldiers) and their clothing has a definite Old West influence. Even the authorities, the Alliance Navy, wear military uniforms more reminiscent of American Civil War sailors than the crews of modern battleships.

Players in a campaign should be given a statement up front about the type of mood or theme your campaign will be following. That way they can get into the spirit of things and help make that mood come alive. You should be able to draw on the mood or genre to create adventures and scenes. If it isn't too difficult, even dressing the part can help liven up the gaming session.

Some aspects of your genre that you should be familiar with: Special Language or Slang, Typical Professions, Level of Technology (be it Science or Magic), Typical Adventures, Level of Realism, and Stereotypes that establish the genre.

Lesson 12: Moral Choices

A good game becomes a great game when characters have to deal with moral choices. A moral choice is one where the right answer is not clear. It's the choice between two evils or two goods, not between good and evil. And it isn't about always making the 'right' choice. It's also about dealing with life when you make the wrong one.

In **Shindig**, Malcolm tries to defend Inara's honor when her client treats her poorly. Due to the planet's social codes, he is challenged to a duel for his offense. In **Safe**, Malcolm has to abandon the doctor and his sister so he can get a critically-wounded Shepherd Book to medical care, even though they leave the two in mortal danger.

Some ways to develop moral choices: Two good things need to be done but the party can only handle one, two bad things need to be stopped but the party can only handle one, a very bad thing is going to happen and they have to decide if they'll risk themselves to stop it, or two outcomes are available where one earns them a money reward and the other is more noble with no money.

Lesson 13: Sometimes Danger Finds You

You can't always wait for your players to get into trouble (though some groups have no problem finding it regularly on their own). The world (or universe) is a dangerous place, no matter what genre you're playing, so your campaign needs to remind them of that fairly often.

In **Bushwhacked**, the crew finds a ship that has been attacked by ***Reavers,*** men who travel the fringes of space preying on other ships like cannibals. In Our Mrs. Reynolds, the crew is attacked by a character intent on sending their ship to her comrades to cut it up for salvage. In Out of Gas, they must deal with the dangers of mechanical failure in deep space.

Every genre worth adventuring in has a known set of dangers and enemies that can be used as often as necessary to challenge the party and reinforce the mood. If you never introduce these elements, you're undermining the mood you're trying to create.

These dangers can be both environmental and social: criminals prey upon them, Mother Nature throws them a curveball, they are caught in large political events like wars, assassinations, elections, successions, and so on.

Lesson 14: The Long Arm of the Law

If the players are on the shady side of the law like the crew of the ***Serenity***, its important for 'the Law' to play a frequent role in their adventures. The ***Serenity*** doesn't even bear any ship's weaponry so direct battle isn't a question, but in several episodes, the presence of the Alliance Navy or soldiers affects the crew's choices.

If the party commits crimes, they should be pursued by the authorities, be it immediately like a sheriff and his posse, or later as the wheels of bureaucracy grind mercilessly onward. The doctor and his sister are fugitives from the law so people are always popping up looking for them.

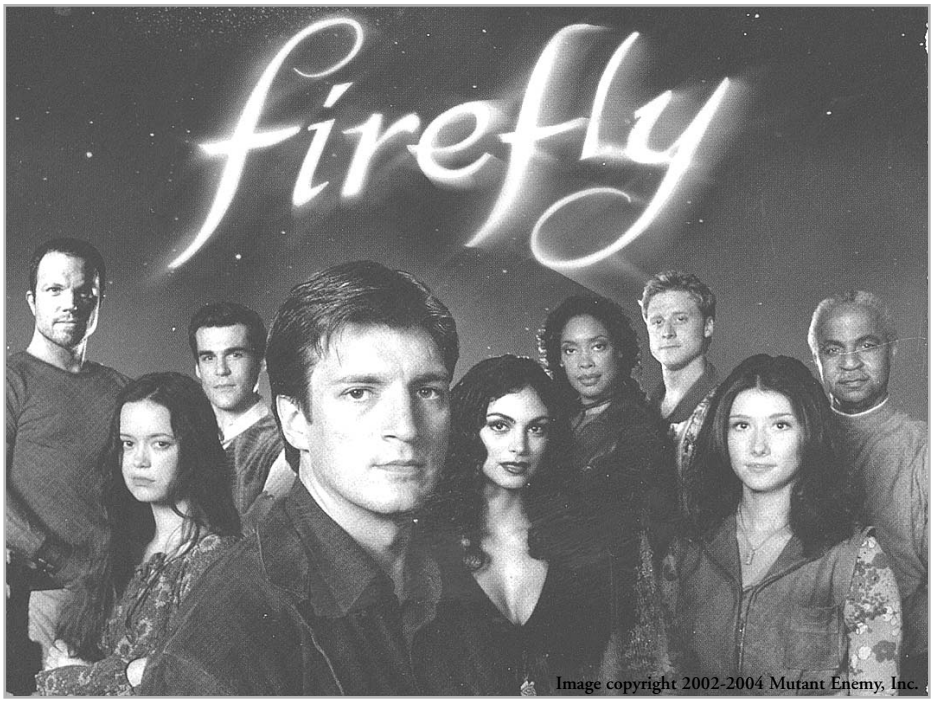
Government troops or other representatives of "authority" can be obstacles or opportunities. In The Train Job, the incidental presence of a car of Alliance soldiers makes the train heist quite a bit more risky. In Safe, only the medical facilities of the Alliance Navy can save the shepherd's life.

When considering the effects of the Law think of: criminal investigations by police, pursuit by government 'sub-contractors' such as bounty hunters, government forces guarding government assets, military units patrolling areas or performing their duties.

Lesson 15: Have Fun with Language

In **Firefly**, the creator decided to tread the treacherous ground of making up his own curse-words. (The last show I can recall doing this was **Battlestar Galactica**, with mixed results). Allowing the characters to utter curses that aren't so blatantly modern, helps sustain the mood and reinforce the campaign flavor. It also adds a reality to the show because people do curse.

Let characters fluent in secondary languages bring them into play, making up the words on the spot if they like. Chinese phrases and exclamations slip into **Firefly** with fair regularity, in spots where it isn't



critical or when the characters need a good exclamatory muttering.

If a player has fluency in a second language or even passing interest, let them bring it to the table. German could work as dwarven and perhaps the elves speak French. Let the players have fun with it.

Areas where language can bring flavor include: curses, exclamations, insults, oaths, formal names and titles, place names, ship names, names for foods or common objects.

Lesson 16: Have Fun with Things

It pays to spend some time describing items of interest in your campaign world. It will enhance the realism and encourage your players to become more invested in the game universe. "**Barford's Sword of Kinship**, forged by the dwarves of Kith-Saal and handed down for seven generations" sounds a little more interesting than "a +1 long sword".

In **Our Mrs. Reynolds**, Jayne brings out an elaborate military weapon and attempts to trade it to his captain. You can see what loving detail has been spent on the weapon. Jayne remembers exactly when he got it and even gave it a name (Vera). You can tell that this is a prized possession for him and gives serious weight to his attempt to barter. Now isn't that more interesting and fun than picking a random weapon off your character sheet?

Giving some personality to things works best for: their ship (anyone heard of the Millennium Falcon?), their weapons (oh, its just a little blade I like to call Excalibur), magic items ("these aren't just any magic boots, my friend…"), and trophies ("I got that horn back wrestling alligators in Australia. Crikey that beast was a bit stroppy!").

Lesson 17: Flashbacks and Cut Scenes are Your Friends

Don't be afraid to fill in tantalizing bits of the past with flashback scenes. These little breaks from the action can be funny, poignant, exciting, or mysterious. **Firefly** uses this technique to great advantage in **Out of Gas**. The writers reveal how all of the main crew members joined the ship and even how Malcolm picked Serenity out in the first place.

Uses for Flashbacks include: introduce new elements into the game, build characters, enhance a plot, and flesh out the world around them.

Like most television shows, **Firefly** used cut scenes in every episode to fill in details, set mood, and move the plot along. Basically, cut scenes could keep the audience right where the writer wants them. In **Heart of Gold**, we are shown the townsfolk and their scheming boss in all his glory. We see how despicable he is and what he's willing to do with his power. That sort of cut scene exposure can help create hatred for a villain or sympathy for a victim.

And sometimes we just have to know what is going on in the other camp. What better way than a cut-scene to heighten the tension or bring clarity to an overly-complex adventure? Cut-scenes do this beautifully, allowing you, as the Gamemaster, to bring all your eloquence to bear and write some killer stuff beforehand rather than making it up on the spot.

Good times to use cut-scenes include: When our heroes are traveling, When the stakes need to be raised, When you need to add mystery, or When you need to clear up some over-complexity.

Lesson 18: Let Them Yield to Temptation

All characters should have weaknesses and you have to give them an opportunity once in awhile to yield to that weakness. It may be minor or it may change the course of the campaign. Jayne, the mercenary, is one greedy S.O.B. He grabs his chance to turn in the ship's resident fugitives in the episode, Ariel, only to find himself in custody as well. Its unclear whether he's changed his ways by the end of the show.

Not every character test needs to end with a great revelation. Seldom should the weakness go away, but perhaps, over time, the character will grow past it. To encourage role-playing, you may consider using a game mechanic to determine when a weakness comes into play, especially if the player would rather just ignore their weaknesses.

Common temptations include: Money, Fame, Love, Lust, Glory, Power, and Status.

Lesson 19: Everyone has a Secret

Adventures aren't any fun without secrets. Characters should have them too. Secrets allow your character to have some mystery, to grow beyond a set of game statistics and a label. Several characters in **Firefly** have secrets that were only slowly being revealed to the audience. These secrets cause surprising results (**Safe**) or create an underlying tension when they aren't revealed.

Secrets are also ideal hooks for plots and adventures. Threaten to reveal a secret and the player can be surprisingly motivated to keep it hidden. Revelation of a secret can shake up a campaign that has otherwise become mundane. Such revelations can also present moral choices for many characters, especially when revelation of the secret would directly affect another character ("Luke, I am your father.")

Common secrets are: Past Deeds, Past Relationships, Current Relationships, Actual Goals, Personal Weaknesses, and Falsehoods.

Lesson 20: Let Everyone Show Their Stuff

Players like to have their characters be competent in their chosen role. They like to feel like their character and their decisions as a player have had a real impact on the success of an adventure or the lives of the characters in the game. It is your job as a Gamemaster to provide those opportunities to them.

It wouldn't be very fair to allow characters with no combat skills into a campaign that is focused on mercenary battles. By the same token, mercenary characters (and their players) would languish in a campaign consisting of a series of mysteries.

For a show with an ensemble of nine characters, it was difficult to find any single episode in which all nine had significant roles. Most gaming groups number a few less than that, so it is a reasonable goal to provide opportunities to as many characters as you can each session.

Look at all of the characters in the party and note their official roles and other areas where they've identified a particular skill focus. If they have a safe-cracking thief, it would not go amiss to have a safe appear every once in awhile.

Keep these details in mind as you craft your adventures. You shouldn't try to tailor everything, but watch that you aren't excluding anyone.

Lesson 21: Everyone Loves a Big Fight

Sometimes you can get a little overwhelmed in plots, sub-plots, and weaving all those role-playing opportunities. Best cure is a big fight! I'm talking a big, rollicking, wide-ranging, scrum. Something where players can get their visceral needs taken care of and what needs to be done is clear.

In **Heart of Gold**, the crew responds to a call for help and ends up defending a bordello from a small army. No great tricks here, just a chance for the combat minded of your players to show their stuff (see Lesson 20). You should make it something they can prepare for and demonstrate their tactical genius to everyone at the table.

The Big Fight doesn't have to be combat, though in most RPGs I've seen, it probably is. Other options for the Big Fight include: the Big Race (good if they have a ship) or the Big Heist (if they aren't legally-inclined).

Lesson 22: Let the Good Guys make a Plan

Everybody likes to tackle something they can have some control over. Jobs like a risky heist have a great opportunity to involve all members of the party as multiple skills will likely be needed to get past various impediments. The players can brainstorm together and problem-solve.

In the episode **Trash**, the crew is presented with an opportunity to steal a rare antique. We get to see them scheming around a table figuring out how they'll get past all the obstacles and get away clean. It looked and sounded so much like a gaming table I began to wonder if the show's creator, Joss Whedon, was a closet gamer.

The key to having a fun planning scene is to make sure that they have enough information about the situation to feel like they can make a reasonable plan. If there are too many unknowns, then the players will feel powerless to address the situation. In Trash, Saffron knew how to get past the security system, Kaylee knew how to reprogram the waste-receptacle, and Mal was able to disable the alarms on the target item. In a gaming situation, you would have to let the players know that their characters know how to get past these security systems, that waste-receptacles are automated and can be reprogrammed, and that alarms can be disabled by methods within the reach of their characters.

One workable solution to this "character knowledge" dilemma is to inform the players that while they are planning they can ask you any yes or no question that their characters might know. Some game systems would have them roll against skills or an attribute, but I don't hold to that too closely.

Lesson 23: Use the Humor

"I'm very much of the 'make it dark, make it grim, make it tough,' but then, for the love of God, tell a joke." - Joss Whedon

I haven't seen a gaming table yet that wasn't rife with puns, inside jokes, and revelry. For me, that's the sign of a good gaming group. Naturally, you don't want the humor non-stop when you're trying to set some non-humorous mood, but if your campaign allows the characters to have senses of humor too, you can co-opt the wise-acres from your players and put them into the mouths of their PCs.

In **War Stories**, Mal and Wash have been captured and are being tortured by a recurring villain. Rather than simply grunt against the pain or spout bravado, the two continue a silly argument that began on the ship at the beginning of the episode, hilarious simply by its incongruity to the scene. The dissatisfied look on the torturers' faces was priceless.

This lesson applies for quotes as well. It is a rare gaming session that doesn't generate some sort of memorable quote, most of them humorous. In our campaigns, characters have been immortalized in the margins of the player's log with the comment that got everyone snorting Mountain Dew out of their nose. Work with that, make sure the good ones get written down for posterity. It can be a source of pride for the player and help deepen the character of the persona she's playing.

Lesson 24: Every Good Deed Gets Punished

A living, realistic world has to live with the rules of Cause and Effect, or in TV-lingo, Repercussions and Continuity. These are the marks of a well-written TV series or a well mastered gaming campaign. Simply put, what happened in the last episode has an effect on this episode. The characters live in a dynamic universe where their actions have consequences, both good and bad.

In **War Stories**, the events of the Ariel episode, unknown to most of the crew, have had an effect on Jayne's behavior (he is mysteriously generous with his share of the loot). The others note this with curiosity, but it doesn't become a big deal. In the same episode, their decision to abandon a previous job has earned them the serious ire of a gangster who captures them.

These repercussions can affect everything. Because you don't have time to create an entire world, be selective about which ones you track. Ones that influence the plot or relationships with NPCs are the most important. Take a moment to decide what the result of last week's adventure would realistically be. Do NPCs change their attitudes? Does anyone make a plan in response to what happened ("Revenge served cold, anyone?")

Changes in a player character should be handled by the player, though feel free to encourage them with rewards for good role-playing when the character grows and matures.

Lesson 25: People Lie

People lie, whether it is for cause, for fun, or just out of habit. Many Gamemasters avoid lies completely and their use should be with caution. But a game where everything the Gamemaster says is 100% accurate isn't as interesting.

Since as GM you are the only source of information they have, they will assume everything you tell them about the world is the truth. You can't start messing with this sort of sensory description or you're players will rebel. Commonly GMs throw doubt into these descriptions at selected times with careful flags "seems like" or "apparently", but these almost warn the players: "There are Lies Ahead!"

The best area you can play with deception is when they are talking to NPCs. Whether you present NPCs by talking in character or in

third person, they can and most certainly will lie. Most will have very good reasons to do so: protecting themselves, protecting others, protecting their wealth and possessions, serving masters who are opposed to the player characters, having a need to make friends, preferring to remain aloof, advancing their own ambitions, and many more.

These NPC deceptions often create more interesting drama as players try to discern the truth. Don't lie about small stuff as players don't need to expend the effort necessary to root it out and it makes the world seem less reliable. Maybe just one or two big lies and they'll have to treat the NPCs with more respect than an ATM of information.

Lesson 26: Use Colorful Non-Player Characters

The world (or the universe) is full of people struggling to make out a reasonable existence, with no greater dreams than having a family and a drink at the pub on Saturday night. Those people are great, but not for a gaming campaign. They are the backdrop against which everything of interest occurs. They are the faceless hordes of humanity that the heroes are saving.

Firefly is loaded with interesting, off-the-wall 'non-player characters'. Saffron is a recurring trouble-maker with a habit of marrying people to gain their trust. The bounty hunter in Objects in Space is an eloquent if somewhat mentally-disturbed personality. In The Train Job and again in **War Stories**, the crew of the ***Serenity*** encounters a sadistic, major underworld figure named Adelei Niska.

It is important to remember that all colorful NPCs don't have to be enemies of our heroes. Sallah in the Indiana Jones movies is a crucial ally. Our friends on the ***Serenity*** meet a few friends or friendly neutrals. The crew obviously has a friendly history with the character Monty who appears in the episode Trash.

And colorful characters aren't just for show. They help the players remember important NPCs in your campaign. Their quirks can give our heroes the edge they need just when they need every edge they can get. River is able to play on the bounty hunter's psychological instability in **Objects in Space** when he obviously outclasses everyone on the ship in combat.

Some ways to make a character colorful are: give the character an unrelated subject that he is obsessed about, give her a flaw which wouldn't make sense for their profession, have him dress in an extremely distinctive fashion, give them an unexpected cultural or social background.

Lesson 27: Give it Some Spice

Strong campaign flavors are fun. Dare to be different and make your campaign something more than your run-of-the-mill fantasy milieu.

With **Firefly** you had a space opera with a distinctive old-west feel to it. It wasn't just another space show with laser guns and aliens. In the **Firefly** "verse" there are only humans, no aliens. Laser pistols exist but are too expensive for the common man so bullets are still used. Even the adventures echoed the western feel: **The Train Job** where they robbed a train, **Heart of Gold** where they defended a bordello from an evil boss, and **Shindig** where there is a fancy dress dance that ends with a duel.

Play around with ideas to make your campaign memorable. Whatever change you decide upon, you should be able to express it one or two sentences and it should be evocative enough for the players to understand right away. Good players will play to this campaign tone, enhancing it.

Lesson 28: Give Them a Job to Do

A situation that can drag down any campaign is when the player characters are bored. Notice, I didn't say the players, though they're likely bored as well. Characters need something to do. When they have a profession and aren't just wandering aimlessly waiting for adventure to smack them in the face, take advantage of it.

Firefly episodes often began with the crew in the middle of a job, transporting cargo, stealing from a derelict ship (**Serenity**), making a deal (**Train Job**) , or resupplying their ship. These activities reinforce the campaign setting and provide a background to introducing adventure elements. It relieves the players of having to think about the basics and keeps them in character more easily.

Starting in the middle of a job or task gives them instant momentum and direction, i.e. finish the job or task. It removes the question of "What do we do now?" which can stump a gaming group more often than you'd imagine.

The activity you select should make sense for the characters individually or as a group. If you like starting a session with a bang, you could have them in the middle of a delicate and dangerous heist, or in the middle of an expected battle. Once the event is resolved, you can fill in why they are there.

Lesson 29: End it Right

For anyone who knows the history of **Firefly**, it had a brief run on television with 16 episodes shot but only 13 ever broadcast. As you might tell, I felt the series was worth far more than that. It was certainly worth a good finale, an opportunity given to very few television series.

Wrapping up a campaign is just as important as wrapping up the story of a television series. It's a gesture of respect and it gives closure to all of those involved. You and your players deserve it and its in your control to provide it. Wrapping up the loose ends provides a certain satisfaction and helps keep you from stringing a campaign on longer than it should go. (Raise your hand if you've seen a great series run into the ground because they didn't know when to stop.)

A campaign finale doesn't mean that the characters can never be used again, but recognizes that the story at hand is done. If they come back together again, it should be for a new purpose, usually separated from the completed campaign by the passage of time and the development of the characters outside of the group.

Summary

Gamemasters can learn from great story-telling from all sorts of media, films, television, novels, comics and more. Television is well-suited due to its episodic nature and reliance on genres and stereotypes to quickly orient the audience. Learning from **Firefly** is a great way to start honing your techniques and making a better campaign for yourself and your players.

I'll leave you with a quote from the creator of **Firefly**: "You take people, you put them on a journey, you give them peril, you find out who they really are. If there's any kind of fiction better than that, I don't know what it is." - Joss Whedon.

Luckily, for those of you who wish to enjoy **Firefly** and get inspired as I have, they've released the whole series as a DVD set, including the three unaired episodes, in the order they were intended to be shown (much different than the actual broadcast order). I highly recommend that you pick it up. In addition, as of July 2004, the original cast was finishing production of the **Firefly** movie called Serenity.