

Through the Wormhole

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The New Media In America

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1 Introduction

Crichton: My name is John Crichton. I'm lost — an astronaut — shot through a wormhole. In some distant part of the universe. I'm trying to stay alive aboard this ship — this living ship of escaped prisoners. My friends. If you can hear me — beware. If I make it back — will they follow. If I open the door — are you ready. Earth is unprepared — helpless — for the nightmares I've seen. Or should I stay and protect my home — not show them — you exist — but then you'll never know the wonders I have seen.

Astronaut John Crichton is the typical American hero of the twenty-first century. He is a geeky but good-looking down-home Southern boy with a Ph.D. in astrophysics and a pickup truck. NASA launches Crichton into space to prove a theory, but his test is interrupted when he is ensnared in a suddenly appearing wormhole. Our hero is whisked across the universe and dropped in the lap of a group of strange alien prisoners just as their plan to escape is coming to fruition. Stealing a living “bio-mechanoid” ship named Moya and starbursting to safety, the ragged group drags Crichton along on an interstellar adventure into the Uncharted Territories.

The new “crew” of Moya is composed of aliens from various cultures. Zhaan, the Delvian, is a freedom-fighter turned priestess. Rygel, the tiny deposed Hynerian dominar, is a shrewd businessman and not to be trusted. D'argo is a young Luxan warrior, a tentacled prisoner of war. The group is joined by Chiana, a Nebari who flees her tyrannical government's attempts to “cleanse” her impure thoughts. Finally there is Aeryn Sun, a Sebacian and a Peacekeeper. The Sebacians, a race very similar to humans, have built a militaristic society and appointed themselves protectors of other species — for a suitable price or tribute. These Peacekeepers are locked in a cold war with the Scaarans, an animal-like race with superior strength and numbers.

None of the aliens are together voluntarily, but least of all is Aeryn, who was torn away from her species when her contact with Crichton made her “irreversibly contaminated.” Additional aliens join up and leave along the way as

the group explores the deepest regions of the Uncharted Territories while being constantly pursued, first by Peacekeeper commander Crais, and later by Peacekeeper/Sebaccian hybrid Scorpius. While Crais first wants Crichton because of a misunderstanding, the Peacekeepers step-up their pursuit of the elusive human after they discover that he has unlocked the secrets of wormholes and can harness their near-unlimited power to create a weapon that could turn the tide of the war.

Crichton's story is a futuristic retelling of the classic "fish out of water" tale. Our all-American farm boy proves that humans can survive, even in alien surroundings, using only their wits, intelligence, and biting humor. *Farscape* builds on a familiar theme, but it is in no way a familiar television show. The show appears on the "cool" medium of television, but it provides "hot" visuals, an intense and stunning visual environment that is always in flux. But if the show is "hot" in visual style, its storytelling is decidedly "cold." *Farscape* writers take advantage of the disjointed nature of television to create stories that are jarring, with strategically placed plot holes and misdirections that cause the viewer to use his imagination to fill in the details. This backwardness is not just confined to the story, it permeates the entire show. From financing to production to writing to characters, *Farscape* turns traditional notions of television on their head. *Farscape* is a powerful view into the future of television art because of its broad reach, decentralized nature, local creative control, and its willingness to change the tried and true rules of both storytelling and broadcasting to achieve a new and innovative result as befits our new creative world.

2 A Different Pitch

Crichton: *Flying through wormholes ain't like dusting crops, farm boy. It takes a little finesse.*

Farscape began life as a standard television pitch, but it was different from traditional network shows. The show was proposed by the Jim Henson Company in an attempt to prove that its Creature Shop could produce more than

just muppets. Originally entitled Space Chase, *Farscape* was picked up by the SciFi Channel, a cable outlet, in an interesting and somewhat unprecedented agreement which called for SciFi financing half the costs of production. Henson maintained complete creative control of the show, and signed distribution deals with networks in several countries, with the majority of the additional funding coming from Germany and the United Kingdom. Production commenced in Australia, and soon the entire creative team was relocated as well. Creative responsibility stayed in Oz, and U.S.-based SciFi had no say whatsoever in production.

Joshua Meyrowitz in *No Sense of Place* discusses the notion of “Least Objectionable Programming,” or LOP. Meyrowitz notes that traditional network programming is conceptualized by committee, and designed so as to be as inclusive as possible and tame enough that it will not cause any widespread anger or discontent. In this process, a lot of the real artistic creativity is lost. The networks know their audiences. Meyrowitz points to studies that suggest as few as 1/3 of viewers watch hour long programs all the way to the end. However, a program like *Farscape* is difficult to understand if not watched from beginning to end. A little too much channel-hopping, and a viewer could miss a critical piece of dialog. However, *Farscape* is not targeted solely at U.S. markets. Fifty percent of the revenues from the show come from non-U.S. airing, so the producers do not necessarily have as much of an incentive to conform their show to the United States market.

One thing that *Farscape* and Meyrowitz agree on is that a television show cannot be narrowly targeted to one segment. While SciFi might bill itself as science fiction (although that is doubtful, looking at the network’s current programming line-up), anyone can view the channel. In fact, *Farscape* viewers straddle every conceivable market measure and grouping. More than most shows, *Farscape* appeals to a wide audience. The show is seen at night in the U.S., but it is on in the evening in Britain and is shown on a children’s network in Canada. The show does, after all, have muppets, although the creatures are far more complex, both in characterization and presentation, than their Muppet

Show counterparts.

If television is almost completely devoid of access controls, this is further amplified by international distribution. If the BBC sees *Farscape* as mainstream entertainment while it is a niche program in the U.S. and a children's show in Canada, there is no clearer demonstration of the cross-marketability of television programs — even programs containing sex, violence, swearing, and occasional nudity. While networks attempt to distinguish themselves based on thematic content, shows like *Farscape* have an ability to cross divides such that they defy a clear categorization. The very idea of cable television and specialized channels seems to break down in the face of such programs. Were Meyrowitz to have written his book today, in an age of digital cable, DirecTV, and increasingly specialized channels, he might have a few things to say.

3 Parliamentary Approval

Crichton: *Screw'em Zhaanie. You're a tenth level Pa'u [priestess], you get to eleven, we get a TV ministry.*

Author and Shakespeare professor Paul Cantor recently commented in an article in *Reason Online* that, “we’re moving into an age where economics will trump politics” with regard to media. Cantor has analyzed the portrayal of globalization on television in his recent book *Gilligan Unbound*. Cantor contends that television is being affected by globalization, most specifically in terms of its stories, but also in other aspects of its creative development.

Farscape is an interesting case because so many species have been introduced, from the Peacekeepers with their military efficiency, to the Nebari with their mental cleansing, to the Scaarans with their animal ruthlessness. *Farscape* recognizes that there is no one true enemy, no specific race to be vilified. It goes further, however, showing the back stage functioning of these various groups, and shedding light on their action in the context of events and political situations that many other shows would overlook. The message of *Farscape* seems to be that no one is truly evil, but no one is really good either.

The multi-cultural society of *Farscape* represents more than just the real world. As one of the first of a new breed of “globalized” shows, *Farscape*, with its reliance on funding from multiple sources, is, to some extent, operating under a parliamentary authority. The show can only exist by fostering enough support among enough groups that a coalition can form to fund and distribute it. Like the delicate peace between the Peacekeepers and the Scaarans, *Farscape* exists because of cooperation among several media entities, SciFi and EM.TV (the owners of Henson) being only the most prominent. In this case, SciFi funds 50% of the show, meaning that a decision by that network could (and, in fact, did) take the show off the air. However, it is easy to imagine a future where one or even a group of networks pulling out of the show would not end it. Sure it might be scaled back in reach and budget, but the show could survive, and possibly work to create a new and larger coalition.

It is ironic that the action of SciFi was what took the show off of the air, for the United States, unlike other countries in which *Farscape* is distributed, does not have a parliamentary government. But this one action is not enough to dismiss the idea of parliamentary television shows. *Farscape* was successful as a multi-national television show for four years, and it was only the short-sighted action of a U.S. network in search of redefinition that killed the highly successful and critically acclaimed show.

4 Crichton As Everyman

Crichton: *Have we sent the “don’t shoot us we’re pathetic” transmission yet?*

Meyrowitz postulates that television shows are successful when they provide “backstage” looks into characters and events that make the audience feel involved as “insiders.” While Owens’ theories seem to apply more readily to situation comedies than to science fiction, applying his ideas to *Farscape* proves an interesting exercise. John Crichton, the only human character, is portrayed as the everyman character. He is lost in a scary land, but he does his best to survive by holding on to what he remembers of his life. Crichton uses “touchstones”

to keep himself sane, and the majority of these touchstones are pop-culture references. In fact, Crichton most often uses television references to explain his feelings and situations.

Crichton has referenced all four programs discussed by Cantor in *Gilligan Unbound*, some repeatedly. In addition to the occasional *Star Trek* or *Simpsons* reference, Crichton also enjoys programs as diverse as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Oprah*. He likes to nickname his alien friends using characters and references from real life. Crichton's pulse pistol is Wynona, while he calls one character Mr. Burns. Chiana becomes Pip, and Rygel gets a number of exciting monikers, including Buckwheat and Sparky. Even Scorpius is not immune — John calls him Grasshopper.

As befits the international nature of the show, Crichton's jokes are not limited to North America. Our fearless hero interrupts bouts of being beat up with British references and the occasional bit of dialog in other languages (usually Spanish).

When Crichton is not referring to other television shows, he is imitating them. But unlike the idealized liberal influence of the 60s as depicted in *Star Trek*, Crichton's Kirk-like forays into planetary politics are rarely met with success. In fact, one such interaction results in him being transformed into a statue for 80 years, not quite the same outcome one would expect from the great captain of the Enterprise.

As Crichton becomes more comfortable in his surroundings and more sure of his powerful position after he discovers his wormhole knowledge, he begins to act more American. At one point, our hero builds himself a small thermonuclear device and crashes a political negotiation. Asked why he has come, Crichton replies that he comes, "because I am an American." As an American, he continues, he wants to promote capitalism. He will sell him wormhole knowledge to the highest bidder. John's behavior is utterly bewildering to the aliens, but one thing that they do understand is money. Even at the far end of the galaxy, cold hard currency is always understood.

This recognition on *Farscape* that capitalism will be the dominant political-

economic force of the future is very telling. In fact, there are no species in the series that prosper on anything other than capitalism. The Peacekeepers are blatant in their fascist control, but they also employ a wide variety of mercenaries. Doctors operate only for profit, all officials can be bribed, and even Zhaan, the benevolent priestess, is not always immune to the pernicious influence of money. Contrast the money-free utopia of Star Trek for interesting results.

Crichton as everyman brings with it the Universe as everywhere. Be it next door or across the galaxy, *Farscape* tells us that there is no idealistic Utopian world to be found. Every place has its seedy underbelly. For every beautiful castle in the clouds, there is a dark conspiracy, and for every dirty commerce planet there is a good and caring shopkeeper. Everywhere in the world there are all kinds of people, *Farscape* says, and no matter where you go you should always be both tolerant and constantly on guard. The world is an exciting and adventurous and scary place, but most of all it is a place full of people looking out for themselves and only themselves.

5 Life In the Big City

Crichton: *Human. It's kinda like Sebacean, but we haven't conquered other worlds yet, so we just kick the crap out of each other.*

For his first year in space Crichton will wear nothing but his NASA uniform. As he begins to assimilate into his new surroundings, Crichton changes. His speech and mannerisms morph as he begins to use select alien words and gestures. He leaves his uniform for more alien garb, and eventually takes a pulse pistol of his own.

Crichton's sole purpose at first is to go home, but soon he begins to develop friendships and bonds with his crew mates. As he learns the place and the technology, Crichton begins to feel more at home. Couple this with a few alien encounters on simulated or imagined Earths with bad consequences, and Crichton's craving for home dulls considerably. When he finally gets back home, Crichton quickly realizes that his true home is with his friends aboard Moya.

Being in space, exposed to so many great experiences, Crichton finds home dull and the people around him intolerant and unaccepting.

Crichton's quest mirrors our quest for globalization. The world of Gilligan was one where any group of Americans could replicate American life anywhere in the world, and foreigners were strange and unwelcomed. Similar was *Star Trek*, with its Federation of Planets and a noble quest to explore strange new worlds and make first contact. Fast-forward to the 90s and we have the Simpsons, a small-town family confronted with the signs of a global village. Along side *The Simpsons* we have *The X-Files* with a strong expression of society's mistrust for shadowy and mysterious governments. Now move to the 2000's, and we have *Farscape*, a world where everyone accepts that people are different and moves on. Blue people are just as natural as brown people in the *Farscape* world. John finds two foot slugs more endearing than his own species. While the people of Earth see little Rygel on his floating throne as an interesting and scary object of study, John sees him as just another person.

Farscape tells us that the global village is a natural place, and people are people. John can't stand Earth because of our lack of understanding of the universe, but at the same time he ignores the many ways in which the universe mirrors Earth. *Farscape*'s characters constantly stereotype others. "He is a Luxon," they might say, "not to be trusted." In *Farscape* we can see the same social influences as we have everywhere on Earth. In *The Simpsons* Homer wants to rid the town of immigrants, but not Apu. In *Farscape*, we are taught to dislike a species, until we happen to befriend one of them and realize they're not all so bad.

Is Earth not ready, as John Crichton believes, or are we just as advanced as his beloved aliens? *Farscape* is a world of constant violence, only it is between species instead of races. Is Earth truly not ready to "look upwards, and see the wonders [he's] seen"? We are left to wonder.

6 It's Cold In Space

Crichton: *They have worlds out there, people that you wouldn't believe. But they do not have chocolate.*

Marshall McLuhan pioneered many fundamentals of media studies in his book *Understanding Media*. One of McLuhan's particularly interesting ideas was that of "hot" and "cool" mediums. Television is a cool medium because it is a low-definition medium that is not overwhelming, either visually or aurally. This is in contrast to movies, which are hot owing to the massive screens and Technicolor and surround sound experiences. *Farscape* takes full advantage of the coolness of television as a medium, even bending McLuhan's definition at times. The show is often described in critical reviews and individual comments as "visually stunning." The producers of the show early on decided that the best way to conserve limited resources was to make several general-purpose sets and redress them to represent the many aspects of the ship that must appear in each episode. At the same time, the camera-work is always fluid, with the lens constantly moving as characters stand, walk, or run down corridors. The same hallway of Moya is shot from dozens of angles in each episode. Because the ship itself is meant to be consistent, there can be only one quarters set that is redressed whenever a character must be seen in his or her room. In this way, *Farscape* producers were able to focus on creating beautiful and artful sets, and then reusing them in innovative ways with only subtle embellishments. Because of the low-definition of television, the audience does not really notice the frequent use.

The show is also effective when it forces a viewer to use his imagination to interpolate size and dimension. The show always starts with one establishing shot of Moya flying through space, frequently followed by someone running down a hallway. First we see the calm and massive beauty, and then the urgent action. While *Farscape* somewhat breaks the traditional definitions of a "cool" program through its visuals (even more so when seen on high-quality DVD), the show shifts the paradigm by cooling down its stories.

Farscape writers are somewhat unique in their penchant for telling a clear and concise story with minimal background and exposition. The viewer is left to imagine the intervening scenes and reconstruct the backstory. This serves both to draw in the viewers and to make future storytelling easier, because so much canon can be avoided until it is needed. The intensity of the stories coupled with the lack of full exposition means that the story is neither hot nor cool, but perhaps luke-warm. The show can be both stunning and intriguing at once thanks to the availability of digital effects, the better contrast of new televisions coupled with stereo sound, and fact that the show can be released on DVD.

7 Conclusion

Crichton: *Boy, was Spielberg ever wrong. Close Encounters my ass.*

Astronaut John Crichton's adventures in *Farscape* are strongly influenced by the increasingly globalized world of the early twenty-first century. The show teaches tolerance coupled with wariness coupled with a strong sense of self-preservation. The strange and contradictory lessons of *Farscape* reflect the tumultuous world in which we live today.

The show itself is not the only thing that reflects our world, the manner in which it is produced is equally important. *Farscape* entered the stage as one of the first truly global shows, conceptualized in Britain but produced in Australia with its primary funding coming from the United States. *Farscape* crossed social and cultural boundaries and was classified very differently in different cultures, appearing on a children's network in Canada, in the evening in Britain, and at night in the United States, while being shown only sporadically in Australia. The show was distributed to several countries, and the cost of original production was shared by many groups, not just one major network or studio.

Farscape was free fo creative meddling from a U.S. network, and as a result it was more artistic and less worried about offending then many other United States shows. *Farscape* was a wonderful four-year experiment in globalization that succeeded brilliantly. In fact, the locals maintained so much control over the

series that, even when SciFi chose to cancel the series on the last day of season four production, the network would not go so far as to cut out the cliffhanger that ended the last episode.

It is with great sadness that over one million loyal and devoted fans have had to say goodbye to *Farscape*, and tens of thousands have refused to do so, staging an expensive and protracted battle in the media and on the Internet to save their show. If *Farscape* is a social experiment, it is an amazing and brilliant one, and a wonderful sign of things to come as more small networks look to create original series without the huge expense that have traditionally restricted such action to the major network players. The future is bright, and John Crichton is still out there, searching, exploring, discovering strange new world, seeking out new life and new civilizations, and getting his ass kicked every day along the way. And that is how it should be. Welcome to our brave new world of television.