Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game as Liminal Space

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Abstract
There have always been television shows, and films, that from their inception are labelled as 'cult' programme that are usually associated with fringe fandoms. Not surprisingly, the transmedia (video games, board games, novelizations, etc.) and products (collector dolls, stills, other collectibles) of these shows/films recognise the liminal space that they occupy, and appeal to a very specific audience/marketing demographic. This can perhaps be most clearly seen in male oriented television shows and their translation to video games. The realm of role playing has for the most part, been a male dominated arena, whether it's traditional role playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *Magic*. So what can be made of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* board game (Milton Bradley, 2000), based a show with a strong female protagonist that has it's roots in the male dominated role playing genre? I will explore the ways in which the game explore and reject gender stereotypes, whether or not the board game is "coded" for gender, and if so, how does this compare to the target audience of the show, how the game navigates and transverses the boundaries of both the source text, and the source genre.

Keywords: RPGs, Board Games, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Cult Television, Liminal Space, Feminism, Gender Roles, Transmedia, Ritual, Creative Play.

If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism (Joss Whedon in Bellafonte and McDowell 1997).

Buffy Background

When *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* premiered in 1997, it quickly became a symbol and outgrowth of the Girl Power movement of the 1990s.[1] According to the show's creator Joss Whedon, 'The very first mission statement of the show was the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it' (Gottlieb 2002). Buffy's embodiment of power is evident from the opening credits, particularly in season one of the series where an unknown narrator speaks the lines:

Into every generation a slayer is born: one girl in all the world, a chosen one. She alone will wield the strength and skill to fight the vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness; to stop the spread of

their evil and the swell of their number. She is the Slayer.

The idea of the Slayer as power resonates throughout, with each season being defined by Buffy facing off against the 'Big Bad' and exerting her unique power to trimph over them; the Master in season one, the Anointed in two, the Mayor in season three, Adam in four, Glory in five, the Nerd trio/Warren in six, and Caleb/The First in seven. Each season was built around Buffy having the power to defeat these 'Big Bads', with the final season culminating in sharing her Slayer power with a number of young women; thus sharing her Girl Power.

What then are we to make of the existence of a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* role-playing board game (RPG)? As a male coded game that uses the ultimate Girl Power character for its source material, is it simply an extension of Whedon's desire to introduce men to feminism in a way that is palatable to them? Or does the existence of the board game represent

more complicated issues? I argue that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* occupies a liminal space because of the border between gender roles that it inhabits, as well as for the liminal nature of gaming itself. Further, I will argue that as a paratext the game also occupies a liminal space, operating in relation to the source material of the television show whilst also opening the text to other potential narratives[2].

Role Playing Games (RPGs)

RPGs are considered 'coded' male due to the impression that the majority of role-playing gamers are male. However, as Figure 1 illustrates, women are just as likely to play role-playing games as men. In an analysis of the role of women in gameplay, Arne Schröder examines the in-game appearance of female characters and argues that what often codes these games as male are the 'underlying rules, character interactions and quest structures of the games' (2008).

Likewise, the most recnt demographics from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) (see Figure 2) show that women are almost equal with men in video game play. Therefore, a female who participates in RPGs occupies a borderland space between fact, and perception. The space they navigate is between what they know to be true through experience, and what society defines as the norm.

Devin Proctor argues that video games take on the importance of ritual and that 'in liminal space, all who exist are blank slates, so they may adopt the identity and properties the ritual bestows on them' (Proctor 2012, 177). As with RPGs, players of video games often begin play by taking on a blank slate avatar, which they then create and use to establish their game identity. These identities give the player a 'firmer understanding of his or her place within the game space' (Proctor 2012: 178). Video games, and role-playing games involve the creation of a persona, participation in a ritual as 'the process by which [...] archetypes of Self are managed' (Proctor 2012: 179), and the change that results from the persona taking part in the ritual. As Gretchen L. DeHart points out,
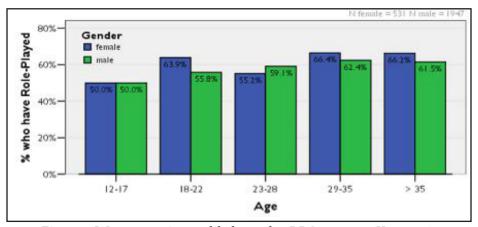

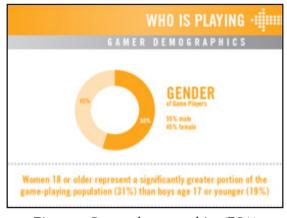Figure 1: Women are just as likely to play RPGs as men (Yee 2006).

Figure 2: Gamer demographics (ESA).

this participation in play is necessary to define identity (2008). Proctor states that 'If liminality is achieved through ritual practice, and game space is liminal space, then gaming can be approached as ritual' (2012: 180). However, with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game*, the identity the player creates/inhabits is unique.

RPGs and Liminal Space

As DeHart argues, people who play RPGs are often characterized as geeks, freaks, losers, and misfits (2008). In part, this is attributed to to a misrepresentation of who the players of these games are, and the conception the general public has of these players. While this characterisation began with traditional in person RPGs, some of these characterisations have transferred to video game RPGs such *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)[5]. DeHart cites public concerns that playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Vampire* would lead to satanic or cultish behavior as well as criminal activity (DeHart 2008: 5). The historical basis for this is the case of James Dallas Egbert III who disappeared into steam tunnels located on the campus of Michigan State University on August 15, 1979. The family hired a private detective, William Dear, to find him. Dear theorized that it was Egbert's play of *Dungeons and Dragons*, and the dangerous potential to become absorbed in the game, which led to him losing touch with reality; as opposed to potential mental illness and drug use. Despite the fact that it was later proved that Egbert had little exposure to the game, and had multiple psychological issues, it was a corollary that the press latched onto.

This story was followed in 1982 by the suicide of Irving Pulling, whose mother publicly announced that it was her son's playing of *Dungeons and Dragons* that led to his suicide, despite evidence that he had only played the game a couple of times (DeHart 2008: 63). These high profile events, along with the 'moral panic' that there were Satanic cults[6] lurking in mainstream America during the 1980s, became intertwined in the minds of the general public. Later, a prominent argument against RPGs became that they were too violent and psychologically damaging to the people who played them, resulting in violent behavior and suicide (DeHart 2008: 65). DeHart argues

that 'this perception of the "dangerous" nature of the games could also be evidence for the fact that the games are creating the necessary distance from social strictures to create a true liminal state' (2008: 75). The very nature of gaming creates 'a place where the ordinary strictures of society are temporarily abandoned' (DeHart 2008: 82).

DeHart suggests that the player deals with dual-realities within the game; that of their real world identity, and the fictional personas they adopt (2008). In most RPGs, players create and then adopt a persona, first choosing a race (elf, halfing, human), and then a class (fighter, magic user). For some games, these choices are aided/dictated through the use of character sheets (see Figure 3). These categories then determine the character's actions during play. The next step in creating a persona is to create a personal backstory for this character, which in conjunction with the character sheets, determine how the character will react to the narrative told by the Gamemaster. For example, backstories might explain why a character betrays others during the adventure/quest, or why they are unwilling to go into a dark, confined space. In conjunction with the narrative the Gamemaster has laid out, the motivations of the characters determines the course of the game (DeHart 2008: 9-10).

Along with character development and the Gamemaster's narrative, dice are an integral part of the game that are used as 'randomizing elements' (DeHart 2008: 14). The dice introduce a sense of risk and unpredictability into the narrative, as well as move the gameplay from a single narrative (that of the Gamemaster) to a group narrative where the actions of each character are vital to play. RPGs have a rigid framework and specific expectations that regulate play. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* is in a unique space, following some of this framework while discarding other elements. Confirming De Hart's argument, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* players, and fans of the television show, are often seen as outsiders due to the latter's cult status.[7] Violence and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are intrinsically linked,[8] but the television show has also been read as inherently dangerous due to the material dealing with demons and vampires and evil.[9] Likewise, when playing the game, players deal with DeHart's dual

Figure 3: *Dungeons and Dragons* Character Sheet.

realities, by occupying both the role of the character (their interpretation of the character of the show) as well as their role as player.

How the Buffy Board Game Navigates this Space

There actually does exist a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* RPG where players follow regular RPG rules. There is a Gamemaster who writes the narrative and guides play. Players create character sheets (see Figure 4), that while guided by and build on the source material from the show, are not limited to any particular season's story arc; instead, the RPG can incorporate not only the seven seasons of the televised show, but also the events of the season eight comics. Gameplay of a traditional RPG is lengthy, and can go on for weeks, or even months, as the Gamemaster directs the players in the narrative. The focus of the game is on continuous play and incorporating new elements into the game. One of the appeals of these long term RPGs is that they extend beyond the canon, with the Gamemaster (GM) and the players participating in an activity similar to that of fan fiction. The narrative of the game allows players to add to the canon, inventing events, stories and character development, that while often grounded in canon (the show and
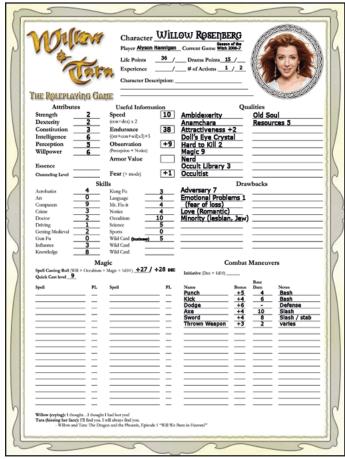

Figure 4: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (RPG) Character Sheet.

comics), often takes the characters and stories in directions not originally envisioned.

The cover of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game*[10] (Figure 5) represents itself as a board game for fans of the show. The cover places the character of Buffy prominently at the center, with the supporting characters of the Master, Angel, Spike, Drusilla, and Angel surrounding her. The fact that it is labelled as a board game, and not an RPG, gestures toward the game's desire to appeal to a larger market. In fact, the marketing seems specifically aimed at fans, not necessarily RPG players. It can also be read as an attempt, as Whedon states, to 'make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening' (Bellafonte and McDowell 1997). While Whedon was referring to the show, the board game can also be read in the same way – it is a board game, marketed to fans of the show, but with RPG rules and expectations; something the players only learn once opening the game to begin play[11]. This juxtaposition of a male-oriented game genre with a female oriented source material achieves Whedon's stated objective.

When players open the game, there are a myriad of pieces and parts, much more so than with a traditional board game. The initial focus, as with RPGs, is on character. Players can first choose sides – one of the Big Bads from seasons one to four (the Master, the Judge, the Mayor, or Adam), or Buffy's side. Next, players must choose a specific character. From the Big Bad side a player can choose the Master, Bad Faith, Veruca, Adam, the Judge, the Mayor, demon Mayor, Kathy, Werewolf Oz, Harmony, Vamp X, Angelus, Drusilla, Mr. Trick, Darla, or Spike. Players can also choose one of the 'Scooby Gang'; Oz, Angel, Willow, Xander, or Buffy.

Once the players have chosen their characters, the story of the game is then determined by which Big Bad the Gamemaster chooses as the focus (Figure 6). Each Big Bad has a separate set-up of characters, a chosen artefact, a set of objectives for the Evil and Good pawns, and an overarching story idea. The Gamemaster does not have as much responsibility as in a traditional RPG as the storyline (here called the objective), is already laid out for the players.

The game has several sets of cards (Research, Artifacts, Evil, Help, and Weapons) as well as dice (Fight, Movement, Majik, Evil). The blue movement dice determines how many spaces a character can move on the board. When a character is in a space adjacent to an enemy character, they can fight them, and the fight dice determines whether they can punch/kick/jab, stake them, or a werewolf/vampire
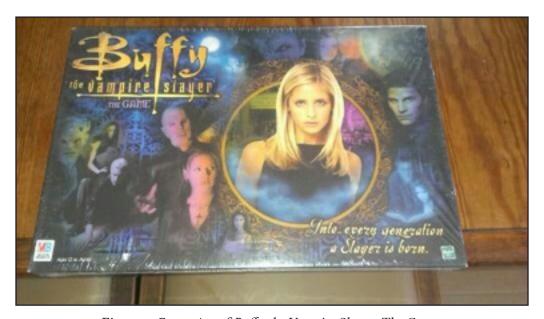

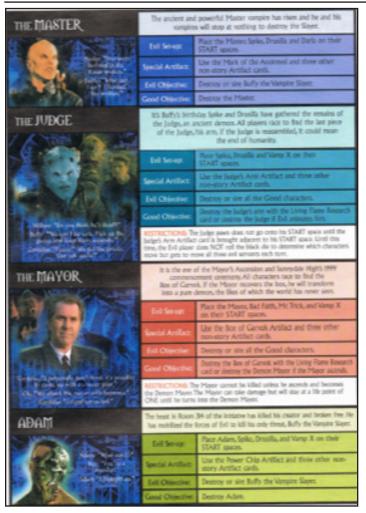Figure 5: Cover Art of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game*.

Figure 6: 'Big Bad' Character Outlines. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game.*

can use fangs to attack. These attacks deduct points from a character's life track. Each character starts with a life track that determines how much life they have – for instance, the Master has 20, Buffy has 12, and Willow and Xander both have 5. When a character's life token drops into the lighter-colored area of their life track, that character is considered wounded. When a character's life reaches 'X', they are considered injured to the point of death and are out of the game.

The game begins with Evil going first, then the Scooby Gang, moving clockwise around the board (see Figure 7). Each character has a specific start point that references the show, with Buffy and Faith starting in the cemetery, Spike in the mausoleum, and so on. The character rolls the movement dice, and based on where they land, can take further action. For example, black spots draw an Evil card, red spots a Weapons card, blue spots a Help card,

and yellow spots a Research card (Figure 8). Landing on a manhole cover allows players to take a shortcut through the sewers. The movement dice also control the 'Phase Chart' which determines how many Evil cards Evil characters can draw, whether or not were-wolf characters change, and whether or not vampire characters have to seek shelter indoors.

The game progresses, with characters fighting, gathering research and artefacts, until the Good characters or the Evil characters achieve their objectives. The gameplay is shorter than traditional RPGs and there is no open story; there is a set objective, hence ending, to gameplay.

The differences between the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* and traditional RPGs speaks to its intent, and to its audience. The target audience is not gender specific, as the target is fans of the shows, which cross gender lines, and covers a rather broad age range. The intent is to allow these fans to inhabit the space of the show. The desire to inhabit a fictional world is the same in both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* as with traditional RPGs, however, the difference is in who the players choose to inhabit, and in what they inhabit. Players do not create a character that inhabits a specific world; rather players inhabit a specific character favourite, and thus the world of Sunnydale.

As in role-playing and video games based on source material, players may choose characters based on their preference for the character, not necessarily along gender roles[13]. Therefore, a female player may choose a male character such as Spike, Angel, or Oz, or a male player may choose Darla, Buffy, or Veruca. However, this choice may have more to do with their familiarity with the show's material, and a preference for a particular character, than it does to conforming to social gender norms. In fact, sex is notably absent from the game[14]. The majority of the character stands/images are not sexualised in any way (the exception is Faith's character image, and it should be noted it is Bad Faith and not normal Faith that is depicted), and there are no storylines that involve romance or sex. The focus is instead on the 'quest' objectives of the game (Schröder 2008). Also, the board game only follows the story's plot until season four, so there is no reference to Willow's homosexuality.

Figure 7: The Game Board. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game.*

Figure 8: Gameplay. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game.*

The game then avoids many of the gender and sexuality issues that other RPGs often encounter, such as female characters presented as sexual ideals, conforming to standard gender roles, or female characters serving as subservient to male ones. The female characters in the board game are not mere objects – Buffy, Willow, Drusilla, Veruca, Harmony, Kathy, and Darla are endowed with more fight skills (represented by how many Fight dice they get to roll at a single turn) and more magic (again represented by how many Majik dice they can roll) than any of the men, except for the Big Bad characters (Demon Mayor, The Judge, Werewolf Oz, The Master, and Adam). The Big Bad characters are set above, not because they are men, but because in the series they are more powerful. While in RPGs players 'seem to use fictional role-playing games to perform archetypical versions of masculinity' (Schröder 2008: 250) the Buffy board game counters this notion. Gender roles in the game defy gender stereotypes as players do not perform to archetypical masculinity; there are no sexualized portrayals of women; and women do not perform a decorative function (Schröder 2008: 253). In this way, the game occupies a liminal space, as it negotiates gender roles between typical RPGs, and the roles presented in the source material of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

The escapism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* lies in inhabiting a specific character from the show. In this case, the 'hyper-identity' that the player assumes is not a created persona, but that of fan of a specific character/side. DeHart states that game play allows people 'the liminal space to share the social worlds defining our identities' (DeHart 2008: 2). The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* game differs from other RPGs in that players are not creating personas so much as taking on known personas. There is no need to create a backstory, as these are provided by the show. The player doesn't have to wonder how a character will react; rather, this behaviour is already dictated by their past behaviour on the show. When DeHart argues that 'Creativity, and creative play, is a necessary and healthy function of human behavior and culture that offers ways to explore personal identity and societal mores' (2008: 82), she is referencing the persona that a role-player creates and takes on during play. However, I would argue, in the case of

the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* the identity that the player takes on is that of fan, and not of the character. It is impossible to play the game without prior knowledge of the show, as this prior knowledge takes the place of character sheets and backstories of normal RPG play. This knowledge is a way of showing fandom, and choice of character (Scooby or Big Bad?) is a reflection of which fandom you belong to, rather than which persona (character) you actually wish to play. According to DeHart, play allows players to 'redefine a sense of "self" outside of cultural judgments, and challenge world-views and "meta-frames" of thought' (DeHart 2008: 95). Fans are often seen as outside the norm, and depending on the fandom, there can be divides even within the fandom[15]. Players of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* identify themselves first as fans, and this identification helps them to redefine themselves. In the case of fans of the television show, the series acts outside of cultural norms and judgments by creating a world where magic is real, as are vampires, demons, and werewolves. Episodes function outside of the real world; problems and issues can be addressed and viewed with distance, allowing fans to analyse and integrate the ideas into their own framework. Episodes such as 'Normal Again' in season six[16] challenge the very reality of the show, and 'Who Are You' in season four, which began the storyline of Willow's homosexuality, challenged fans to accept Willow's new sexual identity. While these episodes are not part of the board game's objectives or stories, the idea of inhabiting the world of Buffy through board game play functions in the same way as DeHart discusses, by causing players to 'redefine a sense of 'self" outside of cultural judgments, and challenge world-views and "metaframes" of thought' (DeHart 2008: 95).

If 'games are not just "ritual actions allowing us to symbolically enact the patterns that give meaning to our lives," but are gradually becoming ritual actions that enact actual patterns in our lives' (Janet Murray in Proctor 1998: 178), then fan play of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game* combines several rituals at once. There is the ritual of watching episodes combined with the ritual of fandom, working together in the play of the RPG, which in itself is a ritual. The constructed identity of being a fan, for many, gives meaning to people's lives. The patterns associated

with being a fan, for instance participating in discussion boards, attending conventions and gameplay, come to enact patterns in fans' lives. Thus, before even playing the game, fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* occupy a liminal space, and by playing the game, enter another form of liminal space.

　　Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Game represents an intersection of liminal spaces: due to its treatment of gender roles; the fact that gameplay inhabits a liminal space; the adoption of personas that cause the gameplayer to occupy a liminal space; and identification as 'fan'. In many ways, the game participates in a 'bait and switch'; targeting one audience with marketing, while forcing players to inhabit another as they play. In this way, the board game is the embodiment of what Whedon, quoted at the beginning of this piece, states his goals were with the show – both showcasing a strong female character, and getting players to participate 'without their knowing that's what's happening' (Bellafonte and McDowell 1997). As scholarship continues to focus on gender roles in media and their fluidity, as well as the fluid nature of cyberspaces and gameplay, I think it is worth exploring genres that currently occupy liminal space in regards to identity creation as well as analyzing these larger, connected spaces of transmedia.

Notes

[1] For more on Buffy's transition into television as a signifier of girl power, see: Moss, G. (2001) 'From the Valley to the Hellmouth: Buffy's Transition from Film to Television', *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*, vol. 1.2, March. Online at: http://slayageonline.com/Numbers/slayage2.htm.

[2] For more on paratexts, see Jason Mittell's 'Orienting Paratexts' in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition (MediaCommons Press, 2012-13).

[3] This commonly held idea can be seen in an *Urban Dictionary* definition of *World of Warcraft*: 'The game is an addiction to those who play it, sometimes more addicting than drugs such as cocaine [...] They never shower, and hardly ever eat and sleep. Anyone who plays this game is a retard who needs to get a damn life and the average IQ of the people in the world would jump dramatically if all of the WoW players were killed' (tp 2005).

[4] For example: 'During a prosecutorial fury that swept the country from 1980 to 1992, there were at least 311 alleged child sex rings investigated in 46 states [...] sex rings were run by Satanic cults, dozens of children raped by scores of adults, dozens of babies were killed and eaten, horses slaughtered in playrooms, children raped by men in black cloaks while the women waited in line for their turn' (Wasserman 2011).

[5] For more on reading cult television see: Lavery, D. (2010) *The Essential Cult TV Reader*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.

[6] For more on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and violence, see: Craigo-Shell, S. (2006) 'What Would Buffy Do? Feminist Ethics and Epistemic Violence', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 48, Winter.

[7] The following article sums up Christian fears about the show: Hurtz, T. (2002) 'Don't Let Your Kids Watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: But you can tape it and watch after they've gone to bed', *Christianity Today*, September.

[8] This is the officially sanctioned game, and therefore claims the authority of the network.

[9] For more on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and fans, see: Stuller, J.K. (ed.) (2013) *Fan Phenomena: Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[10] There has been some dissonance between the US and UK target audience for the show; namely, that in the US 'Most BtVS episodes broadcast in the USA are classified as TV14 – which cautions parents that it's unsuitable for under-14s [...] However, both Whedon and WB and, later, UPN, saw the target audience as being older, at least 16+' (Murphy 2004: 16). When the show was broadcast in the UK, the BBC (and Sky) initially felt the show was targeted to a younger audience and scheduled an early evening slot, which eventually caused conflicts with the 'nine o'clock watershed' due to perceived adult content (ibid.).

[11] It is a common video game RPG discussion that players often choose race over gender in game choice (race or magic user for example). In the case of a game such as *Tomb Raider*, where there is little gender choice, male players have little qualms in playing against gender roles.

[12] This is of note because of the contradiction of sexual storylines within the television shows. For more on this see: Simons, N. (2011) 'Reconsidering the

Feminism of Joss Whedon', *The Mary Sue*, 7 April; Waggoner, E.B. (ed.) (2010) *Sexual Rhetoric in the Works of Joss Whedon: New Essays*. Jefferson: McFarland and Co; and Jowett, L. (2005) *Sex and the Slayer: A Gender Studies Primer for the "Buffy" Fan*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

[13] this can be seen either in fans choosings sides (preferring villains to the good guys), or in the case of 'shippers' who prefer certain relationship pairings over others.

[14] In this episode, Buffy is poisoned by a demon and imagines she is in a mental institution. She believes that she has hallucinated all of her adventures in Sunnydale.

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