

# FRELL & FRAK :

On Profanity in Science Fiction



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## *Frell and Frak: On Profanity in Science Fiction*

John's Worldly Ramblings / 4.26

### **Frell : *Fuck***

When you talk science fiction, you usually deal in human and alien interaction. (*Blade Runner*, on the other hand, had only human and android characters, no aliens. But... usually.) And when you have aliens and humans, you have misunderstanding. And when you have misunderstanding, you have profanity, cussin', foul language, bad words. (I've always thought *Starship Troopers* would have been a far better movie if the Marines talked like they did in *Aliens*.) If your aliens use swear words, you either need to have them speak English, translate it for them, or make clear their meaning by context.

One solid reason why aliens use foul language is to avoid censorship by publishers, the FCC, or stern parents. This concept goes back decades in fiction and it had a lot to do with a large percentage of the readers being children (also the Bible belt). Things are a bit different now, but vestiges of the concepts developed years ago still hang around like the QWERTY layout of your computer keyboard (the origins of which are owed to the first typewriter that put the most used letters in the hardest to reach spots in order to slow down the typist to keep the bars from colliding and jamming). You couldn't have an alien say "Go fuck yourself" to your hero. No, but you wanted him to say something stronger than "Stick an egg in your shoe and beat it," so sci-fi writers came up with their own alien phrases.

Television does this, too. *Mork and Mindy* [1978-1982] was possibly one of the first with Mork from Ork's frequent use of "Shazbot," but I am not aware of a series that uses alien cuss words as often and consistently as *Farscape* [1999-2004].

*Farscape* is one of those shows that a lot of people simply aren't aware of. I only started watching it fairly recently and I have to say it's one of the strangest shows I've ever seen. Despite it being so unorthodox and having some acting where I can't decide if it's truly bad or just an attempt to behave in an alien way, it's unique, entertaining, and well done.

The premise is John Crichton, a human astronaut, accidentally goes through a wormhole and ends up on the other side of the galaxy. He finds himself aboard a living ship with a small

crew of escaped prisoners. The bad guys are after them to recapture the prisoners and they also want the wormhole knowledge in the astronaut's head.

Obviously, when Crichton found himself amidst five different alien species, he couldn't understand them. The writers dreamed up "translator microbes" to solve this problem, bacteria injected into him that allows instant translation between different species. But some words just don't translate.

This concept was poked fun at in one of the most bizarre episodes of this unusual show. Crichton was relaying a story to the ship's pilot which explained why he was forced to prematurely return to the ship despite being kicked off for ten days when Pilot interrupted him:

Pilot: I don't believe you.

John: Why not?

Pilot: Too many inconsistencies. Too much obfuscation.

John: "Obfuscation?" How the hell does that translate?

Other words that don't translate are some cuss words: frell, dren, yotz, and hezmana. You can certainly argue it is *because* they don't translate that they don't actually mean what we think they mean – a neat trick to get past censors. But when Aeryn Sun says, "Frell me dead," it's hard to imagine just what else she could mean, especially when frell is used as a verb, as in "something is frelled" and "frelling great."

Here is a short list of *Farscape's* most often used fictional profanity and their translations:

- Frell : *Fuck*
- Dren : *Shit*
- Hezmana : *Hell, normally*
- Yotz : *Kind of a general term, seems to be used in place of hell, damn, and shit*

Frankly, alien cursing aside, I wonder how they were able to get away with numerous other things like Rygel's fondness for calling Chiana a "bony-assed bitch" and I'm pretty sure I saw two dudes making out in one episode.



Crichton and D'Argo doin' their thing.

## **Feldercarb : *Bullshit***

The original *Battlestar Galactica* [1978-1979] began airing the same year as *Mork and Mindy*. A different aspect of this series was that the invented profanity was used by humans. There were really only two cusses they used:

- Frack : *Fuck*
- Feldercarb : *Bullshit*

"Feldercarb" sounds more like an engine part than profanity (and it takes a little too long to say) but there's little debate over what "frack" means. Nevertheless, the original *Battlestar Galactica* (henceforth *BSG*) was a mostly innocent show, while the "reimagining" of *BSG* [2003-2009] was grittier, more realistic, and overall better (the ending excused).

They dropped any use of "feldercarb" and kept "frack," but they changed it to "frak" so it would be a real four-letter word. Whereas *Farscape* could spin a good story about how they weren't using references to real swears, *BSG* could not have had that luxury with characters muttering dialog like, "Frak you," "Frak off," "Go frak yourself," "Motherfrakker," and, my personal favorite, "Clusterfrak."



**Frakking toaster!**

The Cylons, the mechanical race created by the humans (in the more contemporary version) that turned on their makers and nearly destroyed all humankind, are called "toasters" by many humans. This is not a big deal until you hear one human refer to another human who shows sympathy toward Cylons as a "toaster-lover." This is rather reminiscent of another racially charged epithet that shall not be specified... today.

## **Gos se : *Dog shit***

*Firefly* [2002] and its feature film continuation, *Serenity* [2005], (another sci-fi series with no aliens) got around the foul language barrier another way: by using a foreign language. Two, to be more precise. (This isn't an original concept: in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* the "made up words" are simply phonetic spellings of Russian words.)

The idea behind *Firefly* was that, in the future, the American and Chinese governments were the last two governments standing to rule Earth-that-was. Eventually humans used up all Earth's resources and set off to find greener pastures. They settled in a system with dozens of

habitable planets and hundreds of habitable moons. After centuries the cultures and languages merged and the characters say much of their dialog that can be inferred by context and inflection in Mandarin Chinese or Cantonese. Some of the more colorful or frequently used include:

- Ching-wah tsao duh liou mahng : *Frog-riding bastard*
- Gorram : *Goddamn – approximately*
- Gos se : *Dog shit*
- Ruttin' : *Fuckin'*
- Tian xiz shou you de ren dou gai si : *Fuck everyone in the universe to death*

Okay... those aren't even made-up bad words. How do the censors explain to a ninety-year-old... man... with man boobs who speaks Chinese and complains about hearing "Tah mah duh hwoon dahn," which means *Mother humping son of a bitch*, on commercial television?

(Did anybody catch that?)

*Red Dwarf* used "smeg," *Babylon 5* used "frag," and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* used "Belgium."



**The hero of Canton  
The man they call Jayne**

Does anybody remember when Conan O'Brien and Andy Richter made up a swear word to get past the censors? Their word was "crunk" – although crunk was apparently suggested to them by Ice-T who heard it from Southern rappers... just another instance of a white man stealing from black music.

If we know that frell and frak actually mean fuck, what's the point? If somebody holds up their middle finger and it gets blurred out on TV, we all still know what's going on behind the pixelization. Unless you go to the extent to edit or digitally remove the World Trade Center towers from a film or add CGI walkie-talkies in place of guns convincingly, *and* no one has access to the original version, people are going to know, so what precisely does censorship accomplish?

Frell and frak aren't literally fuck ("literally" is used literally here), but if the intention is there, then it *is* the same.

-John