

## **Ensley Guffey: ‘They’re Trying to Create an Army of Things like You’: Super Soldiers in the Whedonverses**

Since the 15th century CE, increasingly rapid advances in military technology, medicine, and science have produced progressively more effective soldiers. In terms of health, endurance, battlespace intelligence, and sheer firepower a 21st century soldier from the developed world is the most impressive – and deadly – combatant in human history. In fiction, this ongoing multiplication of force at the individual level led to the development of the trope of the super soldier, defined by TVTropes.org as “a soldier specifically intended to be above and beyond a normal man; harder, better, faster, stronger, tougher, more skilled, more determined, built and trained to fight and win.” Beginning in the early 1990s, fiction started to become fact as the US Department of Defense’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) began serious research into ways to enhance individual soldiers in the real world, investigating powered exoskeletons, chemical enhancement, cybernetic augmentation, bioengineering, and even genetic engineering.

Heavily influenced by comic books and speculative fiction, and entering his prime as a storyteller and executive producer at a time when DARPA’s new research avenues were revealed, it is no surprise that super soldiers repeatedly appear in the works of Joss Whedon. From the Initiative in both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, to the Alliance’s brutal reprogramming of River Tam in *Firefly/Serenity*, to Rossum’s special-forces-to-order capability in *Dollhouse*, to Captain America himself, Whedon is fascinated with super soldiers – and the ramifications of their creation. This presentation will examine Whedon’s use of super soldiers throughout his body of work, and the ways in which those characters critique both institutional efforts to “make folks better,” and cultural understandings of what exactly makes someone “super.”