

Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars: Ceremonious Resurrection as Miniseries

Tara DiLullo looks at what “special” effects Sci Fi has in store for its highly anticipated miniseries, *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars*.

By Tara DiLullo

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It's the rare occasion anymore in television for second chances. Nowadays, shows that don't find a large enough audience are often unceremoniously yanked from the airwaves with blinding speed. Such a fate befell the cult sci-fi series, *Farscape*, at the end of its fourth season in 2003, when the show was abruptly cancelled, leaving a cliffhanger, outraged fans and a despondent cast and crew in limbo. Almost immediately, the fans rallied and made such a ruckus that the impossible was achieved — *Farscape* is now being resurrected from the television grave. *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars* is a huge miniseries event airing Oct. 17 and 18 on Sci Fi, the cable network that originally booted it from the airwaves, that reunites the original cast and crew to finish the story the story of star-crossed lovers, John Crichton (Ben Browder) and Aeryn Sun (Claudia Black) and the rag-tag crew of the *Moya* while, hopefully, leaving the door open for new stories in the future.



The war between the Scarrans and The Peacekeepers is the centerpiece of the miniseries *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars*. All images TM & © Henson. © Hallmark.

Directed and exec produced by Brian Henson, the miniseries takes the quirky, snarky space opera, which blends real-life actors with puppetry, to a new level. With a big budget and a mandate to not only appeal to existing fans, but gain new ones too, *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars* is taking full advantage of the opportunity, raising the bar on the already impressive production design and visual effects that have been a hallmark of the series.

VFXWorld spoke to returning *Farscape* veterans, producer Andrew Prowse and visual effects supervisor Benita Carey, who worked in tandem on the miniseries to ensure that Henson's vision for the epic-scaled film was achieved through the creations of the animators and composers on the project. For Prowse and Carey, the miniseries also offered them the opportunity to finally achieve the kind of closure they believed the series truly deserved. “The end of the series was a major cliffhanger,” Prowse says. “We weren't prepared when the show was cancelled, so there was an awful lot of story up in the air. We could have done a quick wrap-up, but it was a little bit of defiance to leave it to be continued and see what happened. The film allows us to finally wrap it up in this sort of compressed series.”

The miniseries takes place shortly after the events of the series finale against the backdrop of an interstellar war between the embattled alien races known as Scarrans and The Peacekeepers. Staging a war allowed the *Farscape* team to significantly widen the scope of the universe that had previously been limited by the constraints of episodic television. “You never have enough money, but the budget for the miniseries was obviously way in excess of an episodic budget, so we were trying to take it to a new level of production value that was bigger and different than we had done before,” Prowse explains. “The scale is huge, with an epic expanse of a story. We were going for a movie feel and we always talked about it like it was two movies and I think we've achieved it.”

To do that, they had to reassemble the creative machine behind the series that had scattered to the wind on new projects during the year the series went dark. Carey says it's a testament to the creative team's love of the show that the vast majority of the vfx team all came back to work on the miniseries. “It's always been a show where we have pushed as much as we can, so coming back on board was exciting. As far as the animations, we used the same companies and that was in order to have the same composers and animators that we had before. We had to source them from other parts of the country, but it was important for us to maintain the creative continuity. They were so enthusiastic about it too, so it was fairly easy to get the word out and get them back on the project.”

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Like the series, *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars* was filmed and posted entirely in Australia. While the series only used the services of the Sydney-based vfx house, Animal Logic, the effects needs of the miniseries proved to be so large, another house had to be brought in for additional compositing. "The number of effects shots was too large and there weren't enough 3D people in Sydney to do what we were trying to achieve, so we went to another company as well, called Digital Pictures, who, interestingly enough, did the effects during the first season of *Farscape*," Prowse notes. "It was a nice symmetry in going home to some of the people that worked on the first year." Cary continues, "When we initially divided the shots, we did it based on assets that we knew [Digital Pictures] still held back from season one. We did it to be sensible with costs, but towards the end, when we ran out of time, we became a little wilder with that split between companies," she laughs.

Rob Nicol, the exec producer for film at Digital Pictures Sydney, details that breakdown of the visual effects. "We produced 39 complete vfx shots for *The Peacekeeper Wars* and CGI elements for an additional four shots being completed by Animal Logic. Our shots involved the development of CG elements and compositing those elements with live-action plates shot on greenscreen. Specifically we were involved with the development of the docking web, which Moya uses to pick up our heroes from a high wall on Gujargan, the development of the wormhole effect and the staging of large battle sequences in the final episode. Given the company's history with the first *Farscape* series (through what was then GMD), we already had some of the models and textures for Moya and the Peacekeeper cruisers. In addition, we created the final shot of the film where a camera track of a live-action element was supplied and a complete rear section of Moya was created and tracked to match the live-action plate. Various new ships were supplied to us as CG models by Animal Logic and we matched lighting references." Considering the scope and depth of the miniseries, the effects were created and composited on a variety of systems. "The software used was Maya and 3ds max for the CG components and for compositing we used inferno, flame and Shake," Nicol says. "One of the requirements from the producers was for us to provide previs and blocking for the large battle scenes and this was completed using Maya. Matte paintings were supplied by Animal Logic and also completed within Digital Pictures. We had 14 people providing CG work and five compositing and the project ran for approximately 10 weeks from initial previs to final delivery."

The other major effects component of the series and the miniseries was the intricate puppetry used to bring to life several of the fully integrated characters on the show, such as Pilot and Rygel XVI. As with the series, *The Peacekeeper Wars* utilized the technology created by the Jim Henson Co.'s Creature Shop, known as the Henson Performance Control System, to create life-like movement and facial expressions for their puppet characters. Dave Elsey, who ran the *Farscape* creature department during the entire run of the series, returned to serve in the creature creative supervisor capacity again employing the technology already perfected over the four seasons of the series.



Animal Logic and Digital Pictures of Sydney, Australia, performed all of the CG work for the miniseries.



Girl with a high tech whip: Chiana (Gigi Edgley) is one of the offbeat characters in this quirky space opera. Fans were crushed when the original series was cancelled. Photo credit: Sci Fi Channel.

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Detailing her overall responsibilities on *The Peacekeeper Wars*, Carey explains, "I was really following from what I did on the series. We had a lot more visual effects per hour of television on the miniseries, so in that sense, I did take on a little more, but generally it was the same thing I did on the series. Essentially from the beginning, I'd work with Brian [Henson] to get what he wants out of a shot or sequences and translate that to the team of people doing the visual effects. There are lots of full computer-generated 3D shots in the miniseries and once we had the shots in progress, I would monitor and make sure they were giving us what Brian was after. He was with us for a few weeks after the shoot but after that, I had to make sure I was maintaining the integrity of what he wanted creatively and then with Andrew."



The Henson Performance Control System brought life to the puppet Pilot (left), seen here in a tête à tête with John Crichton (played by Ben Browder). Photo credit: Brian McKenzie/Sci Fi Channel.

Having had four seasons to hone many aspects of the post-production elements, Carey says they relied on many of the well-oiled procedures to help in creating a smooth flow.

"I think we were very happy with our work practices and shot tracking, which is a huge part of the job. In the shot tracking, we upped the ante on our databases to make things easier to track mostly due to the sheer size of the project. For the most part, we used the same kind of work practices on the series because they worked well." The real challenges came from sheer volume. "The most difficult aspect was time," she explains. "We did over 700 shots, so time was the biggest challenge for us. There were a huge number of shots and we had a hell of a lot to do."

Due to the intense secrecy surrounding the overall storyline of the miniseries, Prowse and Carey were very tightlipped about describing effects in too much detail, but Prowse provided an overview about some of the major effects sequences that elevate the show beyond their expectations. "The level of visual effects was pushed enormously and the effects basically give you production value," Prowse says. "You can extend things and build and create events that couldn't possibly happen otherwise. What we did was build ourselves a fairly large cushion for visual effects and we managed to achieve everything we wanted to achieve. Most of what we did, we had done before, but we took it to a bigger level. For example, we created a number of space battles and a couple of shots where there are about 2,000 ships floating around. It's something we always wanted to do on the show, a whole sequence of CG with no live action in it, but we never really had the money or time to do it, so that's a leap forward. There is also a sequence at the end that involves some shots with the biggest number of components achieved on the show. It's the largest number of effects shots we've ever attempted. It made editing interesting because there were holes everywhere. The effects mess around with your post-production schedule, but we finally locked off the cut and kept feeding in small changes to the very end. The post took a couple of weeks longer than we wanted, and of course it was never enough," he chuckles.

As for the future of the franchise, Prowse is remaining cautiously optimistic, but hopeful considering the miniseries is a huge milestone in itself. "We'll let this run and see where it lands. If it gets the response we hope it does, it should provoke a whole new interest in *Farscape*. I think it's unlikely the series will return, but I would think there could be more miniseries or a movie."

Tara DiLullo is an East Coast-based writer whose articles have appeared in publications such as SCI FI Magazine, Dreamwatch and ScreenTalk, as well as the Websites atnzone.com and ritzfilmbill.com.

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