The Success Of The Simpsons Essay, Research Paper

The Improbable Long-Term Success of The Simpsons

When examining the history of modern prime-time television, there is a certain pattern that virtually every successful show inevitably falls into. After a period of initial success, perhaps lasting three or four years, the writing on the show becomes stale by using the same format and same jokes over and over. The viewing audience becomes bored, and eventually, the show fades into television oblivion. Or, as Jeff MacGregor states in The New York Times, “Historically…(successful shows) collapse under the weight of their own complacency, hanging on for a few lifeless seasons while the producers wait to cash out their millions and move to Maui.” Based on this premise, it would seem that “The Simpsons,” an animated series that debuted in 1987 as thirty second segments on “The Tracey Ullman Show,” should have worn out its welcome long ago.

However, “The Simpsons” is still going strong today. The secret to the show’s success lies in its producers’ ability to understand the expectations of the television audience and the culture that surrounds them. This understanding, combined with “wry sarcasm, topical themes, and superb scripting that puts most other comedies to shame,” as well as some old-fashioned slapstick comedy, makes “The Simpsons” one of the most popular programs in television history. The show is often complex and highly intellectual, while remaining funny at the most basic levels. As Jim Gleeson states in The College Tribune, “The show is rare in rewarding attention to detail, with especially obscure references that… even if you had never heard of…you would still laugh, giddy with the crafted sleight of it all.”

This fact that the show works on several levels at once draws a generationally diverse fan base. The adults are attracted by the surprisingly sophisticated dialogue, while the children enjoy the clumsy antics of Homer and the traditionally “cartoonish” aspects of the program. An example of a multidimensional scene occurs in the episode where Marge, the mother of the Simpson family, starts a crusade against campaign violence. Maggie, the baby, is mesmerized by an “Itchy and Scratchy” cartoon show in which the mouse pummels the cat over the head with a sledgehammer. Later in the episode, Maggie imitates the actions of the mouse by hitting her father, Homer, on the head with a sledgehammer, with the music from “Psycho” playing the background. For the younger audience, the sight of Homer getting hit on the head is funny, much in the same way that the Simpson children laugh as the mouse batters the cartoon cat. The older portion of the viewers takes additional pleasure in recognizing the allusion to the famous horror film.

Another simple example of multilevel humor features Homer sitting on the couch, while another Homer walks past the outside window. Although it takes place in a matter of seconds, this scene is one of countless silly but curiously sensational quirks that makes the show “a masterpiece of tiny, throw-away details that accumulate into a worldview.”

Because the producers of The Simpsons understand the current industry guidelines for humor and political correctness, they are able to create humor by bluntly crossing these presumed socially acceptable boundaries, while still sending a positive message. One frequently addressed subject on the show is religion, which is a normally sensitive issue on television. The Simpsons, however tackles religious thought head-on.

In one episode, Homer skips church on a particularly cold, snowy Sunday and has the best day of his life. After making his “patented, space-age, out-of-this world Moon Waffles” (melted caramel and waffle batter wrapped around a stick of butter), he watches football on T.V. and, upon finding a penny on the ground, asks aloud, “Could this be the best day of my life?” After visualizing, among other things, his wedding day, he proclaims, “We have a winner!”

This sequence would seem to present the idea that going church is a bad thing, but by the end of the episode, the message is reversed. Homer falls asleep amid a pile of “Playdudes” with a lit cigar in his mouth, which falls onto the magazines and sets the house on fire. After a miraculous rescue, Marge asks Homer whether the catastrophe has changed his mind about going to church. Homer then notices that the Flanders’ (the Simpsons’ intensely religious neighbors) house has caught fire, and asks why God isn’t saving “Charlie Church’s” house. At that moment, a small rain cloud appears above the Flanders’ house and puts out the fire. Homer reevaluates the situation and announces that he will be at church seated “front and center” (albeit fast asleep) next Sunday. This episode is an example of the show’s ability to be “hilarious and subversive but also, somehow, uplifting.”

“The Simpsons’” unabated social and political commentary has been illustrated numerous times during the series’ history. This fearless discussion about controversial topics is extremely rare on television, and is part of what has made the show so successful. Gleeson observes that, “The show does not try to score political points. It targets hypocrisy, corruption and institutionalized laziness wherever it finds them, being cheerfully vicious to whoever the writers think deserves it.”

One memorable episode, in which an election is taking place in Springfield, provides an example of this “cheerful viciousness.” An unleashed elephant charges first through a Democratic party convention, which features banners that read “We’re not fit to govern,” and then into a Republican convention, which displays “We’re just plain evil” banners. Because of uncensored social commentary similar to this example, people have accused “The Simpsons” of being “nothing but a mouthpiece for the dangerously liberal viewpoints of its creators, and a shameless celebration of dysfunction.” Nevertheless, the show remains as unrestricted as ever.

“The Simpsons” has even created a stir among some of the nation’s most influential political figures. In a 1990 interview with People magazine, former First Lady Barbara Bush called the show “the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen.” Soon after, Bush received a letter from “Marge Simpson” demanding an apology. Within two weeks’ time, Bush responded and asked for Marge’s forgiveness for “a loose tongue.” Also, in a 1992 speech to the National Religious Broadcasters convention, then-President George Bush said “The nation needs to be closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons.” While these are certainly not endorsements for the program, it reveals at least that the Simpsons are having somewhat of a political impact on the country.

Despite the large amount of crude, violent content on the show, “The Simpsons” provides an attraction to the viewers on a sentimental level as well. One of the main reasons for this emotional attachment is the thorough development of characters on the program. Occasionally, the producers will devote an entire episode to supporting characters, adding depth and personality to an area that is usually underdeveloped by sitcoms.

These characters often start out as stereotypes of certain factions of society, but over time evolve into complete individuals with whom the viewers become familiar. Among the members of the supporting cast are Moe the bartender, Krusty the Klown, Mr. Burns, Homer’s miserly old boss, Chief Wiggum, the fat, lazy police chief, Principal Skinner, and Bart’s chain-smoking teacher, Ms. Krabapple. All of these characters are introduced as flat characters, but over time their personalities have been comprehensively developed into much more. By developing these side characters, as well as the members of the Simpson family, the cartoon figures often become more believable and seem more real than human, clich?d characters on television. This evolution is central to the show’s prolonged prime-time success.

An example of the show’s focus on the supporting cast is the documentation of the love affair between Principal Skinner and Ms. Krabapple. Previously the viewers had only known them in relation to Bart, but subsequent shows reveal that they were both lonely souls who found each other, bringing happiness into each other’s lives. The writers go so deeply into the development that, when accused of having sex in the janitor’s closet at school, Principal Skinner reveals that he is a virgin. Principal Skinner is further developed by the discovery that he is using the name Seymour Skinner as an alias, and that he is actually a deadbeat from Capital City. The real Seymour Skinner is a war hero who has come to Springfield to set the record straight. In the end, the town decides that they like the old Seymour Skinner better, and they send the “real” Seymour Skinner out of town strapped to a train.

Some characters may be the focal point of the show for weeks at a time, or for a significant number of shows over a period of years. An example of a continually growing character is Krusty the Klown, who has had several encounters with the Simpson family over the years. Krusty is introduced on the show as simply as clown TV star, but over the years the viewers have come to find out a great deal about him. Through his numerous appearances on the show, we have discovered that his father disowned him because he wanted to become a clown instead of a rabbi, he has a pacemaker, he is illiterate, and he has three nipples. Bart has starred on his show, saved him from a murder accusation, and convinced him to return to television after he left his show for a life as a fisherman, yet through another bizarre quirk on the show, Krusty has no idea who Bart is.

Similar extensive development is provided for countless other characters on the show, revealing more about the main and supporting characters than any other show on television. The growth of the cast members allows the viewers to form somewhat of a relationship with the members of the show. This relationship translates into loyalty, which has contributed to the endurance of the show’s popularity over time.

During the early years of “The Simpsons,” the show seemed to be simply a cartoon version of the other mindless shows on the air. Bart, the rebellious, spunky fourth-grader, was the focus of the show and a marketing superstar. His signature catchphrases, such as “Aye Carumba!” and “Eat my shorts,” were plastered on the shirts and lunchboxes of children across the nation. If the creators had chosen to continue to emphasize Bart as the star of the show, as they easily could have done, the program would have inevitably died in a few years’ time.

Fortunately, the producers recognized this reality. In fact, they were so aware that they actually based an episode on a nearly identical situation. Bart, while making an unscheduled appearance on the “Krusty the Klown Show,” accidentally knocks down the entire set of the show. He stares at the mess for a moment, looks at the audience and says, “I didn’t do it.” The crowd goes wild, and each time Bart repeats the line, the crowd gets louder. He is an instant star. Toys, t-shirts, and dolls featuring Bart flood the stores, and Krusty focuses his entire show around Bart and his magical phrase for a few weeks. Then, all of a sudden, the line loses its charm. Bart instantly goes from celebrity to washed-up, and he realizes the fleeting nature of fame. The producers of “The Simpsons” obviously realized that the same thing would have happened to the show if they had not made an adjustment. As a result, the focus of the show shifted from Bart to Homer around the fourth season, and writers began developing the characters of the residents of Springfield.

Bart was recently listed as one of the twenty most important cultural figures of the twentieth century by Time magazine, but an analysis of the program reveals that Homer has been the true sustaining force. The creator of “The Simpsons,” Matt Groening, stated that his original intention was for the Simpsons to be a TV family superficially similar to those of his ‘60s childhood, only one you could feel superior to. The essence of Homer’s appeal lies in the latter portion of that statement. He is the ultimate, typical bumbling TV father. He concocts wild schemes that the viewer knows will fail miserably, and the audience takes pleasure in watching as he stumbles his way into inevitable disaster. As hard as he tries, Homer is simply not very bright, and the viewers can sympathize with him and feel good about themselves.

In a way, Homer is living out the fantasies of the average Joe. He sleeps his way through work, repeatedly, inexplicably keeping his job despite massive mistakes. He drinks beer and goes bowling seemingly every night, and comes home to a loving wife and family with a hot meal on the table. Whenever he gets the urge to go after something new, he ignores any possible consequences and goes for it. Because he has the same dreams that the viewers have, the audience relates to him and, in a way, envies him. The viewers therefore feel a connection to Homer and, consequently, to the show.

One theory suggests that the success of “The Simpsons” is a consequence of television history, and could not have taken place if the show had originated twenty years earlier. The medium of television needed time to build up complexity and diversity, so that the show could virtually redefine what is expected of a television program. Based on this theory, “The Simpsons’” effect on television is similar to the Beatles’ effect on music. The theory predicts that the show will continue on until, just like the Beatles, they have nothing left to do.

At its current pace, “The Simpsons” seems like it could go on forever. The show is continually progressing and perhaps funnier than ever. The writers are further developing the characters with each passing episode, and the show’s possibilities, for the time being, seem limitless. It is difficult to explain exactly what the allure of the show is, but at the core its most appealing characteristic is that it is simply funny. From the simple pleasure of watching Homer fall flat on his face to the most obscure reference imaginable, “The Simpsons” continues to entertain over a decade after its conception and shows no signs of slowing down.