BLAME CANADA!

Blame Canada is divided into three sections. “Oh My God” deals with the South Park “facts,” its history, media reception, Internet uptake/fandom, and marketing. “You Killed Kenny” covers the show as a televsual artifact, its generic makeup, humor, intertextuality, music, food/drink references, community, and characters. “You Bastards” examines the recurring issues of politics, “difference,” religion, and gender/sex. In this way, Blame Canada contextualizes South Park through its contribution to and reflection of popular culture. A fourth section exists on the Internet—this Web site contains my recaps of all episodes. It is available for viewing at www.continuumbooks.com/download/BlameCanadaEpisodeGuide.pdf.

My apologies to all the students/fans/viewers who read this book and find it ruins what was once a viewing pleasure. Apologies as well to the creators, who will no doubt look on much of my theoretical framework with a healthy skepticism.

Lastly, I am not a fan; or at least I wasn’t. The material here has been gathered and disseminated out of scholarly interest; while I have often enjoyed episodes (my personal favorite to date is “Marjorine”), been amused by them, and find myself quoting South Park-isms in my media classes, this is not the work of a fan. I came to the series with no preconceived notions or ideas about South Park. Therefore, Blame Canada comes not from love and admiration but from a healthy respect for the series and for its impact on contemporary culture.

Introduction:
Yesterday’s Future Is Today

South Park arrived at a pivotal time in pop-culture history. The golden age of cartoon animation had returned, the Internet was revving up, and Comedy Central needed a signature show. South Park slotted in perfectly: it took animation one step backwards aesthetically and five steps forward intellectually, it engaged with its online fans in a maelstrom of Web sites, it stocked shelves with merchandise, and it put Comedy Central on the cable map. It ticked/clicked all the popular culture boxes.

South Park is truly a pop-culture phenomenon. When Kim Jong Il makes TV news, chances are a still of his Team America persona will be flashed on the screen. It tackles subjects that were long taboo on television and savages celebrities of all kinds. It’s a show that leaves viewers gasping, “I can’t believe they said that.” It’s cruelly funny and hysterically satirical—or it’s degrading toilet humor, depending upon your point of view. In South Park, there is definitely no accounting for taste.

Blame Canada explores South Park’s insertion into popular culture. Few who viewed the first program thought they’d be seeing a tenth season celebration. Part of its success is its infusion of popular culture into its episodes. It is another of the hyper-ironic television programs that demand active viewing. Gen X and Gen Y viewers, the creators themselves, have grown up with what is affectionately termed Boomer Humor, and have come to appreciate and even expect highly referential, self-reflective, and cynical entertainment. Add to the mix its ripped-from-the-headlines subject matter, its total irreverence for everything, its audacity, and its off-the-wall humor, then it’s not surprising the show continues to be the highest rating show on Comedy Central. The fullest appreciation of South Park comes from understanding its subtle nuances and its scathing parodies. South Park is the postmodern pastiche par excellence.
To truly understand Rabelais, Bakhtin claimed, one had to understand folk culture. Rabelais was best interpreted not through “classical” literature but through popular forms. To understand South Park, one should not “read” the show through, say, Masterpiece Theatre, but rather through Monty Python. Bakhtin examined folk (or popular) culture and divided it into three distinct forms of humor:

1. ritual spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace
2. comic verbal compositions: parodies
3. genres of billingsgate: curses and oaths

“Ritual spectacles” are the carnivals and festivities (feudal, state, or ecclesiastical) during which inequality was suspended and everyone feasted, ate, drank, and laughed—think Mardi Gras in New Orleans. During festivals, the usual hierarchies were turned on their heads, the fool was crowned king, and vice versa—it was a medieval free-for-all where Jack was allowed to be as “good” as his master. Comic verbal compositions have their roots in religious, state, and education discourses. Monkish parodies (as compiled by monks) such as The Liturgy of the Gambler subverted the highly ritualized speeches of the church by rendering religious texts humorous. Parody is of course at the heart of many South Park episodes. The “genres of billingsgate” came from the cries and ribaldry of the marketplace. In marketplaces, people joked and conversed in everyday language. Into the linguistic spaces crept abusive, blasphemous, mocking, and obscene words, expressions, and gestures—billingsgate is the language of the streets (or in South Park’s case, the language of the playground), not the language of the court, church, or stateroom. These three folk culture forms are imbedded in virtually every South Park episode, albeit with contemporary figures and a contemporary sensibility.

All of the above elements form what Bakhtin terms the “carnivalesque,” which he described in relation to Rabelais and other writers:

Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid. ... These carnivalesque categories are not abstract thoughts about equality and freedom, the interrelatedness of all things or the unity of opposites. No, these are concretely sensuous ritual-pageant “thoughts” experienced and played out in the form of life itself, “thoughts” that have coalesced and survived for thousands of years amid the broadest masses of European mankind. This is why they were able to exercise such an immense formal, genre-shaping influence on literature.
Not to put too fine a point on it, the carnival was a rowdy place—one enjoyed by the "common" folk. At carnivals outrageous behavior and bawdy language ruled and Bakhtin documents some pretty wild events: the mock kings beaten nearly to death by the revelers; the festive flinging of urine, vomit, and excrement at passersby; obscene gestures and words offered as signs of greeting to strangers; public masses in which excrement and urine are used as host and sacramental wine. In *South Park*, similar carnivalesque behaviors occur: Mr. Hankey jumps from toilets to hands to coffee mugs, leaving a shit trail; Stan vomits over Wendy; "shit" not only happens but is repeated over and over again. "Carnivalesque" describes those non-sanctioned spaces on television in which outrageousness provides an antidote to the erudite, the intellectual, and the constrained—think World Wrestling Federation, *Jerry Springer, The Man Show*. To read Rabelais alongside *South Park* is to be amazed at how little things have changed in hundreds of years. Indeed, "*South Park*-esque" is the modern "carnivalesque."

Satire is just one form of carnival laughter, albeit a rather negative form. The other form, festive laughter, is more joyous and inclusive. Festive laughter is of "all the people." As Bakhtin explains, it is universal in scope and "it is directed at and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity... This laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives." However, Bakhtin overstates his case when he claims a universal jocularity, for not everyone laughs. Critics who find *South Park* racist, sexist, childish, insulting, and offensive certainly aren't laughing. It is the contemporary carnival that fairly screams at its audience and it can be strident at times. *South Park*’s scatological reputation isn't entirely deserved. Sure, it has its share of poo-phemisms, Mephisto continues to experiment with four-assed genetics, people still talk shit, and the series continues to have people put fingers and things in butt holes, but, in every case, the role of shit is to show hypocrisy and to question cultural conventions.

Eating, drinking, and roistering went hand in hand during the festivals; fucking, farting, and body excretions were integral to carnival humor. Bakhtin labeled joking about these things as "lower body stratum" humor, because it, well it was about the naughty bits of the body. More importantly, it was the antithesis of the refined, cool, measured wit of the "upper body, the head. Furthermore, Rabelais' focus on the body and its orifices—mouth, loins, and anus—is a rejection of the classical smooth body; instead, the grotesque body and the humor it deploy is important. The grotesque celebrates the:

...contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. The very material bodily

lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase. The grotesque body is constantly active, exceeding its margins: a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed. It is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body—which is why disembowelment, pregnancy, and elimination of waste (semen, vomit, urine, excrement) reduce loftier philosophy to the base flesh and are inherently part of laughter and humor. The body and the carnival are not innocent places of play, they are inherently political sites—hierarchy and control are subverted. *South Park*’s toilet humor and gratuitous violence are, therefore, part of a rich heritage of subversive crap.

The political nature of the carnival has engrossed critics from a wide range of disciplines. Yes, it was a time for the peasantry to let their hair down, and yes, anarchy ruled (apparently). But was the carnival really a thumbing of noses at the status quo or was it really a sanctioned moment of mayhem—a safety valve allowed by the powers that be to release some of the pent-up energies and frustrations of the common folk? If the latter, then certainly one can read the carnival as containment. These arguments are described by Chris Humphrey in *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England*. If the carnival is sanctioned, then the "anarchy" is only pretense. Scholars have been concerned about the "social" effects and affects of the carnival and how class and gender were acted out during these festivals, but they are not of primary importance for *Blame Canada*. My concern is not how the carnivalesque leads to social change or even how invoking it affects viewers' thinking, but how it is performed through the televisual medium. The carnival itself is a performance; it is a theater at which people perform subversive acts. As wildly and sincerely as they are performed, the acting stops when the carnival is over and the world returns to "normal." So it is with *South Park*. The show's exuberance and scatology referencing recreate the carnivalesque for contemporary audiences.

At the end of Rabelais' fifth book, Pantagruel delivers his ultimate condemnation of contemporary society—he eliminates a large shit. So too, *South Park* drops a large one on the world. As Rabelais started his books, so I begin mine:

*Good friends, my Readers who peruse this Book,*
*Be not offended whilst on it you look:*
*Denude yourselves of all depraved affection,*
*For it contains no badness nor infection:*
*Tis true that it brings forth to you no birth Of any value, but in point of mirth:*

...
Thinking therefore how sorrow might your mind
Consume, I could no apter subject find;
One inch of joy surmounts of grief a span;
Because to laugh is proper to the man.7

Notes
4. Rabelais, Ibid., 12.
5. Rabelais, Ibid., 62.
7. Francois Rabelais, Gargantua and Pantagruel, Book 1, Prologue.
Chapter 1

Who Cares about a Guy That Makes Beer?: History

In case you’ve just returned from an alien probing or, even more unimaginable, you haven’t heard of South Park, this chapter outlines the success story of two young men who go to Hollywood and manage the unthinkable—they sell their idea to a television network and get their own TV series. A series about a talking shit. Seriously. It’s the American dream. It’s about as likely as a poor hillbilly striking oil in his backyard and moving to Beverly Hills—but that’s another show. Despite the general suspicion that South Park wouldn’t last more than a couple of years, in 2006, its tenth season started. The young men are not so young anymore, but hopefully they’re a lot richer. Much of the history of South Park is now folklore, but it’s worth retelling. The history of South Park begins with the histories of Trey Parker and Matt Stone.

Believe it or not, South Park is a real geographical place: “It’s in a perfectly circular valley in the middle of the Rocky Mountains, and because of that there’s, like, the most UFO sightings, and cattle mutilations, and Bigfoot sightings,” according to Trey Parker. And he should know—he grew up in a small mountain town in Colorado. He claims the isolation encouraged him to make movies because there wasn’t a movie theater in town. Parker is the youngest son of a government geologist (Randy) and an insurance broker (Sharon); he has an older sister (Shelley). Hmm, so he’s really Stan Marsh. He is a talented musician and attended Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, but transferred to the University of Colorado in Boulder (UCB). At UCB he met Matt Stone.

Matt Stone was born in Houston, Texas, but moved to Littleton, Colorado, when he was young. Stone’s dad, Gerald, is a semi-retired economics professor, and mom Sheila is a homemaker. His sister, Rachel, is a social worker.
Rachel? There isn’t a Rachel in South Park. So Matt is basically Kyle Broflovski. “My parents think I’m completely warped . . . but my dad is probably our biggest fan.” At the time Stone and Parker met (1989), Parker was making The Giant Beaver of Southern Sri Lanka (sound familiar? “Mexican Staring Frog”) for a class assignment and the two began to collaborate on various projects.

Beginnings

Even in elementary school, Parker was given to shocking people. His first effort was a sketch, “The Dentist Parker,” in which he “drilled holes in his classmate’s head” and much fake blood ensued—he later had to explain to the traumatized first and second graders that the dentist was their friend. In high school, he doodled pictures of people with buttocks for heads during class (also familiar? “How to Eat with Your Butt”). So naturally, at UCB he was going to push filmic barriers. His first animated piece (with Chris Graves), American History, was done for an animation class at UCB (1991) and won a silver medal for animation in the Student Academy Awards in 1993. The next year, he did a three-minute fake trailer of Cannibal! The Musical for a film production class.

He pretended Cannibal! was the short for a real project, so when people kept asking him about it, he decided to go ahead and make it. He, Stone, and others formed a production company, Avenging Conscience, raised the money, and made the film. When their trailer was rejected by Sundance Film Festival organizers (January 1993), a fact satirized in “Chef’s Salty Balls,” the pair sidestepped Sundance and gave a private showing attended by Brian Graden of Foxlab. The pressure of filming was too great for Parker, who dropped out in his senior year. With Cannibal! finished, Stone graduated (with a degree in mathematics) and the two moved to Los Angeles in March 1994.

For nearly two years, they had an agent, a lawyer, and a film, but no success. They relied on the kindness of others. Camping on friends’ couches and sharing a 1985 Buick, they worked as landscapers and production assistants and continued to write scripts. While working with a BBC crew shooting a documentary on the porn industry, they made contacts that led to three porn-esque films (Orgazmo, Profiles for the Young and Horny, and Sex for Life). Parker directed a short, Your Studio and You.

In 1995, Parker and Stone did the rounds pitching The Mr. Hankey Show to various channels, but the response was basically: “Okay, that does it, screw you guys I’m going home. Talking poo is where I draw the line” (“Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo”). Brian Graden suggested the show focus on the four boys and not on Mr. Hankey, and the show was renamed South Park. Graden commissioned them to create a Christmas video card for him.

Back home for Christmas, Parker and Stone made Graden’s card while their family members prepared for Christmas. Parker recalls his mother was “mashing yams or something” (she was making fudge), while downstairs the two boys were “screaming as loud as we could ‘You [bleep]ing son of a [bleep]!’”—the experience is immortalized in “A Very Crappy Christmas.” Graden sent The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Santa to friends; soon bootleg copies were circulating and George Clooney received a copy, which he distributed widely. The clip became a cult hit; excerpts were spotted at rock concerts.

By 1996, the duo had turned down development deals by New Line, Warner Brothers, DreamWorks. As it happens, a newcomer at Comedy Central, Deborah Liebling was looking for a new property and had heard the buzz about The Spirit of Christmas. They pitched to her and, in March 1996, she commissioned a pilot. The pilot did not go smoothly and though Nancy Cartwright (voice of Bart Simpson) walked out in disgust. The pilot was finished in October 1996. However, the show wasn’t immediately picked up because the pilot did not fare well with focus groups. But Parker and Stone were encouraged to keep working on scripts. They wrote “Weight Gain 4000” and then Comedy Central decided to give the show a try. During the filming of Orgazmo (February 1997), Trey and Matt learned that the pilot was accepted. Still skeptical about its chances of success, they agreed to star in another movie, BASEketball. They recalled:

TREY: Last July, David Zucker called and wanted me to direct BASEketball. And I said I can’t, we’re doing this TV show. . . . And he went, “Well, when that falls apart?”

MATT: Yeah, they said, “We’ll get you out of that show so you can come work for us.” We were like, “Why would we want to get out of this? It’s the coolest thing!”

TREY: Then he called back and said, “How about if you guys act in it?” I said, “I don’t know if we have time to do that, either.” He said, “We’re not shooting until February.” We were like, “Fuck, South Park will be done by then. No way it’s gonna still be on the air in February.”

The first episode aired on August 13, 1997, and sixty-five thousand households tuned in—for the first time in six and a half years, Comedy Central had a top-rated television show. After four episodes, South Park was picked up for another thirteen episodes. In the summer of 1999, a feature film, South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut was released, and “Blame Canada” (Trey Parker and Marc Shaiman)
was nominated for Best Song at the Academy Awards. The show continued to break ratings records at Comedy Central and, in 2005, Parker and Stone renegotiated their contracts through 2008—the twelfth season.

FAQs

Compared to network budgets, cable budgets are modest. A half-hour sitcom episode usually costs anywhere from $800,000 to $1.5 million, depending on the stars’ salaries. Of course, animation is slightly different: Even so, *South Park* is cheap. *The Simpsons* costs about $1.2 million per episode; the first thirteen episodes of *South Park*, including production costs and the creators’ salaries, cost $3.25 million, around $400,000 per episode.

Who pays these costs? Mainly advertisers. And how do you get advertisers to shell out big bucks? You have a show with high ratings, the higher the ratings, the more expensive the advertising slot. At the end of 1997, four months after the first *South Park* episode, Comedy Central recorded its first profit (less than $10 million) in its six and a half year history.

On August 13, the show premiered with a 1.2 Nielsen Media Research rating. By its sixth episode, the rating had climbed to 1.7, the highest of any original series shown on Comedy Central. Previously, Comedy Central shows averaged 0.6 rating in prime time. This is not unusual; cable channels do not attract the same high ratings as free-to-air channels: “CNN has to have a worldwide disaster to come up with a 1.4.” The ratings continued to rise and the Halloween episode (“Starvin’ Marvin”) earned an “astonishing 4.8.”

From October, *South Park* averaged about 2.3 million viewers per episode in a cable universe of about 46 million homes. In December, a poll asked kids to name their favorite show, and *South Park* scored in the top three.

By the next year, *South Park* claimed the “highest ratings for any series in basic-cable history.” Reruns of the first nine episodes helped to make the show a “cult hit,” drawing “five or six times” Comedy Central’s usual audience. When “Damien” aired in February 1998, another record toppled and the ratings reached 6.4, an increase of 19 percent from the last new episode (“Mr Hankey the Christmas Poo,” December 17, 1997). In the final two weeks of February, 5.2 million viewers watched. The show even managed to outperform ABC’s *Prime Time Live*. The best ratings were for “Cartman’s Mom Is Still a Dirty Slut.” The episode aired on the April 22 and achieved an 8.2 rating, or 6.2 million viewers, breaking the previous cable record, USA Network’s 8.1, for the first installment of *Moby Dick*, and was the highest-rated non-sports show on cable television. Less than forty-eight hours after the episode, Parker and Stone signed another agreement that anchored them to Comedy Central until 2000. They also negotiated a deal to write and produce a full-length feature film, *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*. The film was released the following year, 1999.

Much to Comedy Central’s delight, they had an “appointment show”: groups of fans were congregating to watch it. *South Park*’s phenomenal success was the talk of the industry and the media; few cable network shows attracted so many viewers or such media attention. Before the second season started, the show was featured on the covers of *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Newsweek*, and *TV Guide*; it even rated an article in the UK’s *Guardian*.

By the third season, the show’s success seemed to be waverling. The ratings had fallen. The third-season premiere (April 7, 1999) drew 3.4 million viewers, a “dramatic” drop from the 5.5 million for the previous year’s opener, “Not Without My Anus,” and the 6.2 million for the second episode, “Cartman’s Mother Is Still a Dirty Slut.” In total, the first three episodes of the third season had lost “64% of its teen viewers and 39% of its 18-to-34 viewers.” Perhaps the poor quality of the second season did not help; the stress of making *Bigger, Longer and Uncut* had sapped Stone and Parker of their creative vitality (see season two DVD commentaries). Still, *South Park* was number twelve in *Lyco*s top search items for 1999. The creators believed the incredible media hype had inflated the show’s ratings, and that the third-season ratings reflected its “true” fan base. By 2000, original episodes averaged “just north of 1.5” million homes. In July 2001, the ratings climbed to 2.3 million, largely attributed to late-night fraternity viewership. By the sixth season (2002), around 2.8 million tuned in. The ratings continue to hover around the 2.7 figure, 3 million viewers; the one hundredth episode (April 9, 2003) grabbed a 2.7, as did the eighth (2.74) and ninth (2.69) seasons. Comedy Central has been surprised by *South Park*’s “ability to hang on”—it was the channel’s most-watched original series in its sixth season. Moreover, *South Park* draws more dedicated viewers to the channel; they stay and watch other shows. In April 1999, an overall increase of 16 percent in the channel’s prime-time audience was recorded; and in May 2004, the prime-time ratings were 26 percent higher than those of May 1998.

Once upon a time, syndication was no big TV deal. Now syndication reels in hefty revenue dollars. Reports have claimed that *South Park* syndication realized around $100 million “over five years.” When syndication started in September 2005, the ratings were not spectacular. “In its first week, *South Park* pulled in a 1.4 household rating and averaged 1.87 million viewers. It dipped somewhat to a 1.34 in week-three overnight ratings. Nationally, however, *South Park* is down 19% from its lead-ins. Because of its content, the show airs at later time slots—between 11 p.m. and 1:30 a.m.—no doubt
this contributes to the low ratings. The show now airs on "135 stations, reaching 86% of the country," and more new viewers potentially translates into an increased audience for original episodes.

As a consequence of healthy ratings, Comedy Central advertising revenues have steadily increased from $76 million in 1997 to $129 million in 1998, $163 million in 1999, $240 million in 2001, and $283 million in 2002. Comedy Central is now among the top fifteen grossing basic-cable networks. But ratings is only part of the economic health of a channel. Because of South Park's success, more cable companies opted to carry Comedy Central, and it became one of the fastest-growing cable channels, jumping from 9.1 million households in 1997 to 50 million in June 1998, 64.6 million in May 2000, 70.1 million in 2001, and 82 million in 2003. Cable operators pay monthly license fees to Comedy Central; the fees jumped from $51 million in 1998 to $56 million 1999. Overall, the series has done well for Comedy Central what The Simpsons did for Fox. It made Comedy Central.

"Tian-ah! Kenny bei guadiao!"

When South Park's success became global knowledge, television stations around the world were keen to buy it. In the United Kingdom, Sky bought South Park in September 1997, a few weeks after its US debut. It started airing on Sky One in March 1998 and on free-to-air Channel 4 in July 1998. Paramount Comedy picked up the UK rights from Sky in March 2005, and the new episodes premiered in April 2005. In both the UK (Channel 4) and Australia (SBS), South Park airs on channels noted for risk taking, for example SBS offers The Iron Chef, Queer as Folk, and Mythbusters.

In Australia, South Park airs on SBS, a free-to-air network. The first season was rated PG (Parental Guidance, content should not harm or disturb children under 15) and aired at 8:00 p.m., but for the second season, it was moved to 9:30 p.m. and given an M rating (Mature, not recommended for those under 15). One option was to edit the series to maintain the old classification, but SBS feared the reaction of the strong fan base. As a spokesman pointed out, "Why would we get out of the building alive." Around a million viewers watched the show and, in Sydney, reruns average 226,400 viewers.

When the commercial free-to-air stations saw South Park's success, they tried to outbid SBS for the second season, but Comedy Central remained loyal to the station that took a risk—SBS had paid almost $1 million (Australian). South Park has boosted SBS's advertising revenue: "Since South Park was first broadcast, advertising revenues have soared from $16.4 million in 1996–97 to $21.2 million in 1997–98, and $19.2 million in 1998–99, according to various SBS Annual Reports." In 2001, Australian cable channel Comedy Central launched South Park. It shows reruns; SBS still has the rights to air original episodes.

South Park aired on Canada's free-to-air network Global Television in September 1997. Originally, it aired at 9:30 p.m. but, following complaints, it was bumped to midnight and still managed to rate in the top ten. Nearly a year later it made its cable debut on Canada's Comedy Network. In August 1998, the first season's episodes were shown back-to-back over thirteen nights. The show airs ninety minutes earlier on cable, at 10:30 p.m.

In France, the show premiered one year after its US debut (July 7, 1998). It airs on cable channel Canal Plus (+) at the relatively early 6:25 p.m. The following year, the show started in Germany (RTL) and South Africa (M-Net).

Hong Kong-based StarTV picked up the show, which became a surprise hit "among Taiwan's fat-sipping, cynicism-dripping youth." As can be imagined, the script has resisted "straight translation." Local writers have translated it into Mandarin Chinese and interpolated Taiwanese pop culture references, current events, and Chinese puns. For example, in "Big Gay Al's Boat Ride," Stan's gay dog is told to attend "a Leslie Cheung concert." Cheung is a "well-known gay actor-singer" from Hong Kong. The show's title has been altered to Nanfang Siyanke or South Park's Four Slackers, which in Mandarin also sounds like The Four Musketeers.

The South Park world includes New Zealand, Brazil, Scandinavia, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Latin America, Mexico, and Israel.

Programming

To ensure success, a show has to air on the right channel and at the right time. Programming is not a science but an art, and many a show has languished in the wrong time slot until it attracts enough viewers. In South Park's case, the TV-MA rating it received at Comedy Central means that it is not supposed to air before 10 p.m. Thanks to South Park's success, the channel now enjoys a reputation for cutting-edge comedy. And, in 2005, it hosted some of the edgiest shows on television: Drawn Together, The Dave Chapelle Show, and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.
much later time slots with limited success; Allison Romano thought WKBD Detroit’s strategy of placing it after *The Simpsons* a “winning” one.54

Despite having similar names, comedy cable networks around the world demonstrate remarkably dissimilar line-ups. In the UK, the Paramount Comedy favors rather old-fashioned US sitcoms such as *Soap, Mork & Mindy, The Wonder Years, Happy Days, Roseanne.*55 As many of these shows are mentioned in *South Park,* this lineup creates a nostalgic anchor. In Australia, the Comedy Channel airs US comedies such as *Arrested Development, Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Man Show,* thus linking *South Park* with more experimental comedy. Because of its adult content, *South Park* is aired late at night in Canada and the UK, thus effectively foregrounding the show’s taboo content. Not so in Australia where it can be seen at all hours.

Thanks to remote controls, viewers can create their own viewing experiences by watching several shows simultaneously. In Australia, the lover of sitcoms could “watch” *South Park, The Flintstones, Who’s the Boss,* and *That ’70s Show* simultaneously—providing a potentially fascinating viewing of representations of the American family. The adventurous viewer could opt for *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman, Law and Order, The Price Is Right,* and *M.A.S.H.*—goodness knows what kind of cultural message that viewer would decode. The relatively commercial-free cable channels further complicate scheduling. The US rigidly adheres to an hour/half-hour schedule (usually using advertisements as a stop-gap device), but in the UK, Canada, and Australia, *South Park* starts at differing times creating a headache for the channel surfer.

Programming is a consummate skill—a program must work on both axes of the programming grid. It must complement the station’s viewing line-up and compete successfully with the competition. A clever programmer arranges the viewing day most appropriate for the channel’s regular viewers and works to attract new ones. In these days of the remote control, viewers have learned the art of judging a show in a matter of seconds—the action, look, and sounds have to tempt viewers to stop.

Rewards of Creation

Comedy Central enigmatically said, “they’re being handsomely paid.”56 A couple of years later, it was reported that Parker and Stone receive $500,000 for each new episode.57 Money, however, is of secondary concern to fans, who are more worried about the show remaining on the air.

Fans speculated that the two would not sign again with Comedy Central and with good reason—the duo had said so on a number of occasions. In March 2000, they claimed they would not sign another long-term deal.58 A year later, in a KROQ (Los Angeles) interview (April 4, 2001), they said they would quit at 120 episodes, but they continue to commit themselves and in 2005 they signed on until 2008. They re-signed after *Team America,* apparently, the filming was such an unpleasant experience that they vowed not to

The *South Park* creators’ story smacks of Horatio Alger: two talented young men leave their small Midwestern towns and come to Hollywood, where they find fame and fortune. Well, fame at least. In September 1997, Parker admitted that they were earning comfortable incomes but were “not insanely rich, but rich by our standards.”59 In March 1998, a *Newsweek* interview provided glimpses of their discontent as Parker complained, “I have a friend who writes for *Just Shoot Me* who makes more a week than I do . . . Thirty million in t-shirt sales, and I got a check for $7,000.”60 When it came time to renew their contract in April 1998, Parker and Stone were more money savvy, upped the ante for another forty episodes, and increased their share of merchandise revenues (approximately $130 million). No exact salary figures were given, but *Daily Variety* reckoned “the producing duos various deals which also include a couple of other unrelated films are worth a minimum of $15 million.”61 However, Parker and Stone soon squashed the $15 million figure on *The Tonight Show:*

T: . . . it came out someplace that we made 15 million dollars, which is—

M: Everyone pictures like a check

T: Yeah . . .

J: You didn’t?

M AND T: No, no . . .

T: I mean we’re getting like way better money than we did when we started and it’s totally cool and Comedy Central’s been great to us.

J: What kinda dough we talking? What kinda money?

T: It literally would break down to probably like still 50 grand a year.62


work with organizations other than Comedy Central. Parker explained: “After doing this movie [Team America], we realized what a great gig we have with South Park. As long as they let us, we'll keep making it. We started and thought we'd get up to six episodes maximum and now we have 120.” Yet, only a few weeks earlier, Trey Parker admitted that he “hates” making the show, “It's super stressful. I'm always miserable. I want to kill myself every week.”

Parker and Stone are the public faces of South Park for a good reason. Not only is their material innovative, controversial, and new; they are two young(ish), attractive males who are upbeat and amusing. They perform the enfant terrible role well. Because of their multiple talents as directors, writers, and composers for movies and television, they have a large body of work. They do the talk-show circuit several times a year, whether to promote South Park, or their latest movie, or to respond to the latest criticisms. For instance, their appearance schedule for the month of October 2005 (just before the launch of the second half of the ninth season) reads like this:

- The Tonight Show with Jay Leno – October 5
- MTV, Making the Movie – October 8
- Access Hollywood – October 12
- 60 Minutes – October 13
- Late Night with Conan O'Brien – October 13
- CNN, Anderson Cooper 360 – October 14
- Ebert & Roeper – October 17
- Last Call with Carson Daly – October 22

Their irreverent attitude strikes the right note and reflects their Gen X sophisticated understanding of the processes of fame and television. They resist merchandising by creating lame characters such as Towelie. Their repeated celebrity bashing reminds viewers that celebrities are only human too and sometimes not very nice humans. Perhaps their most memorable rejection of the film industry was their appearance at the 72nd Academy Awards. Both Parker and Stone wore dresses, but not any dresses—they donned designer clothes linked to specific stars. The outfits demonstrated a healthy skepticism for the bloated Academy Awards system and the spectacle of the red carpet. They flouted gender conventions; their choice of designer garments refused acceptance of product placement on stars’ bodies. But even they admit the prank was not easy to pull off:

Q: How drunk were you guys the day you wore dresses to the Oscars?

STONE: We weren't drunk at all, we were on acid.

Despite the fact that the two creators have produced an enviable body of work in a short period of time, they continue to be typecast as “slackers” and drug users, a mantle they relish and encourage. They make it sound easy by repeating that they write episodes at the last minute; that they start on Thursday for the following week's show. But part of the perception problem stems from the populist perception of comedy. Writing for television sounds like fun, doesn't it? But only a fool would think the creators are lazy. Deborah Liebling emphasized their work ethic in her introduction at the 1998 US Comedy Festival: “They work around the clock, paying attention to every detail on the show, both on-air and off-air. They're prolific writers.” She then listed the projects they'd undertaken in the first eight months of South Park, and the list is impressive:

- written, directed, produced, and starred in Orgazmo
- started writing the prequel to Dumb and Dumber
- starred in BASEketball
- in talks about a feature film, which was to become Bigger, Longer and Uncut
- producing a South Park soundtrack album
- performing in their band DVDA
- dozens of media appearances and interviews

Their hero, David Zucker, witnessed their heavy workload while filming BASEketball. He said the two stars were “up all hours. They work all day on this movie, then they go and write South Park. They have people on the set constantly coming up to them with plotlines and other things that demand their direction.” The two-part South Park schedule allows the creators a midyear “break” to pursue other projects, such as My Bush, Orgazmo, BASEketball, Bigger, Longer and Uncut, and Team America: World Police. They’ve also signed with Paramount Pictures for three years, so it seems unlikely they will be able to relax for some time to come.

So, How Is South Park Made?

CHARLIE BROWN: Good Grief! We need a Christmas tree for our play.

CARTMAN: Oh, Jesus, not this thing again.
BLAME CANADA!

STAN: How come everyone in cartoons has such big heads?

CHARLIE: Alright, everyone, we've got to get on with our play!

KYLE: Jesus, this sucks! All they keep doin' is dancing around!

CARTMAN: Yeah, this thing really falls apart in the second act.

STAN: And why is it that on Charlie Brown cartoons, everyone talks like this.

CARTMAN: My mom could make a better Christmas special than this!

KYLE: Hey, that's it. Oh, my God, that's totally it! It's so simple!

STAN: What, dude?

KYLE: We can get everyone back into the Christmas spirit by making our own animated Christmas special, and showing it to everybody in town!

STAN: We don't know anything about animation.

KYLE: How hard can it be? Look at it.

CARTMAN: Hey yeah! We can make a little animated Santa Claus and Jesus, and it can star us instead of these little round-headed guys!

KENNY:

STAN: Yeah! And we can call it... "The Spirit of Christmas."

"A Very Crappy Christmas" recreates the painstaking story of The Spirit of Christmas VHS. In the South Park version, Butters makes cardboard cutouts of the characters, and the boys take the cutouts to a photographic shop where they begin the laborious process of arranging the figures and then photographing them. The boys have to manipulate the cutouts scene by scene and the mouths syllable by syllable. Their excitement soon turns to boredom as the reality of creating an animation by hand sets in. It is tedious to say the least; it's even tedious to watch. But things have changed dramatically since Parker and Stone did The Spirit of Christmas.

Unlike other animated shows, South Park is created quickly and in the US. It's a frenetic pace. As Trey Parker explains:

We take a lot of time before just to come up with broad ideas, but until the Thursday before that Wednesday, that's when we really sit down and go 'OK, how can we tell this story?' . . . A lot of times on a Thursday, we'll sit down and go, 'hey, have you seen this Terri Schiavo thing? This is huge. We should do a story about that. . . . Matt and I really do most everything. We still write, direct and edit every episode ourselves. We can sit there on a Tuesday night and (rewrite the third act), run into the booth next door, record all the voices, get the storyboards together, edit it and see it in a couple of hours. However, obviously there are some big gaps in Parker's account. There are around sixty people at South Park Studios, so what are they doing? Basically, Trey Parker writes the first draft of the script. During the first recording, the editor (Tom Vogt) sits in on the session:

to see if there are any notes that are made to the script while they're recording the voices. That also gives me a feel for what Trey's intention for the show is going to be, which is kind of my job. I'm supposed to interpret that and get as close to his idea for the show at the beginning... After that, I get the audio that was recorded... the storyboards, and then I build a skeleton of the show up to that point. The animatic is made and passed to the director of animation (Eric Stough). Stough notes difficulties in staging or continuity and "finesses" the animatic. The postproduction supervisor (Karin Perrotta) marks the scenes while the animators and technical directors view the tape. During the course of production, the animatic is updated with completed animation so that everyone can see how the whole thing is developing. After production is finished with the storyboards, they are returned to the editor, who divides the story and assigns various parts to people in the storyboard department. Artists either choose or are allocated what they'll do. Adrien Beard, storyboard and production artist supervisor, explains: "Tony [Postma, storyboard artist]; since he's studied trans (transportation design) at Art Center, I might give him a scene that has a lot of vehicles, or anything that's kind of technical. Keo is really good at action, so he can do a lot of the action sequences. Greg [Postma, storyboard artist] is really good at character scenes where there is a lot of talking." Computer technology does most of the menial work. Originally, the construction paper cutouts were scanned into a computer and replicas were built in Alias Wavefront's PowerAnimator. Now, Silicon Graphics workstations run Maya software to create a virtual plane—in 3D space—on which the "flat" computer-generated characters are animated. "Trey drew all the original characters in Corel Draw," says Stough. "We actually take those illustrator curves directly into Alias PowerAnimator 8.5 and build what we call smart puppets." With the characters constructed, Stough and company then tap into the Expressions function of Alias to manipulate specific body movements. "We animate all the visibility—the front heads, the side heads, the mouths—they're all on those little sliders you push back and forth which make different mouths visible." To keep up with the fast turnaround needed, the production department relies on a variety of SGJ boxes.
Technical directors construct the layout, backgrounds, and props, and lip-synchers animate the mouths. Even the texture of construction paper is applied via computer. While the process is to keep the animation from looking too sophisticated, astute viewers can spot the differences between earlier and later episodes—virtually gone is the “no-platen” or “shadow” look.

After the animation gets Trey’s approval, it is sent with the audio to be edited and mixed using Avid Media Composer. Sounds easy? Well, Tom Vogt expounds on particularly “challenging” episodes:

“Spooky Fish” was one, “Chef Aid” was another. “Spooky Fish,” because we weren’t sure if the story should be told all at once because there was an A, B, and C story. First, there was the story establishing the fish as being evil, and then you’re crossing over to the parallel universe. To me it was one of the more complicated stories because of the way the act links broke, and the way that certain parts of the stories were revealed, and how those parts were resolved. I think they all came together quite nicely in the end. “Chef Aid” was difficult because you were dealing with a lot of new characters, namely musical artists who did the voices. We had a pretty big pre-production period as far as new setups and character designs were concerned, and then we had to wait on the audio for the songs. I feel like I always get the trickier shows (oh, wahl!), but I like that challenge.41

Fifteen to thirty people work on each episode. It can (and has been) done in a week; but according to the South Park Studios Web site FAQs, it takes two to three weeks. An almost finished episode can be revised within days if necessary; for example, “Quintuplets.”92

At the end of 2005, the South Park Studios Web site added blogs which provide insight into the production madness. Anne Garefino, executive producer, wrote:

All’s quiet in the studio tonight. People are feeling the effects of three weeks of crazy hours. Even Toni isn’t running her usual marathon from one animation station to the other. They’ll perk up when the fast food shows up in a couple of hours.

Keep lit scented candles in the edit bay to combat the smell of all the stinky bodies in there. By this time on Tuesday nights, the edit bay is the place to be. Everyone is in there trying to get a clue about what shape the show’s in.

The Storyboard dept. brought some designs into the writer’s room for a potential show. (Writer’s meeting just wrapped at 11:30 p.m.) As soon as he saw them, Trey was sold on the story for next week. They’re hilarious. The designs are of Cartman and that’s all I’ll say about that.

The shot update. This week at midnight we’re 52 shots out. That’s good news except that we have a few shots that will take a while to set up and animate.

(They have lots of people in them and a fancy camera move too.) Those shots will cost us a couple of hours easy.

Trey has written a song for this week’s show. One of my favorite things about South Park is the music and I love watching Trey record. He obviously records “in character” and it’s a great thing to see. “FOLLOW THAT EGG”

Posted: Tue Nov 01, 2005 9:00 pm.81

We just finished group. There were THREE females in the booth tonight. We hardly ever have women available for ADR. In general, women are in the minority here at South Park. . . . Matt directed and Lydia cut it all in to the show as we recorded—flawless as usual.

It’s midnight and Frank just came in . . . We’re 39 shots out. We’ve got a few hours to go but overall, things look good unless Trey continues to write. So good in fact Ryan even has time to animate a shot. He’s been so busy lately trying to manage the floor, (sitting in on the retake sessions, making shot assignments and answering a million questions), that he hardly has time to do what he likes most, animate!

The writer’s meeting broke up at about 10:30 again tonight. I am crazy about the ideas for the next episode. All I can say is . . . it’s too hot to even tease . . .

Stopped into the Storyboard dept. to see what they were doing. While we were in the writer’s meeting, I saw the entire department leave the building and then return a while later with Tower Records bags. They had a break and went on a field trip to buy some music. Greg loves Ninja Academy. Tony is sick—which means that by next Tuesday the entire building will have what he’s got. Before I got in the room he was napping under his desk. Now he’s up and they are all working on new characters for next week’s show. (“Ginger Kids,” November 9, 2005)44

The firsthand account of smelly bodies, fast food, and late nights sleeping under desks certainly does not conform to the glamorous world many associate with television. Rarely does the public glimpse such details about the intimate workings of a television production.

After the show is finished, it is uploaded by satellite to the East Coast, usually on Wednesday afternoon, the day it airs. Because of the tight schedules, there is no time to catch, let alone correct, mistakes. Fans are of course quick to note errors, which are remedied for the second airing,99 typically on Saturday; for example, Willie Westwood notes the following changes at his South Park Web site:

“Memememee!”—When Cartman says this on Wednesday his voice is deep. On Saturday, it’s normal. The number of insane boy terrorists was corrected to four. The length of time since the word “veal” was officially changed to “little tortured baby cow” drops from six days to 24 hours. It should’ve dropped to 36 hours or so . . . 36

Presumably, other countries receive the corrected versions.
Occasionally, episodes are aired out of numerical order. This happens for a variety of reasons. The particular episode might require a new look and thus additional production work. Charles Song at South Park Studios summarized the main differences:

An entirely unique look. Sometimes they're extremely complicated and require extra time, like #405 "Pip" which aired after #414. Everything in "Pip" had to be built from scratch, including the new mouths with rotting out teeth that were used for most of the characters. Since Trey and Matt were looking for an entirely new look for Pip's England (in the same way that Terrance and Phillip's Canada had its own, unique look), everything had to go through a laborious approval process. In addition, live-action sequences. "Pip" had live action sequences with the actor Malcolm McDowell, which involved casting, scheduling, additional planning, and post-production. These things take time, something we didn't have that summer. South Park had a run of consecutive episodes ending with #411 "Probably," and a hiatus for cast and crew. When a new run of episodes, "The Fourth Grade," began in September, there was time to finish the remainder of work on "Pip" in between the new episodes.

Special effects are another reason why certain episodes are delayed, like #310 "Chinopokomon" (which aired after #312) and #311 "Starvin' Marvin in Space" (which aired after #313).

Holidays. Other times holiday scheduling is a factor, as when #110 "Mr. Hankey, The Christmas Poo" delayed #108 "Damien" from airing for several months. #312 "Korn's Groovy Pirate Ghost Mystery" is a unique example where work on the episode began near the beginning of the season, but wasn't given an episode number because of its late air date (Halloween).

Guest Stars. And lastly, certain episodes include the participation of special guest stars, as with #501 and Radiohead, whose busy schedules require careful planning.87

Victims of their own timeliness, everyone wants to know how the show remains so topical.

Conclusion

In January 1999, the t-shirts were still everywhere, but the media claimed "the buzz was over" and people weren't looking forward to Wednesday nights anymore.88 In Internet parlance, South Park had jumped the shark. The show continues to attract media attention and money. Indeed, if media appearances and articles are any indication, the ninth and tenth seasons have seen South Park reclaim some lost ground. Comedy Central's profits continue to rise, and Parker and Stone can be seen chatting with Jay Leno, Charlie Rose, and Larry King. People remotely related to the show are coupled with it: Johnnie Cochrane's obit mentions his South Park "appearance"; Liane Adamo (Parker's ex-fiancée) has her own entry at the Internet Movie Database. The cult of celebrity runs deep in South Park culture. The continued popularity of the show is demonstrated in its name as signifier.

After completing nearly an entire decade, the show has become a staple. Daily Variety still runs stories describing the corporate headquarters of South Park Studios.89 The show now appears in nostalgic reminiscences about teen years!90 Though the show's demise has often been predicted, it has been signed until at least 2008. It ranked sixth in Lyco's most popular television search term for 2005. As fan Coop warned all the naysayers: "And to all you people who say the show is going to end, please be nice and shut up. I'd rather watch the worst episode of South Park than nearly anything else on TV."91

"South Park is a show you should be proud to admit watching, I love it." —Drew Carey

"To date, South Park still holds the Guinness World Record for 'Most swearing in animated series.'"92

"Now, remember: there are no losers at the Cable Ace Awards, only people who are less likely to have another season." —Kyle

Notes

4. Because he couldn't draw, he resorted to construction paper cutouts.
5. Paula Span, "On the Cussing Edge."
6. Ibid.
7. Comedy Central came from the merger of HBO's Comedy Channel and MTV's Ha! in 1991.
8. A parody about a Mormon porn star, Orgazmo (1997) was a hit at the 1997 Toronto International Film Festival and at Slamdance in January 1998.
11. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
29. “South Park’s Ratings Drop Dramatically,” *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), April 20, 1999, 7D.
41. Dempsey, “Late-night Yucks for Youth,” 15.
70. Deborah Liebling at the US Comedy Festival, February 1998.
72. The first half of the season airs March/April to June/July, and the second half recommences around October/November to December.
74. For a full explanation of the production process and the staff, visit the official Web site, www.southparkstudios.com.
77. Ibid.
78. An "animatic" is the filmed version of the storyboard. It can be still images pasted together in sequence and have dialogue. The animatic determines timing, scene lengths, and so on for the animators and technical directors.
86. South Park Scriptorium, www.spscriptorium.com, in the "Secrets" section of the relevant episodes.

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