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### The Simpsons Do the Nineties

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# The Simpsons Do the Nineties

## Abstract

Now in its thirtieth season, in 2018, The Simpsons is a popular culture phenomenon. The series is known as much for its social commentary as its humour and celebrity appearances. Nonetheless, The Simpsons' ratings have declined steadily since the early 2000s, and fans have grown more vocal in their calls for the program's end. This article provides a case study of episode "That 90s Show" (S19, E11) as a flashpoint that exemplifies fan desires for the series' conclusion. This episode is one of the most contentious in the program's history, with online outrage at the retconning of canon and both fans and anti-fans (Gray) of The Simpsons demanding its cancellation or "fan euthanasia". The retconning of the canon in this episode makes evident the perceived decline in the quality of the series, and the regard for fan desires. "That 90s Show" is ultimately a failed attempt to demonstrate the continued relevance of the series to audiences, and popular culture at large, via its appeal to 1990s nostalgia.

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*The Simpsons Do the Nineties*  
 Renee Middlemost

### Abstract

Now in its thirtieth season, in 2018, *The Simpsons* is a popular culture phenomenon. The series is known as much for its social commentary as its humour and celebrity appearances. Nonetheless, *The Simpsons'* ratings have declined steadily since the early 2000s, and fans have grown more vocal in their calls for the program's end. This article provides a case study of episode "That 90s Show" (S19, E11) as a flashpoint that exemplifies fan desires for the series' conclusion. This episode is one of the most contentious in the program's history, with online outrage at the retconning of canon and both fans and anti-fans (Gray) of *The Simpsons* demanding its cancellation or "fan euthanasia". The retconning of the canon in this episode makes evident the perceived decline in the quality of the series, and the regard for fan desires. "That 90s Show" is ultimately a failed attempt to demonstrate the continued relevance of the series to audiences, and popular culture at large, via its appeal to 1990s nostalgia.

### "That 90s Show"

"That 90s Show" begins with Bart and Lisa's discovery of Marge's Springfield University diploma. This small incident indicates an impending timeline shift and "retcon"; canonically Marge never attended college, having fallen pregnant with Bart shortly after completing high school. The episode then offers an extended flashback to Marge and Homer's life in the 1990s. The couple are living together in the Springfield Place apartment complex, with Homer working a variety of menial jobs to support Marge while she attends college. Homer and Marge subsequently break up, and Marge begins to date Professor Stephan August. In his despair, Homer can no longer perform R & B ballads with his ensemble. The band changes genres, and their new incarnation, Sadgasm, are soon credited with initiating the grunge movement. Sadgasm gain worldwide fame for their songs "Margerine" (a version of "Glycerine" by Bush), and "Politically Incorrect/Shave Me" (set to the melody of "Rape Me" by Nirvana) – which is later parodied in the episode by guest star Weird Al Yankovic as "BrainFreeze". Homer develops an addiction to oversized, sweetened Starbucks coffee, and later, insulin, becoming a recluse despite the legion of fans camped out on his front lawn.

Marge and Professor August soon part company due to his rejection of heteronormative marriage rituals. Upon her return to campus, Marge observes an MTV report on Sadgasm's split, and Homer's addiction, and rushes to Homer's bedside to help him through recovery. Marge and Homer resume their relationship, and the grunge movement ends because Homer claims he "was too happy to ever grunge again."

While the episode rates a reasonable 6.1 on *IMDB*, fan criticism has largely focused on the premise of the episode, and what has been perceived to be the needless retconning of *The Simpsons* canon. Critic Robert Canning notes: "...what 'That 90s Show' did was neither cool nor interesting. Instead, it insulted lifelong *Simpsons* fans everywhere. With this episode, the writers chose to change the history of the Simpson family." Canning observes that the episode could have worked if the flashback had been to the 1980s which supports canonicity, rather than a complete "retcon". The term "retcon" (retroactive continuity) originates from narrative devices used in North American superhero comics, and is now broadly applied to fictional narrative universes. Andrew Friedenthal (10-11) describes retconning as "... a revision of the fictional universe in order to make the universe fresh and exciting for contemporary readers, but it also involves the influence of the past, as it directly inscribes itself upon that past." While Amy Davis, Jemma Gilboy and James Zborowski (175-188) have highlighted floating timelines as a feature of long running animation series' where characters remain the same age, *The Simpsons* does not fully adhere to this trope: "... one of the 'rules' of the 'comic-book time' or 'floating timeline' trope is that 'you never refer to specific dates'... a restriction *The Simpsons* occasionally eschews" (Davis, Gilboy, and Zborowski 177).

For many fans, "That 90s Show" becomes abstruse by erasing Marge and Homer's well-established back story from "The Way We Was" (S2, E12). In the established narrative, Marge and Homer had met, fell in love and graduated High School in 1974; shortly after Marge fell pregnant with Bart, resulting in the couple's shotgun wedding. "That 90s Show" disregards the pre-existing timeline, extending their courtship past high school and adding the couple's breakup, and Homer's improbable invention of grunge. Fan responses to "That 90s Show" highlight this episode of *The Simpsons* as a flashpoint for the sharp decline of quality in the series (despite having long since "jumped the shark"); but also, a decline in regard for the desires of fans. Thus, "That 90s Show" fails not only in rewriting its canon, and inserting the narrative into the 1990s; it also fails to satiate its loyal audience by insisting upon its centrality to 1990s pop culture.

While fans have been vocal in online forums about the shift in the canon, they have also reflected upon the tone-deaf portrayal of the 1990s itself. During the course of the episode many 90s trends are introduced, the most contentious of which is Homer's invention of grunge with his band Sadgasm. While playing a gig at Springfield University a young man in the audience makes a frantic phone call, shouting over the music: "Kurt, it's Marvin. Your cousin, Marvin Cobain. You know that new sound you're looking for...?," thrusting the receiver towards the stage. The link to Nirvana firmly established, the remainder of the episode connects Homer's depression and musical expression more and more blatantly to Kurt Cobain's biography, culminating in Homer's seclusion and near-overdose on insulin. Fans have openly debated the appropriateness of this narrative, and whether it is disrespectful to Cobain's legacy (see Amato). Henry Jenkins (41) has described this type of debate as a kind of "moral economy" where fans "cast themselves not as poachers but as loyalists, rescuing essential elements of the primary text 'misused' by those who maintain copyright control over the program materials." In this example, many original fans of *The Simpsons* felt the desire to rescue both Cobain's and *The Simpsons'* legacy from a poorly thought-out retcon seen to damage the legacy of both.

While other trends associated with the 90s (*Seinfeld*; Beanie babies; Weird Al Yankovic; Starbucks; MTV VJs) all feature, it is Homer's supposed invention of grunge which most overtly attempts to rewrite the 90s and reaffirm *The Simpsons'* centrality to 90s pop culture. As the rest of this article will discuss, by rewriting the canon, and the 1990s, "That 90s Show" has two unrealised goals— firstly, to captivate an audience who have grown up with *The Simpsons*, via an appeal to nostalgia; and secondly, inserting themselves into the 1990s as an effort to prove the series' relevance to a new generation of audience members who were born during that decade, and who have a nostalgic craving for the media texts of their childhood (Atkinson). Thus, this episode is indicative of fan movement towards an anti-fan position, by demanding the series' end, or "fan euthanasia" (Williams 106; Booth 75-86) and exposing the "... dynamic spectrum of emotional reactions that fandom can generate" (Booth 76-77).

### "Worst. Episode. Ever": Why "That 90s Show" Failed

The failure of "That 90s Show" can be framed in terms of audience reception— namely the response of original audience members objecting to the retconning of *The Simpsons'* canon. Rather than appealing to a sense of nostalgia among the audience, "That 90s Show" seems only to suggest that the best episodes of *The Simpsons* aired before the end of the 1990s. Online forums devoted to *The Simpsons* concur that the series was at its peak between Seasons 1-10 (1989-1999), and that subsequent seasons have failed to match that standard. British podcaster Sol Harris spent four months in 2017 watching, rating, and charting *The Simpsons'* declining quality (Kostarelis), with the conclusion that series' downfall began from Season 11 onwards (despite a brief spike following *The Simpsons Movie* (2007)). Any series that aired on television post-1999 has been described as "Zombie *Simpsons*" by fans on the Dead Homer Society forum: "a hopelessly mediocre imitation that bears only a superficial resemblance to the original. It is the unwanted sequel, the stale spinoff, the creative dry hole that is kept pumping in the endless search for more money. It is *Zombie Simpsons*" (Sweatpants).

It is essential to acknowledge the role of economics in the continuation of *The Simpsons*, particularly in terms of the series' affiliation with the Fox Network. *The Simpsons* was the first series screened on Fox to reach the Top 30 programs in the US, and despite its overall decline, it is still one of the highest rating programs for the 18-49 demographic, enabling Fox to charge advertisers accordingly for a so-called "safe" slot (Berg). During its run, it has been estimated variously that Fox has been building towards a separate *Simpsons* cable channel, thus the consistent demand for new content; and, that the series has earned in excess of \$4.6 billion for Fox in merchandising alone (Berg). Laura Bradley outlines how the legacy of *The Simpsons* beyond Season 30 has been complicated by the ongoing negotiations for Disney to buy 20th Century Fox – under these arrangements, *The Simpsons* would likely be screened on ABC or Hulu, should Disney continue producing the series (Bradley). Bradley emphasises the desire for fan euthanasia of the *Zombie Simpsons*, positing that "the series itself could end at Season 30, which is what most fans of the show's long-gone original iteration would probably prefer."

While more generous fans expand the 'Golden Age' of *The Simpsons* to Season 12 (Power), the Dead Homer Society argues that their *Zombie Simpsons* theory is proven by the rise of "Jerkass Homer", where Homer's character changed from delightful doofus to cruel and destructive idiot (Sweatpants; Holland). The rise of Jerkass Homer coincides with the moment where Chris Plante claims *The Simpsons* "jumped the shark". The term "jumping the shark" refers to the peak of a series before its inevitable, and often sharp, decline (Plante). In *The Simpsons*, this moment has been variously debated as occurring during S8, E23 "Homer's Enemy" (Plante), or more popularly, S9, E2 "The Principle and the Pauper" (Chappell; Cinematic) – which like "That 90s Show", received a vitriolic response for its attempt to retcon the series' narrative history. "The Principal and the Pauper" focuses on Principal Skinner, and the revelation that he had assumed the identity of his (presumed dead during the Vietnam War) Army Sergeant, Seymour Skinner. The man we have known as Skinner is revealed to be "no-good-nik" Armin Tanzarian. This episode is loathed not only by audiences, but in hindsight, *The Simpsons'* creative team. Voice actor Harry Shearer was scathing in his assessment:

You're taking something that an audience has built eight years or nine years of investment in and just tossed it in the trash can for no good reason, for a story we've done before with other characters. It's so arbitrary and gratuitous, and it's disrespectful to the audience. (Wilonsky)

The retcon present in both "That 90s Show" and "The Principal and the Pauper" proves that long-term fans of *The Simpsons* have been forgotten in Groening's quest to reach the pinnacle of television longevity. On this basis, it is unsurprising that fans have been demanding the end of the series since the turn of the millennium.

As a result, fans such as the Dead Homer Society maintain a nostalgic longing for the Golden Age of *The Simpsons*, while actively campaigning for the program's cancellation, a practice typically associated with anti-fans. Jonathan Gray coined the term "anti fan" to describe "... the active and vocal dislike or hate of a program, genre, or personality" (841). For Gray, the study of anti-fans emphasises that the hatred of a text can "... produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and 'effects' or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture" (841). Gray also stresses the discourse of morality used by anti-fans to validate their reading position, particularly against texts that are broadly popular. This argument is developed further by Jenkins and Paul Booth.

### "Just Pick a Dead End, and Chill Out till You Die": Fan Euthanasia

While some fans of *The Simpsons* have moved towards anti-fan practices (active hatred of the series, and/or a refusal to watch the show), many more occupy a "middle-ground", pleading for a form of "fan euthanasia"; where fans call for their once loved object (and by extension, themselves) to "be put out of its misery" (Booth 76). The shifting relationship of fans of *The Simpsons* represents an "affective continuum", where "... fan dissatisfaction arises not because they hate a show, but because they feel betrayed by a show they once loved. Their love of a text has waned, and now they find themselves wishing for a quick end to, a revaluation of, something that no longer lives up to the high standard they once valued" (Booth 78). While calls to end *The Simpsons* have existing since the end of the Golden Age, other fans (Ramawamy) have suggested it is more difficult to pinpoint when *The Simpsons* lost its way. Despite airing well after the Golden Age, "That 90s Show" represents a flashpoint for fans who read the retcon as "... an insult to life-long *Simpsons* fans everywhere... it's an episode that rewrites history... for the worse" (Canning). In attempting to appeal to the 90s nostalgia of original fans, "That 90s Show" had the opposite effect; it instead reaffirms the sharp decline of the series since its Golden Age, which ended in the 1990s.

Shifting the floating timeline of *The Simpsons* into the 1990s and overturning the canon to appeal to a new generation is dubious for several reasons. While it is likely that original viewers of *The Simpsons* (their parents) may have exposed their children to the series, the program's relevance to Millennials is questionable. In 2015, Todd Schneider data mapped audience ratings for Seasons 1-27, concluding that there has been an 80% decline in viewership between Season 2 (which averaged at over 20 million American viewers per episode) to Season 27 (which averaged at less than 5 million viewers per episode). With the growth of SVOD services during *The Simpsons'* run, and the sheer duration of the series, it is perhaps obvious to point out the reduced cultural impact of the program, particularly for younger generations. Secondly, "That 90s Show's" appeal to nostalgia raises the question of whom nostalgia for the 1990s is aimed at. Atkinson argues that children born in the 1990s feel nostalgia for the era because

we're emotionally invested in the entertainment from that decade because back then, with limited access to every album/TV show/film ever, the ones you did own meant absolutely everything. These were the last pop-culture remnants from that age when the internet existed without being all-consuming. ... no wonder we still 'ship them so hard.

Following this argument, if you watched *The Simpsons* as a child during the 1990s, the nostalgia you feel would be, like your parents, for the Golden Age of *The Simpsons*, rather than the pale imitation featured in "That 90s Show". As Alexander Fury writes of the 90s: "perhaps the most important message ... in the 90s was the idea of authenticity;" thus, if the children of the 90s are watching *The Simpsons*, they would look to Seasons 1-10 – when *The Simpsons* was an authentic representation of '90s popular culture.

Holland has observed that *The Simpsons* endures "in part due to the way it adapts and responds to events around it", citing the recent release of clips responding to current events – including Homer attempting to vote; and Trump's tenure in the White House (Brockington). Yet the failure of "That 90s Show" marks not only *The Simpsons* increasingly futile efforts to appeal to a "liberal audience" by responding to contemporary political discourse. The failure to adapt is most notable in Hari Kondabolu's documentary *The Problem With Apu* which targeted racist stereotypes, and *The Simpsons'* poorly considered response episode (S29, E 15) "No Good Read Goes Unpunished", the latter of which featured an image of Apu signed with Bart's catchphrase, "Don't have a cow, man" (Harmon). Groening has remained staunch, insisting that "it's a time in our culture where people love to pretend they're offended", and that the show "speaks for itself" (Keveney). Groening's statement was followed by the absence of Apu from the current season (Snierston), and rumours that he would be removed from future storylines (Culbertson).

### "They'll Never Stop The Simpsons"

The case study of *The Simpsons* episode "That 90s Show" demonstrates the "affective continuum" occupied at various moments in a fan's relationship with a text (Booth). To the displeasure of fans, their once loved object has frequently retconned canon to capitalise on popular culture trends such as nostalgia for the 1990s. This episode demonstrates the failure of this strategy, as it both alienated the original fan base, and represented what many fans have perceived to be a sharp decline in *The Simpsons'* quality. Arguably the relevance of *The Simpsons* might also remain in the 1990s. Certainly, the recent questioning of issues regarding representations of race, negative press coverage, and the producers' feeble response, increases the weight of fan calls to end *The Simpsons* after Season 30. As they sang in S13, E17, perhaps "[We'll] Never Stop *The Simpsons*", but equally, we may have reached the tipping point where audiences have stopped paying attention.

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