The Simpsons Do the Nineties

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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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This episode is loathed not only by audiences, but in hindsight, proven by the rise of "Jerkass Homer", where Homer's character changed from delightful doofus to cruel and destructive idiot (Sweatpants; Holland). While more generous fans expand the 'Golden Age' of The Simpsons' (Simpson), the recent run has been building towards a separate spinoff 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 and Turner Network (TNT) would likely be screened on ABC or Hulu, should Disney continue producing the Simpsons (Simpson). 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 timelines and their established 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 sharp decline in quality in the series (despite having components that are below average in regard for the desires of fans. Thus, "That 90s Show" fails not only in rewriting its context, 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 tone change in the show, they also have reflected upon the tone-deaf portrayal of the 1990s itself. During the course of the episode many trends 1990s 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...?" For a story we've done before with other characters. The Simpsons' declining quality (Kostarelis), with the conclusion that series' downfall began from Season 11 onwards (despite a brief spike following the narrative into the 1990s; it also fails to satiate its loyal audience by insisting upon its centrality to 1990s pop culture. While other trends associated with the 90s (Seinfeld; Beanie babies; Weird Al Yankovic; Starbucks; MTV VsJ) all feature, it is Homer's supposed invention of grunge which most overly 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 tone of the series, "That 90s Show" has two unmissed qualities: firstly, to capitivate an audience who have grown up with The Simpsons, via an appeal to nostalgia; and secondly, inserting itself into the 1990s as an effort to prove the series' relevance to a new generation of audience members who were born during the "lost decade". Online forums devote to "That 90s Show" (S19, E11) as a flashpoint that exemplifies fan desires for the series' conclusion. 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 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). The failure of "That 90s Show" can be framed in terms of audience reception— namely the response of original audience members objecting to the recontexting 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 screened 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 feels the desire to rescue both Cobain's and The Simpsons' legacy from a poorly thought-out recontext can serve to damage the legacy of both. While other trends associated with the 90s (Seinfeld; Beanie babies; Weird Al Yankovic; Starbucks; MTV VsJ) all feature, it is Homer's supposed invention of grunge which most overly 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 tone of the series, "That 90s Show" has two unmissed qualities: firstly, to capitivate an audience who have grown up with The Simpsons, via an appeal to nostalgia; and secondly, inserting itself into the 1990s as an effort to prove the series' relevance to a new generation of audience members who were born during the "lost decade". 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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 The Simpsons represents an “affectionate 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 standards they once placed in it” (Booth 76). While calls to end The Simpsons have existed since the end of the Golden Age, other fans (Ramaswamy) have suggested it is more difficult to pinpoint when The Simpsons lost its way. Despite airig 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 rewrite history…for the worse” (Canning). In attempting to appeal to the 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. Second, “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-consum ing. …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 Han Kondabolu’s documentary The Problem With Apu which targeted racist stereotypes, and The Simpsons poorly considered response episode (529, 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 (Snierson), 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 “affectionate 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 episodic retcon 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 “[W]e’ll Never Stop The Simpsons”, but equally, we may have reached the tipping point where audiences have stopped paying attention.

References


