

Michael O'Toole, Murdoch University, Australia

Art vs CGI : Integrity and Technology in 'South Park'

Cartoon series such as "The Simpsons" and "South Park" have improved significantly through the use of computerised animation and enhancement. This has been most evident in the speed of production and the realism of the representation of character portrayal and settings, but has also intensified the impact of the modal and compositional functions of meaning-making in TV cartoons.

In the first episode of "South Park" Trey Parker and Matt Stone used construction paper and stop-motion animation, requiring months to produce a somewhat simple-minded story with schematic characterisation, limited facial movement, no crowd scenes and shadows of crepe paper models frequently obtrusive. The quirky characters, both children and adults, the strong sense of community and the self-referentiality of the narrative, which have become trade-marks of the series, were all there in embryo, however.

By the time of the episode "Free Hat" in Season 6 digital techniques had not only speeded up the production process, but had led to richer characterisation, realistic facial expression, authentic speech – except where cartoon schematics were preserved for humour -- , individuality within crowd scenes and graded colour and shading. Most pointedly, it allowed the realistic depiction of recognisable public figures like the talk-show host Ted Koppel and the film directors George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Frances Ford Coppola, who are attacked by the children of South Park for digitally remastering their best-known films, thereby losing, purportedly, their artistic integrity.

In addition to lampooning (verbally, visually and musically) these directors for succumbing to the "Fascist" efficiency of computer animation, Parker and Stone (by now regularly using advanced CGI techniques themselves) represent themselves in a live action insert as "humane" in their remastered version of Episode 1 of "South Park". As always with this series, intertextuality, parody and self-referentiality serve a modal function, bonding viewers with the absurd but honest politics of the child protagonists. Play with sub-frames and destruction of the space between screen and audience exploits the compositional potential of the digitalised audio-visual medium and enriches with purely visual jokes the humour of the story-line.