

Who Killed *The Simpsons*?

by Brandon Kruse

I love *The Simpsons*. That's as simple and elegantly as I can put it. For the entire decade of the 90s, it was hands-down my favorite show on television. I religiously recorded every episode on VHS, saving each season's tape and dutifully labeling the episodes that lie within (and I have now replaced them with the first 10 seasons on DVD). I watched the weekday evening repeats when it hit syndication. I bought all the episode guide books. I traded quotes from the show with my friends and family to the point where it became a second language, and the show's influence can be spotted all over this site, from references peppered into our brief link write-ups to the Baron von Funny section, which took its name from a throwaway joke where Bart once stepped into a whole chicken and declared himself Baron von Chickenpants.

But I don't watch *The Simpsons* anymore. I stopped tuning in to the new episodes about two years ago, in the fall of 2006, and have probably seen only three or four episodes since then. I had to stop. Watching them had become a joyless experience, and I could even feel my disappointment starting to affect my fondness for the episodes from the glory days. It was that powerful.

How does something like this happen? Sure, almost every show falls into a period of decline if it runs long enough (anyone who watched the last couple seasons of *Cheers* can attest to this), but it's very rare to see a show go from being one worthy of multiple viewings of every episode to one barely worth watching at all. What causes such a spectacular fall? It's a mystery that has preoccupied me for quite some time, and a source of sadness for me and many of my friends and family. Over the years, it has become the Lily Kane to my Veronica Mars, compelling me to constantly poke around for clues, consumed by the need to answer one question: Who killed *The Simpsons*?

To start the process of answering that question, let us first identify when the show began to falter. The run of *The Simpsons* can be broken down into fairly specific eras:

Seasons 1-3 (1989-92): The Early Years

The first season of the show was a little more cute and clever than laugh out loud funny; the quality of the writing was already there, but the voiceover work and animation were still works in progress. By Season 2, the show began to hit its stride, with classic episodes like "Bart vs. Thanksgiving," "The Way We Was," and "Lisa's Substitute." Then in Season 3, the show really found its voice, right around the time the "Flaming Moe's" episode aired (November 21, 1991). If there's one episode that you can point to as the moment when *The Simpsons* went from great to transcendent, that's it. And many of the episodes that followed that season continued to raise the stakes, until by spring of 1992, the show's brilliance

was pretty much undeniable by any reasonably open-minded, intelligent person who actually took the time to sit down and watch it. (This does not include former President George H.W. Bush, who a few months later would utter his infamous quote: "We're going to keep trying to strengthen the American family. To make them more like *The Waltons* and less like *The Simpsons*.")

Seasons 4-8 (1992-97): The Golden Age

The single greatest sustained run of excellence in the history of television. 119 episodes, and not a stinker among them (and yes, the whole "Who Shot Mr. Burns?" thing was a bit of a misstep, but those two episodes still contain loads of comic gold). To be a *Simpsons* fan during this era was to live in a perpetual state of bliss. (Especially if, like me, you had all the episodes on VHS.)

Seasons 9-11 (1997-2000): The Past-Its-Peak Stage

For the first time, the show begins to stumble, starting with the second episode of Season 9, the much-maligned "The Principal and the Pauper," in which Principal Seymour Skinner is revealed to be a fraud. (Would that we knew then what we know now – at least that episode has some genuine laughs, including "The rod up that man's butt must have a rod up its butt!") From there forward, every so often, *The Simpsons* would mix a subpar episode in amongst all the brilliance. They were still in the minority, these clankers, and the fact that the show was losing a step was only subtly perceptible – the highs were a little less high, and the lows were a little lower than before.

They closed out Season 11 with their "Behind the Laughter" parody of VH1s, "Behind the Music," an episode that could have reasonably stood as a series finale. If *The Simpsons* had called it quits at this point, they would taken the Sandy Koufax/Barry Sanders/Larry Bird Path to Retirement, leaving at or near the top of their game. They could have turned their focus to making a feature film for release in 2002, allowing their Golden Age writers take a crack at writing the script while they were still pretty golden. They would have staked an almost unbreakable claim to the title of Best Show in the History of Television, a title they have now had to cede to *The Wire*. (And don't get me wrong, I am a huge, huge fan of *The Wire*. But you can't gather your friends and watch a marathon of *Wire* episodes; at least not without wanting to shoot yourself in the face when it's over.)

Seasons 12-14 (2000-2003): The Decline Phase

Season 12 was the first season where the subpar episodes outnumbered the good ones, and that balance dipped even further south in the seasons to follow. The show began to feel a little bit off, something that felt intuitive then and seems more perceptible now with the benefit of hindsight. The giddiness of the Golden Age, the feeling that you were watching master craftsmen doing every little thing right,

began to fade, replaced by a growing sense of concern, building week after week, that something was wrong.

In 2003, when *Entertainment Weekly* published a list of the [Top 25 Episodes in Simpsons history](#), 24 of them came from Season 9 or earlier. And even voice actor Harry Shearer (Mr. Burns, Smithers, Principal Skinner, Ned Flanders) said in 2004: "I rate the last three seasons as among the worst, so Season Four looks very good to me now."

Seasons 15-20 (2003-Present): The "Please Stop, You're Hurting America" Period

The show chooses to take the Steve Carlton/Eric Dickerson/Hakeem Olajuwon Path to Retirement, sticking around long enough past their prime that it becomes obvious to everyone but them that it's time to call it a career. Storylines become less about mundane, everyday family life and more about big events that allow the Simpsons to rub elbows with famous people, and the scripts feature odd, disjointed jokes that seem like they were written in a foreign language and converted into English, leaving most of the humor lost in the translation. An even slightly above-average episode with a handful of laughs (like say Season 17's "Marge and Homer Turn a Couple Play") becomes such a rarity that when you see one, you're stunned. I can't imagine there are fans from the Golden Age who still enjoy the show; odds are that some exist, but I just can't understand how they can reconcile the difference in quality.

So essentially, the show started dying in 2000, with Season 12. Here are some theories about who or what is to blame:

Turnover Among the Writing Staff

Simply put, the show is no longer being written by the same guys who penned the episodes during the glory years. This is my personal pet theory.

Here's a list of the writers who were the credited writer or co-writer on five or more Simpsons episodes during Seasons 1-12, as well as the number of episodes they were credited on:

Richard Appel (7)
Donick Cary (7)
David X. Cohen (13)
Jonathan Collier (6)
Jennifer Crittenden (5)
Greg Daniels (8)
Larry Doyle (6)
Dan Greaney (10)
Ron Hauge (7)
Al Jean (14)
Jay Kogen & Wallace Wolodarsky (10)
Jeff Martin (10)
Ian Maxtone-Graham (7)
George Meyer (11)

Bill Oakley & Josh Weinstein (12)
Mike Reiss (10)
Mike Scully (10)
Sam Simon (9)
David M. Stern (8)
John Swartzwelder (47)
Jon Vitti (17)

Those names might not mean much to most of you, but if you're a die-hard fan of the show, that list is the Simpsons Hall of Fame. They may not have written every joke in the scripts they authored (the process of the Simpsons writing staff has always been described in profile articles as highly collaborative, and many jokes are added or replaced during re-write sessions in the writers' room – George Meyer was the king of this), but collectively, they were the central architects of the show's Golden Age. These 21 writers were credited on roughly 90% of the 249 episodes that aired between Seasons 1 and 11.

For several of them, *The Simpsons* was their first TV writing job; others came from writing for *Late Night with David Letterman* (when he was on NBC), *Saturday Night Live*, HBO's *Not Necessarily the News*, and, of course, *The Tracey Ullman Show*; and writers George Meyer, John Swartzwelder and Jon Vitti were hired largely for their work on a self-published magazine called "Army Man." This was a reflection of an oft-stated belief of the show's producers that the best Simpsons writers were ones who had not picked up bad habits working on traditional TV sitcoms.

By contrast, those same writers have only been credited on about 20% of the show's 179 episodes since Season 12. And among the writers who replaced them, there were fewer unspoiled newbies (there are some that did come from Letterman or *Mr. Show with Bob and David*) and more veterans of the kind of shows Simpsons producers used to strive to avoid: *Married with Children*, *Unhappily Ever After*, *Suddenly Susan*, and *Full House*.

The writing process also seemed to change, judging made by comments George Meyer to MSNBC in 2000: "In the early days, I think, more of the show, more of the episode was already in the first draft of the script. Now there's more room-writing that goes on, and so I think that there's been a kind of homogenization of the scripts. That can be good and bad. I think what I miss is some of the distinctive quality of some of the writers. You could tell, for instance, a Jon Vitti script from a John Swartzwelder script. Now we're a little more likely to toss everybody's contributions into the mix. And as I say, there are advantages and disadvantages to that. Certainly, the shows are more jokey than they used to be. But I think they also lack the individual flavor that they had in the early years."

But what of *The Simpsons Movie*, you may ask. Wasn't that written primarily by Golden Age-era writers (including Meyer), and wasn't it just as disappointing as the last few

seasons of the show? Doesn't that poke a hole in your little theory? To you people, I say: shut up.

Too Many Guest Stars Playing Themselves

As I mentioned earlier, one of the complaints about recent seasons of the show is that the Simpsons universe seems to be inhabited more and more frequently by celebrities. Is this true? Looking at the breakdown between guest stars playing a fictional character within the show vs. guest stars playing themselves, from season to season, there's no pattern or trend. Season 4, quite possibly the series' best, featured just three guest stars playing a character (not counting the yeoman's work of Phil Hartman, who was basically a series regular), but 16 guest stars playing themselves. Prior to Season 12, 51% of the guest stars on the show played themselves. For Seasons 12 through 19, that figure moved to... 53%. So basically the balance hasn't changed.

However, there are two things that appear to be different now. Number one, the number of guest stars per season has definitely increased, ever since about Season 10. For Seasons 1-9, the show averaged 20 guest stars per season. For Seasons 10-19, the show has averaged 29 guest stars per season. (More on this in a minute.)

The second change is in the usage of guest stars. Back in Season 4, when those 16 guest stars paraded through, they did so in small, bit parts, as throwaway gags. Think Adam West getting his driveway plowed by Barney "The Plow King" Gumbel, Leonard Nimoy helping to christen the maiden voyage of the new Springfield monorail, or Barry White stopping by to celebrate, and then speak out against, Whacking Day. All were essentially glorified cameos, perfect little nuggets that added to the story without taking attention away from it. Contrast that with the Season 14 episode "How I Spent My Strummer Vacation," which gave more screen time to Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Tom Petty, Elvis Costello, Lenny Kravitz, and Brian Setzer than Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie combined, because without them, there *was* no story.

The Loss of Phil Hartman

Remember that stuff I said a moment ago about how the number of guest stars went way up starting in Season 10? You know what else happened around that time? Phil Hartman died. Phil Hartman, who from Season 2 until the third episode of Season 10, made nearly 50 appearances playing dozens of characters, most notably incompetent lawyer Lionel Hutz and C-list celebrity Troy McClure. It's generally a bad idea to immediately assume that two coincidentally-timed incidents have a cause-and-effect relationship, but I can't help but think that losing a brilliant voice actor who made 6-7 appearances a year for eight seasons would lead the producers to look to fill the void. Especially with Hutz and McClure, who were big parts of the Simpsons universe.

In fact, it's my belief that losing those two specific characters profoundly hurt the show. Hutz became a key part of any legal disputes and/or court cases, and the Simpsons writers made liberal use of him, even if it was just a one or two-line appearance. Legal disputes and court cases, while not necessarily a part of everyday life, did keep storylines grounded in the Springfield community. And McClure was the writers go-to guy anytime they had a filmstrip or instructional video that needed introducing, or whenever they needed to make fun of dumb Hollywood celebrity behavior. When they lost him, they generally stopped doing filmstrip jokes (which is a shame), and lost a big outlet for celebrity satire (it's harder to do it right to the face of the real person you've just asked to be a guest on your show).

The Loss of Conan O'Brien

This has long been a popular fan theory for the decline of *The Simpsons*, which is dumb because a) O'Brien was only on the show for two years and was a credited writer on just four episodes (and by god, yes, "Marge vs. the Monorail" was brilliant, but it's just one episode, and he's just one man), and b) the show remained great for several years after his departure. Matt Groening has called this idea "one of the most annoying nut posts" on the internet, and he's right.

Matt Groening

He may be right, but in many other ways, he's oh so wrong. The man who put *The Simpsons* on the air is the man who could take it off, but he doesn't seem inclined to do so. In April 2006, he said this: "I honestly don't see any end in sight. I think it's possible that the show will become too financially cumbersome... but right now, the show is creatively, I think, as good or better than it's ever been. The animation is incredibly detailed and imaginative, and the stories do things that we haven't done before. So creatively there's no reason to quit." Sigh. Words cannot describe how disappointing it is to learn that the man who's steering the ship is the most delusional one of all.

Mike Scully's Reign of Terror

Another favorite fan target is writer/producer Mike Scully, who was the show-runner for Seasons 9-12, which, as we discussed earlier, was the period when the show fell from greatness. Scully has been blamed for taking the humanity out of the show, and for encouraging the explosion of "jerkass" Homer, the fan name for the more volatile, callous, oafish version of the character that emerged as the show progressed. But jerkass Homer was on display, in some degree, as early as Season 5, in episodes like "Homer Goes to College," "Boy Scoutz N' the Hood," and "Deep Space Homer," and continued to show up in many other classic episodes over the next few seasons, including "Lisa on Ice," "Two Bad Neighbors," and "Hurricane Neddy," and I can't imagine any reasonable Simpsons fan worth his salt dismissing those episodes as unworthy of the show.

POOP READING

But the real dividing line for those who hate jerkass Homer seems to be the Season 8 episode "Homer's Enemy," which featured the introduction and subsequent death of Frank "Grimey" Grimes. Anti-jerkass Homer fans routinely cite this episode as one of the most flagrant violators, and tend to speak of it in apocryphal terms. I, on the other hand, think it's one of the ten best episodes the show ever did. And I'm not alone. In 2000, Matt Groening ranked the episode as his 6th favorite. In 2007, *Vanity Fair* ranked it as the 7th best episode. And in 2006, Ricky Gervais said it was his favorite, calling it "The most complete episode." Plus, it was written by Simpsons master John Swartzwelder. So if you want to disagree with Matt Groening, Ricky Gervais, John Swartzwelder, and *Vanity Fair*, go ahead, but let's just remember that disagreeing with those four is how Houdini died. I'm just sayin'.

There's a quote from writer/producer Josh Weinstein, who was the show-runner (along with partner Bill Oakley) at the time of the episode, that to me gets to the heart of this jerkass Homer nonsense: "We wanted to do an episode where the thinking was 'What if a real life, normal person had to enter Homer's universe and deal with him?' I know this episode is controversial and divisive, but I just love it. It really feels like what would happen if a real, somewhat humorless human had to deal with Homer." I think that last sentence is the key – frankly, I think most of the jerkass Homer complaints come from fans who are somewhat humorless.

The Length of the Show's Run

In the end, the simplest answer is probably the right one: *The Simpsons* has been on for a long time, and shows that stay on the air for a long time tend to see a dip in quality, as story ideas gradually dry up, no matter how talented the writing staff. *The Simpsons* is now the longest-running prime-time animated series in U.S. television history, the longest-running sitcom, and is tied with *Gunsmoke* as the longest-running scripted prime-time show. Compare its number of seasons and episodes to other classic American TV comedies:

30 Rock: 3 seasons, 42 episodes*
Arrested Development: 3 seasons, 53 episodes
The Office(U.S. version): 5 seasons, 76 episodes*
Taxi: 5 seasons, 114 episodes
The Dick Van Dyke Show: 5 seasons, 158 episodes
Curb Your Enthusiasm: 6 seasons, 60 episodes*
The Larry Sanders Show: 6 seasons, 89 episodes
The Bob Newhart Show: 6 seasons, 142 episodes
The Mary Tyler Moore Show: 7 seasons, 168 episodes
I Love Lucy: 7 seasons, 181 episodes
Newhart: 8 seasons, 184 episodes
The Cosby Show: 8 seasons, 201 episodes
Seinfeld: 9 seasons, 180 episodes
All in the Family: 9 seasons, 202 episodes
Friends: 10 seasons, 236 episodes
MASH: 11 seasons, 251 episodes

Frasier: 11 seasons, 264 episodes
Cheers: 11 seasons, 273 episodes
South Park: 12 seasons, 181 episodes*
The Simpsons: 20 seasons, 428 episodes*

*Denotes shows that are still on the air.

There seems to be a real dividing line around 180 episodes. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Newhart*, and *Seinfeld* all finished at or near that mark, and all three did a good job of maintaining quality right up to the end. Shows like *All in the Family*, *Friends*, *Frasier*, *MASH*, and *Cheers* that went past the 180 mark all suffered in quality in their final seasons, and as *South Park* hits that line, it has certainly grown more hit and miss as well.

And *The Simpsons* 180th episode? "The Principal and the Pauper." I do believe I rest my case.
