

South Park “Scapes”

A CRITIQUE OF DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY AS PORTRAYED IN THE POPULIST MEDIASCAPE

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SOUTH PARK, OFTEN DISMISSED AS TRIVIAL ADULT ANIMATION, IS IN FACT A SPACE FOR DEBATE AND ENLIGHTENMENT. As a show that has a significant association with current events, political and cultural issues as well as economic and environmental issues, South Park, created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, has captured the attention of scholars and viewers alike, both positively and negatively, as a result of its satirical, populist and humorous nature.

As frivolous as it may seem, the underpinnings of the constructs within the series has the potential to tap into the academic sphere as it highlights a societal perception of the nature of design and technology within an active domain.

This paper seeks to discuss the formal critique of design and technology within the American animated series focusing on four episodes that highlight dominant themes within the fields and to create

awareness of the negative implications of said themes in the social and public realm. The first episode, “Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes,” focuses on the theme of consumption in relation to large corporations causing the closure of small and medium enterprises (SME). As the act of consumption increases so does the demand for goods which in return generates competition between brands, products and corporations. The rivalry triggers manufacturing of new products to entice consumers but for new products to succeed old products need to be sacrificed and so the market is faced with the culture of obsolescence. Obsolescence is the dominant theme in the second episode under review, “A Nightmare on Face Time.” It is particularly themed around the obsolescence of DVDs due to downloading and streaming practices.

Streaming, the delivery of video and media in general, became prominent in the late 1990s and early 2000s with further

development of technology and the internet. The internet introduced additional resources through its development such as a space for research, advertising, shopping and communication via email among other forms. However, as beneficial as it is, the internet also poses negative consequences. Dependence on the system is one such consequence and is emphasized in the third episode under review, "Over Logging," which also deals with the activities instilled and the ritualistic role it plays in the everyday. The early period of the millennium welcomed the onset of social networking sites, one of which was Facebook, a leading competitor in the profile driven arena. The final episode under review, "You Have Zero Friends," illustrates the construction of the digital identity in social media, focusing specifically on Facebook.

The result of this critique aims to inform practitioners and academics, within design and technology, of the implications of current threads in the aforementioned fields and the impact they have on the everyday within the social and public realm.

The fictional town of South Park, in Rocky Mountains, Colorado, is home to four fourth graders, Eric Cartman, Kyle Broflovski, Stan Marsh, and Kenny McCormick. These foul-mouthed boys are the main characters of the satirical and politically charged series.¹ Their individual personalities play a significant role in the development and unfolding of each storyline. Cartman is antagonistic and anti-Semitic, sparking rivalry between him and Kyle, the only Jew in the group. Best friends, Kyle and Stan, are continuously trying to show Cartman

the error in his ways but fail to succeed. Kenny, whose tightened hood muffles his voice, comes from a poor background and is mocked as such by Cartman. Despite their unconventional friendship, the four boys are quick to uncover the social impact of the events that take place within their community; especially when it involves their parents who, in the following episodes under review, are often unaware of the error in their ways.

Inspired by the Walt Disney film *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the episode entitled "Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes" tells the story of the introduction of Wal-Mart in South Park which caused dramatic change in the town's economic, social and cultural sphere. Low prices and bulk buying increased the shoppers' desire to buy products that were not always a necessity. The ability to consume more and pay less led to an increased desire to accumulate and in this regard Wal-Mart was depicted as a business which used this trickery to advance its status by being able to provide a constant supply of goods to the consumer. This notion was conveyed in the story when Kyle and Stan approached Wal-Mart, depicted in human form.

Wal-Mart: "The heart [of Wal-Mart] is you the consumer. I take many forms: Wal-Mart, Kmart, Target but I am one single entity, desire."

What we can take from this is that we as a society do not realize that we are being challenged by the way in which we construct our world, our everyday. It is the consumer who gives power to mega stores

by constantly supporting their methods to lure consumers. Scale also entices. The bigger the store, the more products available to the consumer and the wider the variety of goods.² The variety provided by mega store gives the illusion of the lack of alternatives in smaller stores which results in the lack of support of privately owned stores. The phenomenon of the mega store has also tapped into the social identity of communities. When the South Park community became aware of the new addition to their town they felt a sense of accomplishment. Mr. Garrison: It's like we're a real town now!

The establishment was associated with the building blocks of a town, something that was imperative in making South Park a town like any other. This implies that Wal-Mart and other stores like it is crucial in the functioning of society. Social interactions between community members took place more frequently within the store and the shopping culture became a way of entertainment, impacting on routine of the everyday, to shop at any time of the day or night without explanation as to why shoppers insisted on going back.³

The continuous consumption of products, elucidated above, feeds into the cycle of invention and production to the extent that products made prior become antiquated. In order to maintain consumption at an optimum level new products need to be developed to entice consumers. However, for manufacturing to keep up with the demand older products ultimately reach a state of obsolescence, surrendering to the trend that is innovation.

Technological advancements augment obsolescence even further by adding artifacts which are still operational to this category. The episode entitled "A Nightmare on Face Time" addresses the obsolescence of entertainment products such as DVDs in the face of technological advancements that allow individuals to watch movies and broadcast shows wherever they please. Individuals are not restricted to watching their favorite films or television shows at home anymore. The everyday has adapted to the multifunctional nature of smartphones, tablets and laptops in that these technological artifacts afford individuals the opportunity to take their entertainment with them. Devices that restrict adaption and movement have fallen away from the consumer market as a result of this.

Exponential advancement in technology may be inevitable but adapting to new products is not as simple nor is it always positive. Randy Marsh, a member of the South Park community, exemplifies individuals who are not ready to give up systems that still perform by buying a Blockbuster store which he believes has great potential. However, his son Stan exemplifies individuals who do not question the need for new modes of entertainment and attempts to enlighten his father about the inevitability of technological innovation.

Stan: It's awesome [the Blockbuster store]; you should try to get it on that ancient civilization show so that people can see how cultures used to live.

Randy: Oh hahaha [sarcastic tone] I get it. Blockbuster's so out of date it's ancient,

hahaha [sarcastic tone]. But you're wrong. The average person still wants to rent movies they can hold in their hands.

This quote illustrates the nostalgic reference to the relationship between user and object. Technology has removed the tangible and replaced it with weightless existence by introducing systems that store and deliver our media with the touch of a button. Users are deprived of the opportunity to physically experience the products they own and form relationships with those products. Though DVDs are not obsolete, as suggested on South Park, they are heading towards obsolescence due to streaming practices which are associated with convenience.

Companies such as Netflix and Hulu, which are both mentioned in the episode, are among the most popular video streaming sites. Whilst Netflix still offers video rental, Hulu offers on-demand streaming of TV shows and films which are ad-supported. Throughout the episode Randy tries to encourage passersby to rent DVDs from his store to no avail and at the end he succumbs to the technology of the day by watching a film on his son's iPad; the image of an individual who has no option but to embrace a new product and the development of the internet.

With the advancement of technological artifacts permeating the everyday an unfortunate consequence presents itself, that of dependence on the part of the user. The internet may have afforded users with quick accessibility to entertainment and communication but it has also caused a shift in priority of the everyday as illustrated in

the South Park episode "Over Logging". In this episode the internet in Colorado has "dried up" causing mass panic and, in the case of the Marsh family, relocation to the West coast.

The citizens of South Park are at their wits end because without the internet they are left with nothing, no means of communication, no news source and a general inability to surf the net for their amusement. The frantic behavior resembles the reaction a community would have in the face of a natural disaster and the way in which they discuss the lack of internet access is as if they are in the middle of a drought and their water supply has completely run out. The comparison of the internet to a natural resource is further illustrated by Randy's plea to the community.

Randy: And so what have we learned from this ordeal? The internet went away and came back. But for how long we do not know. We cannot take the internet for granted any longer. We as a community must stop over logging on. We must use the internet only when we need it. It's easy for us to think we can just use up all the internet whenever we want. But if we don't treat the internet with the respect that it deserves it can one day be gone forever. So let us learn to live with the internet, not for it. No more browsing for no apparent reason and no more mindlessly surfing on our laptops while watching television!

Society has become so engrossed in and dependant on the availability of the internet that the very notion of its demise causes a sudden rush of despair. It has shifted from

“VIRTUAL SOCIAL SPACES PROMOTE GLOBAL COMMUNICATION.... HOWEVER, WHEN THEY ARE USED TO REPLACE REALITY THEY BECOME A HINDRANCE TO THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL FLOW OF SOCIETY.”

an alternate source of information to a basic human need in parts of the world where the internet is easily accessible. By comparing the internet to water the show implies that society in general believes it to be as important to our survival. Dependency has circumscribed the everyday as a result of convenience that has in turn made the act of surfing the net habit forming.

The community of South Park had become locked-in to the array of spaces to explore on the internet and could, and did, occupy themselves at all times of the day even whilst doing another activity.⁴ The internet has made numerous daily activities effortless so much so that it is as if people are incapable of doing these activities without the use of their gadgets. Communication between individuals via the internet and social networking has also caused a shift in how individuals form and maintain relationships. Facebook, a leading competitor in social networking sites is Facebook which allows its members to conduct multiple activities with their friends as well as providing a platform for people across continents to stay in touch. However, as the final episode “You Have Zero Friends” will demonstrate, the site can have serious implications on the identity of its users.

In this episode Stan’s friends have forced him to join Facebook by creating a profile on his behalf. Stan tries to avoid all Facebook activity but he is soon locked-in when his family and friends question him about the legitimacy of their friendship on Facebook. Throughout the episode Facebook is perceived as reality. For example, the number of friends one has on Facebook determines the number of friends in real life. Kyle’s experience with the site exemplifies this when he loses all his friends on his profile due to befriending an unpopular student in his class.

He reacts as if the loss of friends has occurred in reality and is desperate to restore his friendships online. Therefore, whatever information members decide to make visible on their profile must be true and excluded information requires investigation. This “rule” has serious implications in the social realm as misconstrued information can cause the demise of relationships.

The power that this site seems to have on one’s reality is telling of the control that exists over members of the site. Face to face interaction becomes less important and valid than that on screen which in turn affects the evolution of the profile. The profile is supposed to serve as a description of the person and an explanation of their interests.

Rather it is taken as an opportunity to create an individual who one wishes to be, an elaborate form of the self. A result of this manipulation is the authority that the virtual profile demands of the individual.

South Park does well to explain this phenomenon by putting Stan in a position where he has to enter the virtual world and defeat his now powerful profile in order to survive and consequently deactivate his Facebook account. He describes this process as being “sucked in.” This demonstrates that the destruction of the virtual identity is possible, though challenging, and to be able to take back control one needs to realize that the stronger identity is the one present in reality. Innovation has led us as a society to improvement and success in the advancements we have made in the technological age but this has been achieved through the sacrifice of social standing. Virtual social spaces promote global communication through the above-mentioned technoscapes. However, when they are used to replace reality they become a hindrance to the physical and social flow of society. Technological innovation may be inevitable but the detriment of relationships within communities cannot mimic this exponential growth.

South Park exemplifies a medium that is simplistic in its form yet complex in its function. These self-reflexive messages are transmitted, not only throughout the United States, but on a global scale through mediascapes that transcend beyond its entertainment threshold and into the ideologies of its viewers.⁵ Ideologies of the individual and whole societies are also,

at times, reflected in the images that filter through different media.⁶ In the case of South Park it is quite evident that the thoughts and ideologies of the average consumer and of those who have relationships with the technological innovations mentioned above are strongly depicted in a satirical format. The tone of the message has the ability to come across as mocking and demeaning but the reality of the message is often on par.

It is through these messages and storylines, whether informed by a cut-out society or a vulgar little boy, that design and technology is critiqued and their purpose and influence on its users are questioned. The most important and intriguing aspect of this critique is its “real-time” factor, the way it is positioned in the everyday, not only as an aspect of time but as a ritualistic form.⁷ Design and technology have become so intertwined in ritualistic daily activities that their influences are often made unaware.⁸

As seen by the abovementioned examples, the themes consumption, obsolescence, dependence and the digital identity have social and public implications within the everyday in communities. This is an interesting look at how a populist cartoon uses satire to demonstrate such effects within reality and to illustrate the manner in which individuals react to these themes in design and technology. What one can take away from this is the current implications of such practices and look at it as a way to challenge the current models of evolution inherent in the development of design and technology.

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