

Diversions

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INSIDE DIVE ■ TWO DRAGONS ... "Starksy & Hutch" delivers hilarious, vaguely homoerotic hijinks PAGE 7 ■ THE BLACK HAND ... Ferdinand assassinates the New York indie rock competition PAGE 8

COMIC RELIEF

BY TOM PREVITE STAFF WRITER

Animated programs and comics, once shunned as strictly children's media, now attract older audiences with risqué material and adult themes.

And they're not even real.

Frylock, Captain Murphy and Peter Griffin are animated characters pioneering the trail for mature-minded programs on Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim," a 6-hour block of programming that begins at 11 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays.

"We happen to be doing pretty well against all the competition, except sleep," said Jim Babcock, a spokesman for the Cartoon Network. "We are almost always number one in that time block with young adult viewers."

Although the primetime scene features "The Simpsons," the forefather of mainstream animated content, "Adult Swim" is the first late-night block of animated programming geared specifically toward adults.

"At a certain point, we found that 30 percent of our viewing audience was people over the age of 18," Babcock said. "We were able to take this audience we already had and create a place for them."

The kind of irreverent and edgy content that marks late-night talk shows such as "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and "Late Night with David Letterman" also highlights the creative process involved in "Adult Swim" programs.

The often bizarre "Aqua Teen Hunger Force" unites a meatball, a milkshake and a box of fries as they live in the suburbs of New Jersey. And "Sealab 2021," a parody of Hanna-Barbera's "Sealab 2020," is an off-the-wall program about an idiot captain and his ragtag crew.

"We wanted to find a cartoon that we could repurpose when we were working with Cartoon Network," said "Sealab 2021" co-creator Adam Reed. "My partner and I picked a couple of cartoons, watched them when we were drunk with no sound, and picked the one that we thought would be funniest."

The popularity of "Sealab 2021" comes from the show's tendency to use pop culture references from the 1970s when many viewers were growing up, such as "Star Wars" and "WKRP in Cincinnati."

However, cartoons also gain popularity in adult spheres by diverging from real life media in a way that can't be imitated.

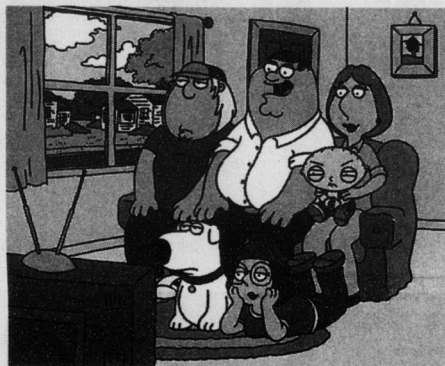
Beyond what Reed calls "crackerjack artwork," cartoons also offer a medium with countless ways of expressing points.

"Cartoons like 'Family Guy' and 'The Simpsons' can do stuff that you can't do in a live action show," Reed said. "(Sitcoms) imagine flash-sideways, but can't take that to anywhere near a cartoon."

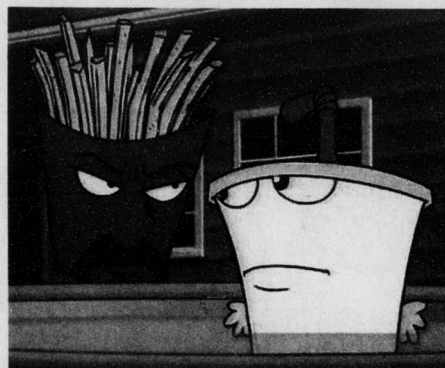
Unlike sitcoms, which are restricted by physical barriers, cartoons have the versatility to show characters doing anything anywhere.

The fluidity of cartoons also allows for

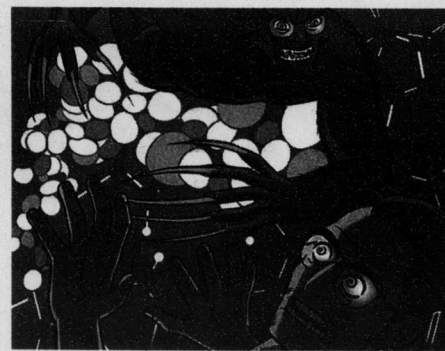
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"FAMILY GUY" COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX



"AQUA TEEN HUNGER FORCE" COURTESY OF CARTOON NETWORK



"X-STATIX" COURTESY OF MARVEL COMICS