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Artist Statement and Research
SMP in Studio Art, 2014

SMP Essay for "Gipetto"

The artwork that I created for my SMP is titled "Gipetto", and it is a 30-minute animated cartoon featuring anthromorphic characters and the topsy-turvy world that they inhabit. The main plot consists of four high school friends showing up at a diner after attending a house party. They begin to recount their night via a series of flashbacks. Then, unbeknownst to the kids, two of their high school teachers walk into the same diner after having a story-worthy night themselves. They, too, retell their tale through flashbacks. The two stories end up converging at the end of the episode.

My friends and I came up with the idea for "Gipetto" in high school. It was originally based around a neutral character named Gipetto, who acts as a fly-on-the-wall to the world of idiots that surrounds him. He and his friends' exploits are based on experiences that my friends and I have had and people who we've known in real life, as well as experiences and characters forged in our imaginations. These inspirations can be retold most accurately using the humor device of stereotypes. We knew the certain type of people who we were trying to characterize, and the form of the cartoon afforded us the license to make those characters even funnier and more exaggerated. In fact, we went as far as to make them animals.

The type of stereotypes and content that we were aiming for are best portrayed through the use of dry and vulgar humor. This fit the style of animation that I was working with-

Flash animation, which is a low-budget software program used to make shows like *South Park.* [1]

Consequently, not only were the stereotypes made more digestible through the animation, but the type of humor was as well.

For past animation projects in previous classes, I've skirted around the idea for using *South Park* as a source. The reason that I never brought myself to do it was because I never viewed the show as enough of a fine-art operative to qualify for use in an art class. But finally, my SMP was the project that proved to be perfect for this type of source. It was necessary to use when the focus of my project became the construction of an entire episode and not just on the art.

Trey Parker and Matt Stone are the creators of *South Park*. That includes the art, the concept, and the characters. The show has a cast of producers now, but Parker and Stone still work actively on the scripts and storylines of all episodes.

Trey Parker grew up in Denver, Colorado. He was the more musical of the two while growing up, participating in theater, chorus, and a host of other music classes and activities. His family, parents Randy and Sharon and sister Shelly, are the namesakes if not the inspirations for Stan Marsh's family in the show.

Matt Stone was born in Houston and grew up in Denver. He was more into film and graduated with a mathematics and film double major from University of Boulder. His family is also represented in the show as Kyle Broflovski's family.

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[1] "Taking South Park Seriously." *Google Books*. Ed. Jeffrey A. Weinstock. State University of New York Press, 2008. Web. 28 Apr. 2014.

The two friends met at Boulder film school and began their collaborating in 1989. In 1992, they made a film called *Jesus vs. Frosty*. It was a precursor to *South Park*, even including some of the characters or at least semblances of them.

After that, the two moved out to Hollywood looking to make it in the movie business. They got a few jobs from large studio execs. Fox commissioned Parker to make a show that was ultimately passed on, but the exec, Brian Graden, was impressed and gave him another task. This was what turned into *South Park*. It was an animated holiday card called *The Spirit of Christmas* and implemented the same crude humor that is used in *South Park* and repeated the same blob shaped characters as in *Jesus vs. Frosty*. The video was such a hit that it made the rounds in Hollywood and got them a few show offers on the spot. Comedy Central got a hold of it, with exec Doug Herzog saying it was "literally the funniest thing I'd ever seen", and they were offered a show from it. The rest is history.

South Park is a cartoon meant for mature audiences. Its trademarks are as follows: low budget animation, political and pop-culture references, libertarian messages, and both tongue-in-cheek and toilet humor. Their style and delivery has drawn both praise and criticism from all parts of the opinionsphere. Stone and Parker have been very candid about the show and the response it induces. They've responded directly to many accusations, and in many cases have had to defend their work, sometimes under threat.[2]

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[2] Franco, Aaron. "Trey Parker & Matt Stone." · *Interview* · *The A.V. Club*. Onion Inc., 19 Mar. 2008. Web. 28 Apr. 2014. <http://www.avclub.com/article/trey-parker-matt-stone-14216>.

What I'm trying to do with *Gipetto* and what Stone and Parker have done with *South Park* intersect at a lot of places. There are three obvious connections, those being the animation/art style, the humor, and the premise. My animation is a little bit different and obviously so is the fact that I'm using animals instead of blob-shaped people. Also, the kids in my show are a little bit older, allowing for a different kind of connection from the audience.

I looked at *South Park* as a model for *Gipetto*. I used it as a gauge for the humor and the boundaries that I should adhere to. I also used it as a gauge for how to balance the humor with other aspects. For instance, I wanted there to be some shock value, but I didn't want the entire show to lean on it. This is what *South Park* does so well, and why it has been so successful. The initial shock of hearing the vulgar things that the characters say is what draws the audience in, but the audience definitely stays for the content and refreshing messages and viewpoints that the show offers. There is even legitimate use of storylines and sincere character development. Striking the right balance in those areas is something that was high on my priority list.

I identify with their humor so much in the way that it shows how imperfect people are. This is a very relatable concept, and it's a great way to dilute the effect of the vulgarity of some of their humor.

There are also a lot of things that the show does that I wanted to stay away from. *South Park*, in its most representational view, is about messages.[3] It takes popular issues and looks at them from a libertarian viewpoint- that meaning an emphasis on free will and a de-emphasis on

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[3] "Taking South Park Seriously." *Google Books*. Ed. Jeffrey A. Weinstock. State University of New York Press, 2008. Web. 28 Apr. 2014.

officious intervention. One of the reasons I feel so closely connected to the show is because I do share many of their viewpoints. In a lot of cases, the show has probably molded some of my own opinions. But I want to stay away from this because I fear becoming too preachy. The way *South Park* incorporates their beliefs is to walk a fine line. One of the smokescreens they use to get away with it is through the use of children as their main characters. My characters are a little bit older and are therefore not as innocent. That's something that I use to my advantage with my humor in a way that South Park cannot. My characters, being in high school, are more aware of the shenanigans that they are getting themselves into. But I do play into the reverse view on authority that *South Park* conveys, where the adults are usually more immature than the kids.

I also touched on issues germane to a different social circle than the ones represented on *South Park*. *South Park* is seen (in most episodes) from the viewpoint of Elementary school kids. *Gipetto* is seen through the viewpoint of high school kids. This leaves for a whole host of different issues, including but not limited to puberty and adolescence and the scenarios that teens face.

We're all animals. That's funny, and that's okay. This school of thought is the main theme of my show. It connects- though not exclusively- with the theme that *South Park* gets at when it portrays the "average American". But instead, *South Park* is saying, "We're all just idiots. That's funny, and that's okay." The style of the *South Park* art is so perfect in its simplicity and straightforwardness to portray the proverbial culture-consuming American.[4] This

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1. [4] McFarland, Melanie. "On TV: Social Satire Keeps 'South Park' Fans Coming Back for a Gasp, and a Laugh." *Seattlepi.com*. Hearst Seattle Media, LLC, 1 Oct. 2006. Web. 27 Apr.

straightforwardness is used not only in the form of the characters but also in their movements and their facial expressions. My characters are built with this model in mind, but not as a guide- more as a reference point. I used animals instead of people. If I wanted to have a more detailed style of art, which is something that I was aiming for, then animals are the perfect conduits for this type of humor. In doing so, I was still aiming to build a world, just as *South Park* has, although I had more freedom to create if I didn't limit myself to real world references.

This project also benefited from a massive amount of collaboration. I did many phases of the project- conceptualizing, writing, audio, and music- with the help of multiple people. The only parts that I completed entirely on my own were the two most time-consuming: drawing and animating, and video editing.

The collaboration wasn't something that came easily for me. I had to figure out how to delegate certain responsibilities to people. In the end, some of the people who I delegated to ended up not coming through or fulfilling their promises. The situations that arose from these debacles were reminiscent of another of my sources, the legendary Max Fleischer.[5]

2014. <http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/tv/article/On-TV-Social-satire-keeps-South-Park-fans-1216014.php>.

[5] "The Animated Life of a Film Giant." *The Jewish Daily Forward*. Unviersity Press of Kentucky, 14 Oct. 2005. Web. 27 Apr. 2014. http://forward.com/articles/2078/the-animated-life-of-a-film-giant/?

Max Fleischer was one of the original feature animators when the industry exploded in the early part of the 20th century. His creations of *Betty Boop* and *Popeye the Sailor* eclipsed Walt Disney's *Mickey Mouse* for a while, making him and Disney the two premier 2D animators of the time.

Fleischer's reign at the top was hindered, however, by his studio's unwillingness to keep pace with Disney's studio technologically and conceptually. Fleischer prodded his studio to do two things that they continually rejected. The first was to invest in the Three Technicolor Process. The studio cited economical reasons for vetoing the request, and in turn allowed Disney to pounce on the opportunity and become the first studio to use the technology.

The second was to produce a full-length animated feature film. Again, the studio rejected this suggestion at first. Then, Disney found unarguable success with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Fleischer's studio finally commissioned a full-length feature film, which would end up being *Gulliver's Travels.* However, the timing of the release was horribly fated with the escalation of the war in Europe, and its success was minimal.

Unlike Fleischer, I wasn't working for a studio. I was working for myself. So while that meant shouldering much more of the workload, it also meant that I could make snap decisions and changes without having to go through a bureaucratic process. Much of the collaboration issues that I faced were in the music department. When I finally decided that I wasn't going to receive the music that I was counting on, I quickly put together some song clips that I found on YouTube. For the purposes of this project, I felt that they were good enough and would suffice.

I also looked at Fleischer as an influence in another category: humor. Fleischer was known for his lewd characters and, more to what I was interested in, dingy backdrops.[6] He was also a master of subtle and subliminal humor. The earliest cartoons had less of a storyline and were more of a celebration/amalgamation of raunchy and lewd visuals that were representative of the Jazz Era. He would place his characters in urban environments, usually decrepit tenements with rotting, crumbling walls and shabby furnishings. I liked the idea of this for my characters because of the type of humor that I wanted: deadpan, almost a commentary on their situations without making the message too overbearing. The settings that we wrote into the scripts definitely allowed for me to incorporate these themes. There was the night diner scene, which can always be made more dingy and depressing. There was also school, which has certain backward connotations, especially if told from the viewpoint of the students. And then there was the party scene. The party scene allowed me to employ a lot of the subtle humor that I had been hoping to be able to use: things happening in the background that might not be caught by the viewer at first glance. These are what truly make a show witty and layered, which is what both *South Park* and Fleischer have accomplished.

My main goal in this project was to make people laugh. We (the other writer and I) took into account our intended audience, the format and setting of the story, and the aesthetic nature when writing the script. We understood that many of these choices may alienate some potential viewers. Some of the audience might even be offended at first. To them I would say

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[6] "Max Fleischer". *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 2014. Web. D27 Apr. 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/89963/Max-Fleischer/biography

this: the characters in the show are animals. I used animals on purpose to be stand-ins for the human deficiencies that are trumpeted in the raunchy humor. Not only am I poking fun at specific stereotypes and situations with which I am familiar, but I am also poking fun at stereotyping and cartoons in general. Again, the low-budget animation at my disposal came in handy when dealing with this objective. Had the quality of animation been more advanced, the level of humor would have needed to follow suit. However, the nonexistent budget ended up working in my favor when making the art, because I wasn't able to rely on technology to do the work for me. I had to rely on my own artistic abilities and imagination, and I think that made for a better product.