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The Gang Beats the Odds: It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia's Consistent Popularity

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In 2004, eighty-five-dollars-worth of digital video tapes made television history. Three undiscovered actors threw together a couple of comedic short films centered on skewed versions of themselves. The first pilot of what was then called *It’s Always Sunny on Television* featured a simple premise: one guy trying to borrow sugar from a friend despite learning that friend might have cancer. Fortunately for Rob McElhenny, Glenn Howerton, and Charlie Day, the FX executives immediately fell in love with these unlovable characters. With a few minor story changes, the series was picked up (Rowles). Twelve seasons later, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* stands as the network’s crowning achievement, a daring and successful comedy with a devoted fanbase. While this sitcom maintains its original quality, other similar shows fall to mediocrity. FX’s *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* has enjoyed steadily high ratings, while other sitcoms falter, through its balance of consistency and originality.

The downward trajectory of a series’ popularity is common. According to the website GraphTV, which charts IMDb ratings over each episode, many well-known American comedies such as *Modern Family*, *The Office*, and especially long-running programs like *The Simpsons* have clearly negative trends in popularity with varying degrees of steepness. In comparison, however, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*’s ratings have remained nearly...
consistent (8.8/10 average on IMDb) throughout the series’ lifespan (Wu). In fact, season 12, the newest season to date, has the highest average rating so far.

The difference in reception is hard to ignore on paper, but viewers of the show are aware of the consistent quality with each new installment. Upon analysis of the series’ arc, there are clear reasons for this quality that can be inferred when comparing it to other series of the genre. To clarify, my deconstruction of the flaws of other shows does not in any way imply that I dislike them. In fact, my ability to dissect them in such a way is largely due to the amount of time I have spent viewing them because of how much I enjoy them. However, there are, undeniably, two main factors that have played a role in these series’ decrease in popularity. By comparison, the writing staff of Always Sunny, mainly consisting of creator Rob McElhenny and main cast members Glenn Howerton and Charlie Day, have more carefully considered these factors while developing the show over the past twelve years: the law of diminishing utility and “jumping the shark.”

Even if the name is not familiar, the concept behind the law of diminishing utility is an obvious one: the more we have of something, the less we enjoy it. Novelty is generally more stimulating than consistency. It seems like a basic idea to keep in mind when writing, but it can be surprising how many television series recycle the same basic premises in multiple episodes.
Take, for example, *Family Guy*’s season 1 episode, “Mind Over Murder” and its season 4 episode, “Model Misbehavior.” The former centers on Lois performing risque song and dance numbers for Peter’s friends in his basement bar. The latter’s premise involves Lois undertaking a modeling career. Both episodes deal with Peter’s jealousy when Lois is ogled by his friends as well as when she ventures into more fulfilling life choices that remove her from her “housewife” monotony.

Ignoring the sexist undertones, these episodes, only a few seasons apart, employ the same plot with the same development, not only in terms of formula, but in terms of actual content. Loyal viewers would have little investment in “Model Misbehavior,” with the ability to easily predict the turn of events given their memory of “Mind Over Murder.”

This repetition also implies that the characters have not changed as a result of their past experiences. By the resolution of the season 1 episode, Peter learns to appreciate Lois’ commitment to keeping the family’s house and lives together, and Lois realizes that she only needs recognition from those she is close with. But these revelations are negated as Stewie uses a time machine to reverse the events back to the opening of the episode. It could be argued that the writers chose this resolution in order to keep the plotline in their repertoire for future episodes within the canon of the series. Sadly, this technique leaves viewers dissatisfied. In fact, even series creator Seth MacFarlane has voiced his distaste with the staleness of the current episodes: “Part of me thinks that *Family Guy* should have already ended … I talk to the fans and
in a way I'm kind of secretly hoping for them to say we're done with it. There are plenty of people who say the show is kind of over the hill” (qtd. in O’Neal).

The *Always Sunny* team, on the other hand, is extremely aware of the law of diminishing utility and the importance of remaining novel in each episode. In fact, they go so far as to lampoon the habit of other comedies to reuse their previous arcs. In the season 8 episode, “The Gang Recycles Their Trash” the characters rehash a nearly identical plot as the season 4 episode, “The Gang Solves the Gas Crisis,” but the writing is replete with self-referential humor and unexpected reversals of the original plotline. This awareness of not only general sitcom tropes, but even tropes within the series itself, is a vivid representation of the writers’ talents and passion for continuing development of the series.

On the topic of development, character change over time is also an integral part of negating diminishing utility. This development is often the focus of dramatic series, but comedies often suffer from tired characters that fall into confined roles and traits that become stale. As Rob McElhenny himself has articulated, the actors often grow more than their characters: “I was watching a very popular sitcom, and I noticed the people were getting better and better looking as the seasons were going on” (qtd. in Stanhope).

*As Always Sunny* has progressed, each character has changed drastically from their season 1 selves, and certainly not for the better. Dennis was a ladies’ man burst forth from the
comfort of the upper class, but is now a probable serial killer who struggles to avoid the label “white trash.” Dee was an aspiring actress with astronomical self-worth relative to her failed current state. Once-literate Charlie is now a trash-eating janitor with a loose grasp on reality. Frank was an accomplished millionaire accustomed to suit and tie, but now wears cheetah costumes for fun while he slips into senility. In obsessive efforts to conquer his own suffocating closeted homosexuality and body dysmorphia, Mac has put his body under immense trauma. In fact, to protest his observance of other sitcoms, Rob McElhenny (who plays Mac) gained 50 pounds of fat for season 7, which not only serves as “a funny sight gag, but also a very believable evolution for the character” (Stanhope). Then, in the latest season, Mac finally comes out of his aforementioned closet, admitting to the gang his sexual orientation in order to sign a legal document that gives him ownership of a two-dollar lottery ticket (it’s a long story; watch the episode, “Hero or Hate Crime?”). For the remainder of the season, he embraces his new lifestyle, making this revelation “irrefutable proof that these characters can develop beyond the end credits of a single episode” (Bramesco). Compare this again to Family Guy: Peter Griffin is as much an apathetic, moronic drunkard as he was in the pilot episode, “Death Has A Shadow.” His motivations and characteristics remain constant, meaning his actions are predictable, diminishing any chance for suspense that might have otherwise kept a viewer invested.

There is a threshold, however, at which keeping a series “fresh” can go too far. This is most commonly known as “jumping the shark,” referring to the infamous scene from the season 5 premiere of Happy Days, in which Fonzie literally jumps over a shark while on water skis. It has since come to refer to a point when a series has overstepped its bounds in an effort toward originality, largely because the development team has emptied their repertoire of new ideas.
A more current example can be seen in the final season of FX’s *The League*. The series as a whole is ridiculous and exaggerated, especially when recurring character Rafi (Jason Mantzoukas) is involved. However, the absurdity is grounded in a typical reality that viewers could recognize. Of course, these characters could not survive in the real world, but everything that they do is actually possible...until this episode. After a trip to Puerto Rico (a two-part animated episode in a wholly live-action series, strangely enough), Rafi returns with an actual chupacabra. This mythical creature is released at his sister’s funeral, purely for comedic effect.

Although this is a hectic and humorous event, it contradicts the world that has been built over seven seasons, leaving the viewer with questions about the foundation of the series that will never be answered. Of course, the writers did have the end in sight, and perhaps they wanted to reject the rules of storytelling when there were no consequences for them professionally, but it unfortunately leaves a bad taste in the viewer’s mouth after an otherwise enjoyable series run. When the world becomes suddenly unfamiliar, the motivation to return to that world is diminished, which has a negative effect on popularity, as seen with the final season of *The League* which was its lowest rated.

*Always Sunny* succeeds because it is able to counter the law of diminishing utility without “jumping the shark” (or “releasing the chupacabra,” as in *The League’s* case). The series has not been afraid to try new ideas that fascinate the viewer, but this originality has remained within the confines of the world that the characters reside in. Take, for example, the season 11 episode, “Being Frank.” Here, the show strays from its usual omniscient live-action form to an entirely first-person view from within Frank’s mind. As an homage to the 1999 Spike Jonze film *Being
John Malkovich, we follow Frank on a typical day’s interactions with the gang and other favorite characters of the series, while gaining insight on his thought process through voice-over. Although this is a complete deviation from the typical structure of the show that fans have grown used to, it offers a closer look at the character through which new aspects of his psyche are revealed. And while this episode is entirely novel as far as the series is concerned, it is not a departure from the reality of the universe. The main cast of characters is involved in another of their wacky schemes, and, as usual, Frank appears to know little about what is happening, due to his increasing age and abuse of substances. While viewers are treated to new information, what they know about the show has not been contradicted.

A further example of this balance is a scene from another season 11 episode, “The Gang Goes to Hell.” When the gang is trapped in a flooding room, where it appears their demise is imminent, Dennis embarks on an emotional monologue during which he apologizes to Mac for having ripped up all the letters that his father sent to him from prison. He sobs passionately, taking the tone of the show to an until-now unseen depth. However, it is revealed quickly that Dennis is using a slice of an onion balled in his fist to elicit the tears and the humor returns. This revelation of Dennis’ mistreatment of Mac, especially when dealing with a sensitive issue, certainly affects the relationship of the characters, as Mac’s dependence and reverence for Dennis is reduced. This development, though, is balanced by the adherence to what viewers know of Dennis: that he is a sociopath incapable of genuine emotion. Again, novelty is taken to
the appropriate lengths to keep viewers engaged, while honoring the canon of the show. In this manner, fans of the series are actively participating in the narrative in that they struggle to predict the outcome of these unexpected events, while their loyalty is not betrayed by the writers presenting contradictory information.

As other sitcoms struggle to maintain a fanbase, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* has transcended the typical decline in series popularity by balancing originality with consistency. The characters continue to develop in interesting but integrated ways as the series progresses. The writers venture into new territory with episodes like “Being Frank” and “The Gang Goes to Hell,” while being careful to maintain reliability within the show’s universe and characters. For convenience, all of the episodes detailed and analyzed above are available on Hulu; studying these and the rest of the series is highly encouraged for anyone interested in storytelling. As *Always Sunny* continues to air, the show is worth active attention due to its brilliant writing. And, it’s hilarious.
Works Cited


Wu, Kevin. *GraphTV*. http://graphtv.kevininformatics.com/