No Longer "As Crappy as Possible"?: Cult Sensibilities and the High-Definition Revisioning and "Unbleeping" of Early Seasons of *South Park*

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Abstract:

This article will consider the recent "remastered" editions of the first twelve seasons of the Comedy Central animated series *South Park* (1997-), and the impact that this may have upon the meanings associated with the original episodes. The show is now produced in a high-definition format, and most circulating versions of new instalments present any swearing "unbleeped." These choices were not present from the very beginning of the series, however, and retrospectively applying them to past works serves to complicate the linear production history of the show. *South Park* has been quite vocal

in its criticism of the revisionist practices of directors such as Steven Spielberg and George Lucas (most notably in the episode "Free Hat", airdate 07/10/2002). As such, this decision to submit to an apparently similar process raises questions about *South Park*'s "cult" status, and the previous tendency to celebrate its (self-professed) "crappy" aesthetics. The show's remarkable longevity offers a valuable case study into the complexities and contradictions of preserving television history, while also attempting to maximize a text's profitability and "afterlife" in the online streaming marketplace.

In anticipation of the twentieth season of *South Park* (1997-), the production company South Park Studios released a live-action trailer on YouTube entitled "We've Been There" (2016). It begins with a man holding his newborn child, while the pilot episode of the show – "Cartman Gets an Anal Probe" (airdate 08/13/1997) – plays on a screen in the background. This is followed by a faux-sentimental montage in which we see father and daughter passing key milestones in the next two decades of their lives, punctuated by shared experiences of watching crude moments from *South Park*. The clips from the show reiterate how often it has pushed at the boundaries of perceived acceptability, with certain "landmark" instalments breaking taboos on basic cable television that would likely have seemed unthinkable when the series first debuted. The sequence also acknowledges the passing of time in other ways: we initially see the protagonists viewing episodes on a CRT television and on a (now long obsolete) Apple iMac computer, before transitioning to a flat-screen LCD TV, a tablet, and a mobile phone.

The remarkable longevity of *South Park* provides a valuable case study for the changing landscape of television production and exhibition. The show debuted during a significant period of

growth for cable, at a time when "roughly 65 percent of U.S. households" had begun paying to supplement their home entertainment experiences beyond the major free-to-air stations (Lotz 2018, 11). Almost a quarter of a century later, *South Park* exists within a "post-network era" (Lotz 2014, 8), in which viewing has been transformed by the popularity of "digital production technologies [and] internet distribution" (Robinson 2017, 17). In order to stay competitive, *South Park* has responded to these new circumstances. Although each instalment of the series is still produced with the intention that it will premiere on Comedy Central, the show is now distributed across a growing number of on-demand platforms, most of which do not necessarily have to abide by the same content restrictions as basic cable. Since 2007's eleventh season, "uncensored" (in the terminology of the show's producers) versions of new episodes have been made available on home video and online, removing the audio "bleeps" required to mask swear words during the initial television broadcast. Starting with the thirteenth season in 2009, the show has been produced in widescreen and in high-definition, reflecting not just the changing shape and resolutions of television screens, but the variety of other devices upon which it is now possible to watch media content.

The primary focus of this article, however, is less on the specifics of the ongoing formal evolution of *South Park*, but rather on how this evolution has impacted the circulation of the earlier episodes of the series. Around the same time as season thirteen was announced, it was revealed that the pre-2009 seasons of the show would be re-rendered in high-definition and widescreen formats, and that home video and streaming releases of these new versions would similarly remove the original broadcast bleeps where possible ("Season 13 Premiere" 2009).[1] The consumption of these updated works serves to complicate the linear production history of *South Park* from one season to the next. As Nicholas Rombes (2010, 201) asks: "what is a [text's] historical place in time when it exists in numerous 'restored' versions?" Do the standard-definition versions of the early shows still count as

the "originals" or has their meaning been largely supplanted by the HD "upgrades"? This is especially pertinent in the case of *South Park*, which has traditionally promoted its status as a "cult" text. Joanne Hollows (2003, 49, 46) argues that such works establish and sustain this capital "by processes of 'othering'" – essentially placing their "transgressive" acts in relation to (and in opposition to) other, usually more widespread, trends. The decision to remaster early seasons of *South Park* risks muddying this process, potentially exposing the (often downplayed) intersections between cult performativity and the show's expanding corporate business interests.

South Park emerged in an era in which cable stations regularly adopted a strategy of "narrowcasting" – the production of lower-budgeted series which would likely entice a comparatively modest, but (it was hoped) highly-motivated, audience group (Sandler 2003, 94, 92). Amanda D. Lotz notes that *Duckman* (1994-1997), an early made-for-cable animated sitcom, distinguished itself with a unique, rather adult "comedic voice […that] was as likely to turn viewers away as passionately engage those who shared its sense of humor" (2018, 34)**.** Narrowcasting thus made a virtue of its "precisely targeted content" – which could still be monetized through the carefully-targeted advertising spots sold between the programs – compared to the apparent blandness of shows aimed at "the entire family," the conventional strategy of free-to-air networks (Lotz 2014, 27). Drawing on John Thornton Caldwell's concept of "televisuality," Glen Creeber argues that cable stations (and the individual texts found on these channels) "began to flaunt their own look and aural space," promoting idiosyncratic programming in an attempt to attract a desired demographic (2013, 52). In terms of animation, Mark Langer notes that a recurrent strategy in the 1990s for attracting a dedicated subculture of adult consumers (the "animatophile") was to embrace a variant of a "trash aesthetic (or perhaps more correctly, a trash practice), which examined the detritus of mass culture and recombined it to produce cultural capital." He suggests that "hallmarks of cheapness and bad taste within the total

culture," such as the use of limited animation and other supposedly low-quality production methods, "now became icons of rarity and desirability among animatophiles" (2004, 164-165).

South Park offers a highly-visible example of the effectiveness of this practice, but also demonstrates the potential contrariness of using this as a means of capitalist product differentiation. The show is the creation of Trey Parker and Matt Stone, and is adapted from two of their short films, both entitled *The Spirit of Christmas* (1992 and 1995). The films were crudely animated using paper cutouts, and feature a group of child protagonists in a holiday-themed narrative filled with violence and profanity. Bootleg copies of the latter short began to circulate within the industry and online, with Parker and Stone – both still under thirty at the time, and with few established film or television credits – quickly valorized for their amateurish, "do-it-yourself" production methods.[2] The perceived cult value of the *Spirit of Christmas* shorts, and the *South Park* series that followed, was heavily rooted in the distinctive, unapologetic coarseness not just of the subject matter, but of the animation style as well. E. Ann Kaplan argues, however, that "the level of any one text's production – in which individuals might have artistic ambitions and an aesthetic (or even an anti-aesthetic) end in mind – is completely irrelevant once […that text] becomes a commodity" (1987, 52-53). In reality, *South Park* – like many narrowcasted cable shows – operates within the precarious category of the "mainstream cult" text (see Hills 2010). Its very existence relies on the continued patronage of a large corporation – Viacom, the top-level owners of Comedy Central – which expects the show to maintain certain viewing figures and exploit subsidiary revenue streams in order to remain financially viable (Cantor 2013, 191). *South Park* has also been acknowledged by the industry elite: numerous episodes have won Primetime Emmy awards, and the feature, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (1999), received an Academy Award nomination. In an attempt to distance themselves from this system (and the

inevitable accusations of "selling out"), Parker and Stone have adopted evolving strategies of "othering" (to return to Hollow's term) to reiterate *South Park*'s continued "cult" credentials.

The show's crude visuals permitted an early exploitation of Internet video culture (something which, in itself, harkened back to the "outsider" distribution methods of the original *Spirit of Christmas* shorts). During this period, inefficient video codecs and slow data transmission discouraged the online viewing of most film and television productions. By contrast, as Brian L. Ott notes, *South Park* was "low bandwidth and ideal for download" (2003, 221). The large block colors privileged by the show's "paper cutout" aesthetic could be much more easily compressed down to an acceptable file size than higher quality animation or photographed live-action footage, with any remaining video artefacts seemingly reiterating the show's wider "trash" identity. In the early-2000s, Parker and Stone contributed to this discourse by implicitly endorsing access of "pirated" digitized episodes from fan websites (Johnson-Woods 2007, 61, 44). This stance was further underscored by the production of "Christian Rock Hard" (airdate 10/29/2003), which parodied the overly punitive legal actions taken by music companies in response to illegal downloads. Although the industry still generates huge profits, the episode presents sarcastically emotive scenes in which celebrities adjust to the lost income: Britney Spears, for instance, is required to downgrade her private jet to a slightly less luxurious model (without "a remote control for its surround sound DVD system"). *South Park* thus seemingly presented the web as a democratic space, with the show's visual style perfectly suited for sharing freely online.

Since this time, however, the Internet distribution of *South Park* has in fact become much more intensively regulated, roughly coinciding with the decision to revamp the early seasons, and generating significant financial rewards for the show's creators. In 2007, Parker and Stone "signed a profit-sharing deal with Viacom for advertising revenue made from content hosted at the program's

online home, southparkstudios.com" (Marx 2012, 175). In 2014, the American streaming rights to *South Park* were leased exclusively by Hulu – gating the series behind a subscription paywall – with the South Park Studios website offering only a limited, rotating selection of (ad-supported) episodes to watch for "free" (Jarvey 2014). Hulu's deal ended in 2020, leading to HBO securing a multi-year contract to offer *South Park* as part of its newly-launched streaming service, HBO Max, reportedly bidding over $500 million for the domestic (United States) rights alone (Low 2019). Furthermore, in August 2021, Parker and Stone inked a new deal with Viacom – claimed to be worth $900 million – which not only guaranteed *South Park*'s future as a television series until at least its thirtieth season (scheduled for 2027), but also saw the announcement of fourteen separate *South Park* "movies" to be released exclusively, two per year, on yet another subscription-based streaming service, Viacom's own Paramount+ (Parker and Weprin 2021). The more forceful online exploitation of the series – bolstered by the significant back catalogue of newly-remastered episodes – has thus allowed *South Park* to expand well beyond its narrowcast origins, but the content is now offered to viewers on a more restrictive, and arguably more openly profit-driven, set of terms.

The series nonetheless continues to engage in acts that, on the surface at least, appear to bite the hands that feed it, taking vicious jabs at celebrities, public figures, and major organizations. In 2018, the show's Twitter account promoted the "#cancelsouthpark" hashtag, arguing for its own unsuitability in an era of (perceived) heightened sensitivity. The most recent "full" season in 2019 (due to the pandemic's impact on production) aggressively lampooned corporate censorship surrounding the Hong Kong protests, following criticisms that companies such as Blizzard Entertainment and the NBA have limited the free speech of affiliates in order to preserve wider Chinese business interests. This led to *South Park* itself being banned in China: a decision which not only marked the loss of a viable market for the show, but which also reportedly dissuaded one major

corporation – Apple – from bidding for the American streaming rights of older episodes (Tenbarge 2019). As Nick Marx (2012, 175) suggests, however, it is "important to consider how these moments [of controversy] function outside of the discursive realm, and in real day-to-day business decisions." For *South Park*, this can be viewed as another example of "othering": the series continues to profess an edgy and anti-establishment stance – the punning title of the episode "Band in China" (airdate 10/02/2019) overtly signals the desire to generate controversy – while shifting audience attention away from the commercial imperatives underpinning the brand. Although risky, these actions seem to have helped, rather than hindered, the show's overall profitability: *South Park* was not actually canceled by Comedy Central despite the tongue-in-cheek Twitter campaign, and the streaming rights continued to be fought over by several other major media groups before HBO secured the deal. Indeed, even the decision to privilege serialized, rather than entirely standalone, narratives in recent seasons – an act which could, on the one hand, be viewed as a bold shakeup of the series' established, proven formula – nonetheless demonstrates a canny exploitation of the on-demand media landscape, where viewing numerous episodes back-to-back (and, crucially, in release order) has become a profitable aspect of the "binge-watching" culture associated with streaming services, compared to the more haphazard access offered by "linear television" (Jenner 2018, 109).[3]

Although *South Park* has thus become much more visibly aligned with corporate culture in recent years (especially following the creators' headline-grabbing deals with Hulu, HBO, and Viacom), it is important to re-emphasize that these elements were baked into the series from its very inception. Indeed, as will be elaborated further below, it is the very contradiction at the heart of the show's production methods – an analog aesthetic but digital execution – that permitted the eventual "remastering" of the early seasons. The first version of *South Park*'s pilot episode was entirely hand-animated using construction paper puppets, just like the *Spirit of Christmas* shorts, but took over three

months to complete (Parker and Stone 2002a), making it an unsustainable practice for an ongoing series. From the second episode onward, and reflecting the significantly higher budget relative to Parker and Stone's previous work, *South Park* has been animated using computers. This hugely sped up the process, meeting Comedy Central's requirement for mass production of episodes. At the same time, however, and in another instance of the show's creators developing an atypical approach while broadly working *within* the system, this quickly facilitated a (somewhat chaotic) production schema wherein most instalments are written, performed, and animated in the week leading up to broadcast.[4] Although the use of computers was acknowledged in contemporary publicity, Parker and Stone (2002b) also emphasized how important it was – and how hard they worked – to ensure that they were still capturing the "shitty" aesthetic of construction paper animation during the transitional period from pilot to series. In particular, they highlight the irony that state-of-the-art technology of the era (including software that had been used on big-budget features such as *Jurassic Park* [1993]) was being pushed to its limits in order to complete tasks such as creating shadows between the characters and the scenery – essentially faking the sorts of production "defects" that would occur if a physical paper cutout was not overlaid carefully onto the background (fig. 1). As Eric Stough, the director of animation during the show's early seasons, noted: "We don't want it to look computery. […] We want it to look as crappy as possible" (quoted in Cheplic 1998, 40).

Figure 1. Digital shadows added to approximate paper cutout animation in Weight Gain 4000 (airdate 08/20/1997).

The switch to digital methods nonetheless enticed *South Park*'s producers to slowly "improve" the show's aesthetic as production continued, even before the more visible shifts to widescreen and high-definition. Speaking during the creation of the sixth season, Parker and Stone (2002b) noted that computers had already progressed so much since the show had started, and tasks that had previously caused them so much trouble could now potentially be achieved with relative ease on consumer-level hardware. The series has embraced advances in technology, and while the designs of the main characters continue to harken back to their construction paper roots, new episodes also

regularly feature more complex animation, depth, and shading. Michael O'Toole (2014, 241) points to "Free Hat" (airdate 07/10/2002) as an early example of these improvements, noting the presence of crowd shots containing more than one hundred protestors – well beyond what had been possible in the show's first seasons – with a "diversity of signs being waved […], a range of movements in the crowd, and even individualized facial expressions." As Eric Stough remarked during the production of "Super Fun Time" (airdate 04/23/2008): "There's things that we do today that, you know, ten years ago Trey [Parker] was, like, 'No, I don't want them to look that good.' But now it's kind of expected" (quoted in "Six Days to *South Park*" 2008).

Such progression is not necessarily a bad thing, although there is always the risk of alienating long-running fans by appearing to abandon the rebellious, seemingly slapdash approach of the initial works. The series has traditionally been careful, then, to reiterate its "trash excesses" and professed "handmade look" over and above its developing technical achievements (Caldwell 1995, 194, 196). In the episode "Fourth Grade" (airdate 11/08/2000), broadcast midway through the fourth season, the show debuted a new title sequence, in which the usual visual style is interrupted by a gratuitous explosion. This is followed by a techno remix of the *South Park* theme song, underscoring shots of three-dimensional computer-generated models of the characters, with bold on-screen text making statements such as "COOLER," "BETTER ANIMATION" and "YOU LOVE IT" (fig. 2). As Parker admits, however, the credits were intended as a joke, one that is quickly revealed when the episode itself begins, and reverts to "the same crappy animation you've always seen" (Parker and Stone 2004b). Although, as noted above, this is not strictly true – given the subtle "improvements" that were already being integrated into the show by this point – the juxtaposition of the more obviously "high-tech" 3D models and the flat, "simplistic" artwork that follows serves to emphasize just how different *South Park* still looks compared to other television cartoons. At the beginning of season six, the

credits changed again, this time incorporating sped-up footage of an (unidentified) pair of live-action hands cutting out bits of paper and assembling the four main protagonists, overlaid onto clips from previous episodes (fig. 3). A variant of this sequence featured until the end of season eleven. The process of mythologizing the show's production – continuing to imply the presence of physical construction paper – is indicative of the value of this aesthetic to *South Park*'s cult identity, especially in its first decade.

Figure 2. Parodic CG "improvements" to the South Park title sequence in "Fourth Grade".

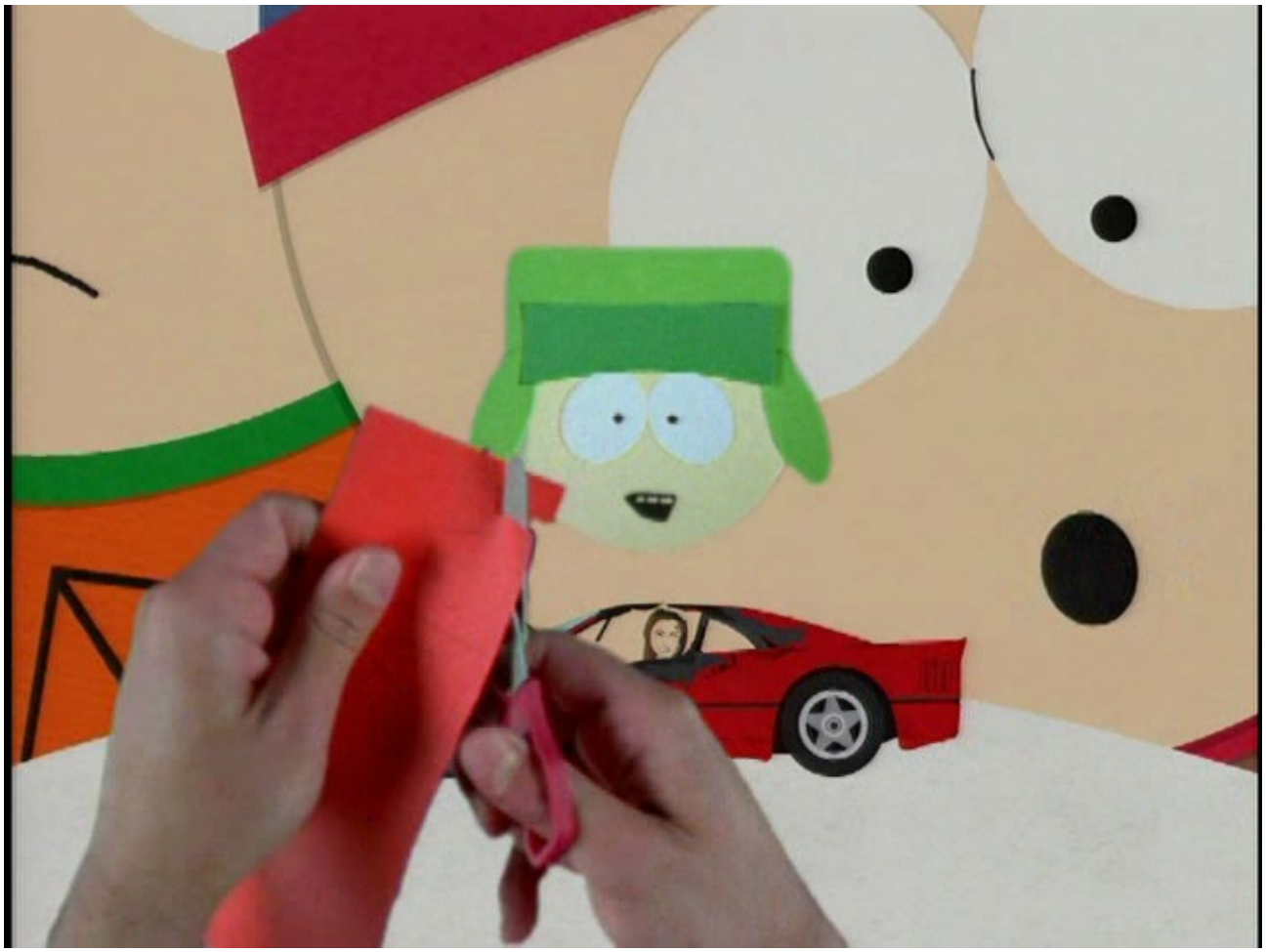


Figure 3. Suggestion of paper cutout animation in South Park's titles (episode "Jared Has Aides" [airdate 03/06/2002]).

Parker and Stone have further demonstrated "otherness" by showcasing their fan, and often "anti-fan" (Gray 2003), responses to other cult artists who have seemingly abandoned their initial principles in the face of new technological – and commercial – possibilities. A revealing example, for the purposes of this article, is the representation of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg in the instalment "Free Hat." The episode begins with *South Park*'s protagonists watching previews in a movie theater. One of these advertisements is for the twentieth anniversary edition of Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982), which had been released in cinemas just a few months before the episode's airdate. *South*

Park's version of the trailer hyperbolically touts the "improvements" that can actually be seen in the 2002 edit of the film: the inclusion of new computer-generated images instead of some older physical effects, and (reflecting newfound sensitivities "in the wake of 9/11"), the substitution of the word "hippie" in place of "terrorist," as well as the digital erasure of guns carried by federal agents, replaced instead by walkie-talkies (Guins 2009, 141). This is quickly followed by parodic announcements for other (supposedly) planned re-releases, including a new version of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) which refrains from saying the word "Nazi," and which again replaces all of the guns with walkie-talkies. There is also yet another version of *Star Wars – Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), referencing the controversial alterations already made by George Lucas for the "Special Edition" of the film released theatrically in 1997. The show's characters are outraged, questioning "why don't they leave those movies alone?! We liked them the way they were!" The episode involves them setting up a club to protect classic films from the "modernizing" whims of their directors, ultimately finding themselves waging a battle against Lucas and Spielberg to prevent a re-edit of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).

Parker and Stone have acknowledged that two of *South Park*'s child characters – Stan Marsh and Kyle Broflovski – regularly serve as stand-ins for themselves (Weinstock 2008, 8). Indeed, the attitudes presented in "Free Hat" align less with a group of eight-to-ten year old boys, and more with a particular generation of viewers – much closer to the ages of Parker and Stone, and perhaps even *South Park*'s core demographic – surveyed in Will Brooker's 2002 study of the *Star Wars* phenomenon. This consists primarily of those "who saw the first [*Star Wars*] film in the cinema as kids and are now [at the time of the book's publication] in their early to mid-thirties." For this group, the alterations to the original trilogy (as well as some of Lucas' decisions in the prequel films) generate everything from "a vague sense of disappointment to a feeling of outright betrayal" (Brooker

2002, 83, 79). “Free Hat” tends towards the more forceful end of the spectrum: as Stan states in his attempt to recruit protestors to the cause (and also staring straight into the virtual “camera” at the episode’s viewer): “Don’t you see what’s happening out there?! The films that *you* all grew up with, that touched *your* lives and are a part of *your* soul, are now being updated and changed.” The episode portrays Lucas and Spielberg as greying and somewhat bloated figures, making frequent reference to them as “aging filmmakers” who have gone “insane.”

Criticisms of altering the past are also explored in “Free Hat” via a fake, live-action advertisement that interrupts the animated narrative. Parker and Stone appear as themselves – the “*South Park* creators” – touting a supposed re-release of the pilot episode on DVD, where the older style of animation is being replaced with three-dimensional models and extra effects:

> Parker: When we first made *South Park*, we didn’t *want* to use construction paper, we just *had to* because it was cheap.
>
> Stone: And now with new technology we can finally remaster *South Park* to make it look sharp, clean, and focused.
>
> Parker: And expensive!

As the trailer cuts between the original footage of the pilot episode and the mocked-up remaster, the voiceover humorously claims that “all the *charm* of the simple little cartoon will *melt before your eyes* as it is replaced by newer and more standardized animation” (emphasis mine). The satirical implication is that the original versions of Spielberg’s and Lucas’ films (and even old episodes of *South Park*) occupy a particular place in history – warts and all – and that changing them in any way risks losing what made them so special in the first place. Parker and Stone’s decision to put themselves

within the show serves to foreground their own authorship of *South Park*, but also separates them from the excesses of the filmmakers criticized in the episode. They are presented as a younger generation, who are able to make fun of themselves, and who are clearly in possession of the subcultural capital that allows them to understand fandom's concerns about "remastered editions" – unlike the bullheaded Spielberg and Lucas, who are shown to have lost their way.

How, then, do the apparent morals of "Free Hat" actually apply to the continued existence of *South Park* itself? The notion of a singular version of a *South Park* episode is admittedly problematic, even in its early years. Due to the rushed nature of the show's production, Toni Johnson-Woods states that there was often no time "to catch, let alone correct, mistakes. Fans are of course quick to note errors, which are remedied for the second airing" (2007, 17). Thus, the first broadcasts of certain instalments are essentially ephemeral, and do not necessarily constitute the "official" or "privileged" edition of the text that continues to be distributed and seen. However, the schedule at South Park Studios – where a new instalment usually needs to be written and completed within a matter of days – has fostered a culture in which the creators essentially have no choice but to "move on" from an episode after it airs.[5] The fixing of small technical issues, undertaken shortly after an episode's initial broadcast, have historically been the only revisions endorsed by the creators. This would arguably not open up Parker and Stone to the same kinds of criticisms leveled at Spielberg and Lucas in "Free Hat." Traditionally, any alterations have been minor, and have occurred before any given episode could permeate widely in popular culture – unlike, for instance, *Star Wars*, where modifications have been more substantial and have mostly occurred many years after the fact. During *South Park*'s first decade, then, the continued circulation of the show on television, VHS, and DVD essentially reproduced the original (or, if necessary, slightly "corrected") broadcast version, with no further changes to content.[6]

The packaging of *South Park* on physical home video – predating its subsequent exploitation on streaming services – may nonetheless have played a role in the eventual decision to make changes to the early seasons of the show. Although the series was released on VHS and DVD almost immediately after its debut, initial offerings contained only a handful of episodes per volume. The issuing of *South Park* as complete season DVD boxsets, with more substantial supplementary content, did not begin in the United States until 2002. In the audio commentaries recorded for these versions, Parker and Stone acknowledge that they generally do not choose to re-watch episodes after their completion, and do not always hide their displeasure about being required to do so in order to satisfy the demands of DVD (and latterly Blu-ray) culture. While South Park Studios now tends to assemble special features for a video release during and/or shortly after the completion of a given season, the commentaries for earlier instalments were produced retrospectively, and thus created a stark contrast between the older, revisited work and the current incarnation of the show. For instance, in the Blu-ray commentary for *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, recorded more than a decade after the theatrical release, there are numerous moments in which Parker and Stone (2009) refer to the film as looking "junky," poorly framed, and "pretty hard […] to look at." On these occasions, their criticisms appear fairly earnest, relative to the defiant tone of early publicity and its celebration of the show looking "as crappy as possible." Indeed, the commentary does actually refer back to *South Park*'s previous stance in "Free Hat," with Parker noting that:

> We used to rip on George Lucas and Steven Spielberg for […] changing *E.T.* and *Star Wars*, and… I kind of understand now where they come from. […] It's hard for me to watch this and [not] be, like, "oh, well let's just re-animate that real quick and make it look nicer and better." But obviously that would be bad because then it's not what it was.

Parker later humorously reiterates his stance that "we're not going to fix it, George and Steven! We're not going to go back and fix it!" (Parker and Stone 2009). Curiously, though, it is also mentioned that the commentary was being recorded during the production of *South Park*'s thirteenth season, and yet Parker and Stone do not acknowledge during this discussion that the project to remaster the early seasons of the show in high-definition was already underway.

It is possible, then, that the creators do not perceive the HD reissues of *South Park* as altering things in the same, apparently egregious manner as Spielberg and Lucas. The remastered episodes do admittedly fix additional continuity errors, but again only in seemingly minor ways: for instance, one "mistake" that has always remained in the standard-definition version of "Volcano" (airdate 08/20/1997) involves the boys sitting around a campfire. In certain shots, the flames are animated, but in others they remain completely static. In the HD version, the fire continues to crackle throughout the scene. It would be churlish to lump this together with – for example – Lucas' addition of a previously-deleted scene into the 1997 "Special Edition" version of *Star Wars – Episode IV: A New Hope*, in which Han Solo meets with Jabba the Hutt (rendered using CGI, replacing the human actor who stood-in for Jabba at the original time of filming). The correction of the fire is meant to be an "invisible" effect, while Jabba's presence in *Star Wars*, and the use of computer graphics to achieve this, was widely publicized in advance of the release and positioned as a highly "visible" alteration (Buckland 1999, 184).[7]

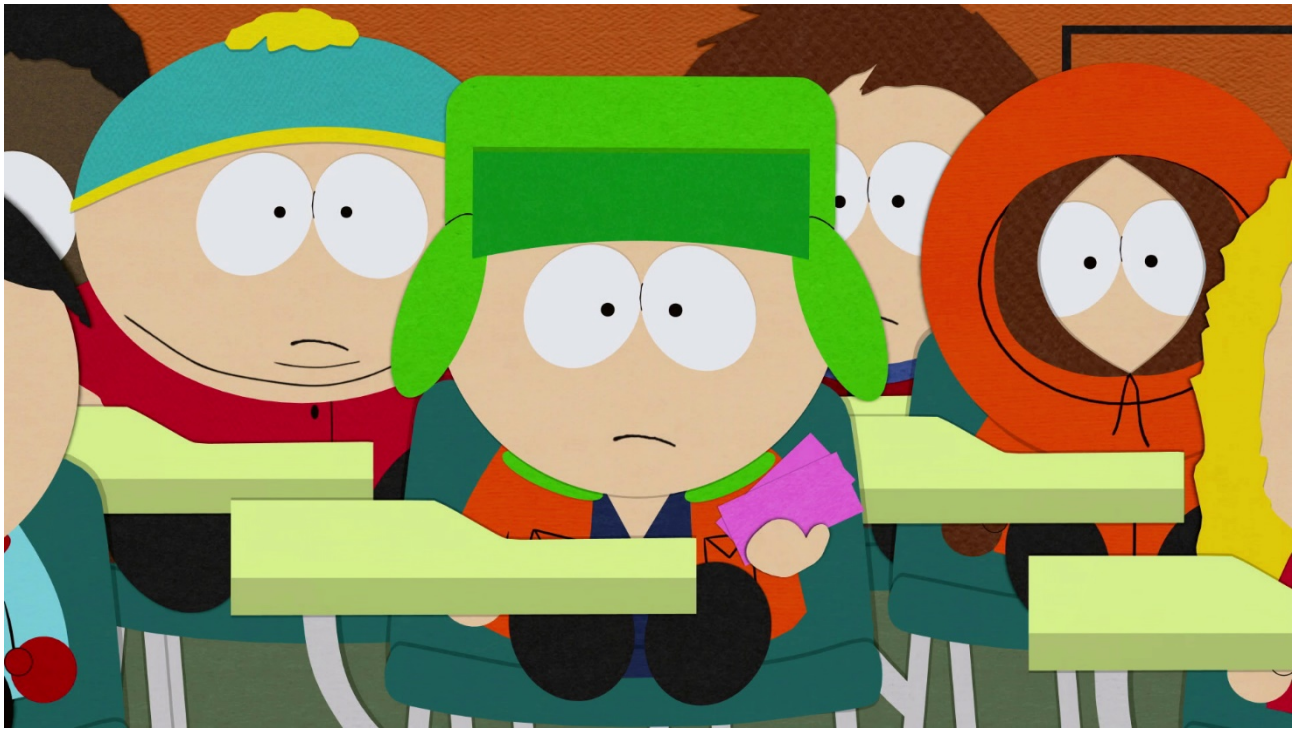
The remastered episodes also attempt to claim historical fidelity by preserving any topical references found in the original versions. For instance, a joke remains intact in the HD version of "Here Comes the Neighborhood" (original airdate 11/28/2001), wherein Token's ownership of a DVD (rather than a VHS tape) causes him to be viewed by the boys as rich and privileged, even

though such discs can now frequently be found in supermarket bargain bins and VHS has disappeared entirely from mainstream use. Similarly, in "Butters' Very Own Episode" (airdate 12/12/2001), there are numerous gags at the expense of real-life figures O. J. Simpson, Gary Condit, and John and Patsy Ramsey – each of whom had experienced the murder of a family member or close associate. Parker and Stone have subsequently admitted regret over the episode's speculation of Condit's and the Ramseys' personal guilt, in response to new evidence that came to light about both cases in more recent years (Goldman 2011). The HD remaster does not address this change of heart, however, and simply reproduces the original insinuations about Condit and the Ramseys having something to hide. Although this might appear insensitive, it nonetheless reiterates the idea – outlined in "Free Hat" – that one should preserve the show as a reflection of a specific cultural moment, even if the creators might treat the subject matter differently today.

The primary "upgrades" to the episodes, then, mostly involve their presentation in high-definition resolution, and the reframing of the aspect ratio from the traditional television format (1.33:1) to the new widescreen standard (1.77:1). As Barbara Klinger notes, in periods of technological change (as embodied, for instance, by the shift to a post-network era), older works "must approximate contemporary visual and aural standards to attain value in a contemporary market" (2006, 248). Compared to the seemingly obsessive tinkering of Spielberg and Lucas, these alterations are often positioned as necessary to keep pace with the evolving requirements of syndication, and particularly the potential for distribution online: even series such as HBO's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1998) and *The Wire* (2002-2008), positioned as bastions of "quality" (rather than trash) television, have been remastered in new widescreen formats which deviate from their original aspect ratios. As Thomas J. Connelly notes, however, fans have at times expressed disappointment in the outcomes, especially in cases where a relatively low-quality copy is "upconverted" (essentially

creating a faked HD resolution), and/or the overall image is altered to form a widescreen ratio (2014, 182-183). The ability to create an effective HD version is ultimately limited by the source material: a show such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), which was shot on 35mm film and which has been carefully preserved over the years, looks very striking in new high-definition masters, while the upconversion of a more recent sitcom shot on videotape, for example, would not yield such spectacular results.

The procedures undertaken to remaster *South Park*'s early seasons were only possible as a result of the complex technology underpinning its professed "trash" aesthetic. Because the show has been animated on computers since its second episode, the team were able to return to the digital assets used to make each instalment (which had – mostly – been preserved), and re-render them frame-by-frame at a higher resolution. This digital reworking also permitted the animators to seamlessly expand the frame to widescreen. With a live-action or analog animation source, the process would usually involve cropping or stretching parts of the picture to fit the required dimensions. By contrast, the HD versions of *South Park* preserve the whole of the original image, with the artists instead creating *additional* background assets to fill the extra space (figs. 4 and 5). The malleability of the assets in the HD remastering process reflects D. N. Rodowick's (2007, 15) pronouncement (drawing on the work of Philip Rosen) about the "lack of closure" of digital, compared to analog, images: they can be "reworked, reappropriated, and recontextualized." However, the ability to make these adjustments with relative ease, while also proclaiming fidelity to an apparent original, also exposes what Klinger (2006, 79) has referred to as "the oxymoronic ideal of organic digitality." As noted, this has been one of the central contradictions present in *South Park* from its first season, with the presentation of computer-generated images masquerading as handmade animation.



Figures 4 and 5. The standard definition and reframed, HD remastered versions of "Terrance and Phillip: Behind the Blow" (original airdate 07/18/2002).

The remastering of the episodes arguably require further conceptual compromises: in the past, the implied physicality and low-resolution nature of the image was regularly used to authenticate the show's claim to "otherness," with the reliance on technology significantly downplayed. By contrast, with the HD versions, the abandonment of the standard-definition versions of the show, and the reformatting of the aspect ratio, is now apparently justified precisely because the creators are working from the "original" and "authentic" *digital* materials – the disparate collection of computer files that were compiled to create the episodes. In discussing video game remasters, Ryan Lizardi (2015, 89) argues that such works often tempt viewers to substitute an "idealized […] past that never existed" as a means of validating the replacement text. For instance, in a discussion of the 2016 remake of *Day of the Tentacle* (1993) – a title lauded at the time for its "cartoon-like" graphics – the co-developer Tim Schafer claimed that modern audiences want the updated version "to look like [the original] does in their brain and their memories" rather than being entirely faithful to the objective reality: "They don't remember it looking all jagged and pixelated" (quoted in Martens 2015). The remake subtly nudges the aesthetic and gameplay content towards current-generation standards, while still promising the pleasure of engaging with an older, fondly-regarded classic. The HD versions of *South Park*'s first seasons arguably operate on a similar knife-edge: they offer an experience made possible only by the extensive intervention of current technology (and, indeed, significant amounts of new labor undertaken by the show's artists), but also shakily claim fidelity to the "original" texts. It is revealing that the animation quality itself is not significantly "improved": the framerate is still jerky, there are no three-dimensional models replacing two-dimensional characters, and so on. The patches

of dirt and fake shadows added to the early episodes are still visible, and in some ways made more pronounced due to the sharpness of the image on modern screens. The allusions to "trash" are thus accentuated – rather than obliterated – by the remastering process, potentially helping viewers to evaluate the HD versions in relation to a sentimentalized "memory" of the show's history.

The emphasis upon crudeness also attempts to justify what is arguably the most significant change to the content of the new versions of the early shows: the presence of "unbleeped" swearing. As noted in the introduction, the decision was made – starting with season eleven – to produce two versions of each new episode: a broadcast edition with the necessary curse words bleeped to satisfy the network's rules, and another that presents the swearing without modification. Although Comedy Central still gets to screen the episode first, the swift dissemination of content to "on-demand" services in recent years has undoubtedly diminished the cultural "impact" of the initial broadcast version: one can usually purchase the unbleeped version on Amazon Prime Video and iTunes, or stream it on HBO Max (formerly on Hulu), within hours of an episode's first airing. Furthermore, the choice to include *only* the unbleeped audio within post-season eleven home video releases – even though DVDs and Blu-rays are more than capable of storing multiple soundtracks – seems to solidify the notion that this is now the "preferred" experience, endorsed by the show's creators.

There is an important difference, however, between the swearing in recent instalments of *South Park*, and the retrospective decision to unbleep the HD remasters. New episodes are made with an explicit awareness that most viewers will be accessing a version that allows them to hear these words unfiltered, but the pre-2007 seasons of the show were never created with such an expectation.[8] This is made evident by the fact that the studio did not even routinely preserve audio tracks without the bleep for the first couple of years, meaning that certain episodes still contain obscured swear

words, even in their HD versions. These discrepancies are addressed in a "disclaimer" that appears before the main menu of several of the *South Park* Blu-rays:

> SEASON ONE & PART OF SEASON TWO ARE CENSORED HERE AS THEY WERE WHEN THEY ORIGINALLY AIRED.[9] UNFORTUNATELY THOSE EARLY EPISODES WEREN'T ARCHIVED WITH SPLIT AUDIO TRACKS SO THIS IS HOW THEY'LL LIVE FOREVER.

The use of the terms "censored and "uncensored" when discussing the HD versions of *South Park* obfuscates the reality of the show's production. The inference is that we are finally seeing (most of) these texts restored to a more "authentic" form, which suggests, by extension, that the previous versions were in some way compromised. Content regulation is undertaken for a variety of ideological and economic reasons, and yet often risks being presented in rather emotive terms. In a discussion of the rap artist Eminem, who releases "explicit" versions of his music on CD and download platforms as well as "clean" versions for radio, Guins (2009, x-xi) takes issue with the notion that the latter should be viewed as media that has been nefariously "censored." Instead, the existence of a "clean" version reflects a conscious decision to exploit an additional distribution medium and revenue source.

While it is true that the broadcast versions of *South Park* are required to work within the boundaries of Comedy Central's "standards and practices" guidelines, the completed episode is ultimately a product of negotiation between all parties involved. Parker and Stone have regularly been able to convince the network to relent on certain subjects: for instance, the episode "Le Petit Tourette" (airdate 10/03/2007) was permitted to include more swearing than usual because it was dealing specifically with Tourette Syndrome, and because Comedy Central cleared it with advertisers first

(Parker and Stone 2008). Furthermore, as Guins emphasizes, "cleaning is not an after-the-fact process. Today the market demands a clean version upon release" (2009, 160). While there have certainly been many instances throughout the show's history in which a certain image or subject has been disallowed, this is traditionally conveyed to South Park Studios *during* an episode's production, and can be worked around while the episode is still being made. Even on occasions where Parker and Stone have not entirely gotten their own way, the finished episode is not truly "censored": the creators of *South Park* have control of the final edit(s) as long as they do not contravene any major rules.[10]

While the unbleeping is the *actual* "after-the-fact" activity taking place in the remastered versions of *South Park*, the wording of the Blu-ray disclaimer implies the opposite. It also – in perhaps the most surprising turnabout from the sentiments expressed in "Free Hat" – suggests that episodes remaining in their original, supposedly "censored," state "forever" is a bad thing. The bleep, rather than being acknowledged as an integral part of the show's first decade, and maybe even a part of its "charm," is now presented solely as an aberration. This does not seem to tally with the attitudes expressed by Parker and Stone during the production of the shows themselves, wherein battles with the network were often claimed to be part of the creative surge. For instance, as Parker noted in an early behind-the-scenes documentary:

> We've had to take out some of the swearing because it was on cable, […] but we didn't really mind because […] part of the humor comes out of pushing it. I think that if *South Park* was on a channel where we could absolutely say and do whatever we wanted, then it actually wouldn't be as effective because part of the effectiveness is being on a channel where people are, like, "oh my god, I can't believe what they're doing." […] So that's the fun in the week-

to-week – it's seeing how far we can push it in the next week (quoted in "Goin' Down to South Park" 1999).

Instead of being merely a concession or loss of control, then, the bleep could also demonstrate defiance. Timothy Corrigan (1991, 30) argues that cult works are often marked by the "material scars" of such interventions by creators and distributors, and the original versions of *South Park*'s early seasons proudly emphasize this trait. This is perhaps most evident in sequences from "Something You Can Do with Your Finger" (airdate 07/12/2000) and "Raisins" (airdate 12/10/2003). In the former instalment, the boys are holding tryouts for a band. Stan's girlfriend, Wendy, decides to audition, and sings a rather more suggestive variant of the schoolyard rhyme "Miss Susie":

Mrs. Landers was a health nut / She cooked food in a wok / Mr. Harris was her boyfriend / And he had a great big--

Cock-a-doodle-doodle / The rooster just won't quit / And I don't like my breakfast / Because it tastes like--

Shih tzus make good house pets / They're cuddly and sweet / Monkeys aren't good to have / 'Cause they like to beat their--

Meeting in the office / A meeting in the hall / The boss, he wants to see you / So you can suck his--

Balzac was a writer / He lived with Alan Funt / Mrs. Roberts didn't like him / But that's 'cause she's a--

Contaminated water / Can really make you sick / Your bladder gets infected / And blood comes out your--

Dictate what I'm saying / 'Cause it will bring you luck / And if you all don't like it / I don't give a flying [bleep].

In the episode "Raisins," Wendy breaks up with Stan. Surprised and heartbroken, Stan tries to convince his friend Jimmy Valmer to intervene on his behalf. Unfortunately, Jimmy's stutter – a running gag in the show, which often requires him to attempt sentences several times – leads to a misunderstanding:

Stan: Jimmy, will you go talk to Wendy for me?

Jimmy: For w-- For w-- For w--what?

Stan: Just go talk to her and be poetic. Tell her she's my muse. No, tell her… tell her she's a continuing source of inspiration to me.

Jimmy: She's what?

Stan: She's a continuing source of inspiration to me.

Jimmy: Okay…

[Jimmy approaches Wendy.]

Jimmy: Hey, Wen-- Hey, Wendy.

Wendy: Yeah?

Jimmy: Stan says you're a cunt-- you're a cunt-- Stan says you're a cunt-- cunt-- cunt--

Wendy: Well, tell Stan to [bleep] off!

[Wendy walks off, no longer listening.]

Jimmy: You're a cunt--tinuing source of inspiration to him.

[Jimmy looks bemused for a second, and then returns to Stan.]

Stan: Well?

Jimmy: She just w-- walked away, Stan. You're going to have to face facts – it's over.

Robert T. Valgenti (2016, 112) argues that the audio bleep, added to obscure certain words, is supposed to emphasize a "distinction between what is sayable and what is not sayable." The humor created in the broadcast versions of these two *South Park* episodes, then, is largely rooted in the seeming inconsistency about what has been allowed. In both cases, a strong swear word – "fuck" – has been redacted, and at least one other word – "cunt," usually considered to be even more offensive – remains audible. The justification appears to be that "fuck" is being used as an actual expletive, while the other examples maintain some (shaky) deniability: Wendy's song in the first example is playing on the perception of swearing being heard *within* other "acceptable" words, while Jimmy in the latter is entirely innocent of what he appears to be saying, and remains confused even after he receives such a hostile response.

Of course, there was no such "innocence" from the creators of the show. In the DVD commentary for "Something You Can Do with Your Finger," Parker notes that "this was […] one of the two times on *South Park* […] so far that we've gotten away with saying 'cunt' on television […]. It's pretty sweet," before adopting a tone of mock outrage that the network failed to ask them to redact the word (Parker and Stone 2004a). In the "Raisins" commentary, Parker proclaims Jimmy's accidental insulting of Wendy to be his "favorite moment in the show." Stone interjects, between bouts of laughter: "why'd they let us do this?! […] He's just yelling 'cunt!'" (Parker and Stone 2006). While there is some minor story progression in both of these scenes, the primary focus is on the "metajoke" (Valgenti 2016, 105) of Parker and Stone playing with the boundaries of cable television.

The bleep over the word "fuck" establishes that certain rules for the episode are in place, making the apparent uses of "cunt" so surprising. This is potentially enjoyable for the viewer (and seemingly for the creators as well) specifically *because* those rules were being stealthily broken. In deleting the bleeps from the HD versions, the self-reflexive nature of the humor is lost.

The lack of bleeps also serve to obscure moments in which Parker and Stone were able to cover new territory with the network's blessing. The first instalment of the fifth season – "It Hits the Fan" (airdate 06/20/2001) – is significant for being the first ever broadcast on Comedy Central to use the word "shit" unbleeped. (In fact, it is ultimately spoken 162 times across the twenty-two minute show, which is indicated by the presence of a counter superimposed at the bottom of the screen that updates with every usage.) In the episode, Cartman is extremely excited that a television series, *Cop Drama* – spoofing the "edgy" content of contemporary shows such as *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) – is going to utter the phrase. The initial exchange in the original version of "It Hits the Fan" goes as follows:

> Cartman: Tonight, on *Cop Drama*, on TV, they're going to say… "shit"!
>
> Kyle: [Gasps.] They're going to say "shit" on television?!
>
> Stan: You can't say "shit" on television!
>
> Cartman: It was just on the news. People are freaking out, dude!
>
> Stan: Holy [bleep]ing shit!

This sequence marks the first time in the episode that "shit" is spoken, and it is made clear how much of an extradiegetic taboo this is as well – not only is there a pregnant pause before Cartman says it, but there is a brief swell of music and the "camera" moves in closer to his face. We are further

reminded of this "breakthrough" when Stan swears in surprise, and one word is bleeped but "shit" is left audible. In the HD version, when Stan just outright says "Holy fucking shit!", the rhythm and meaning of the scene is once again transformed: if the word "fuck" is apparently acceptable, then why is the episode making such a big deal about the use of "shit"?

As Gray (2012, 15) suggests, one does not necessarily have to posit *South Park* as the "evolutionary peak of satire and parody" in an attempt to argue that it is worthy of academic attention. The scenes described above are fairly juvenile in their intent, but also served (in their original incarnations at least) as historic markers of the contemporary broadcast landscape. For instance, in the commentary for *South Park*'s pilot episode, Parker reflects on a profane tirade delivered by Kyle, noting that back in 1997, "even though it's all bleeped, […] it was really shocking. […When] it first came out, people reacted strongly – like, 'oh my god, I can't believe that's on TV' – just because there are these bleeped words that, you know, you hear on MTV everyday now. […] I like to think that we had something to do with that" (Parker and Stone 2002a). There is undoubtedly truth to this supposition: as Michael V. Tueth notes, the initial success of *South Park* "emboldened both cable and broadcast networks to attempt their own treatments of taboo subjects" (2005, 27). The shift towards the post-network era, and the freedoms available to subscription services such as HBO and Netflix, has encouraged the show to push things even further. The final episode of the twenty-second season – "Bike Parade" (airdate 12/12/2018) – broke one of its final profanity barriers by having Santa Claus proclaim that the residents of South Park are a "bunch of cunts." The statement was presented unbleeped, reportedly even in its broadcast version (Venable 2018), and undisguised by innuendo or wordplay. New episodes of the show may now be able to say almost anything, but it is important to emphasize that this was not *always* the case. The unbleeping of the early seasons serves to diminish

our understanding of how *South Park* itself has played a major role – slowly but surely, and for better or worse – in changing the boundaries of television discourse.[11]

As with the shift to high-definition, however, the goal with the swearing likely has more to do with presenting an "idealized" (and somewhat unreliable) memory of *South Park* than complete accuracy. The early instalments of the show were viewed as transgressive upon initial release, but Parker and Stone (2002a) have acknowledged that they potentially look rather "tame" when compared with more recent seasons. Hearing the characters curse in the "remastered" versions may come closer to approximating the emotional "shock" of experiencing the show back in 1997, even if the content is being subtly rewritten in the process. Indeed, although one can find some dissenting voices, and the occasional humorous reference to Parker and Stone turning into Spielberg and Lucas, the online responses to the HD versions of *South Park*'s early seasons generally appear to be fairly muted. This does reiterate that fan cultures can be highly varied: while *Star Wars* aficionados have filled many discussion threads with outrage over George Lucas' decision to make Greedo (rather than Han Solo) shoot first in the "Special Edition" version of the 1977 film, fewer *South Park* viewers have protested about the reformatting of the image, or the unbleeping process in these new releases. Compared to the perception of exploiting the child consumer and pandering to political correctness in the new versions of *Star Wars* (Brooker 2002, 75-76, 81), the remasters of *South Park* are arguably more careful in authenticating any changes in response to the show's established adult focus and cult sensibilities. The "trash" aesthetic of the early seasons is still present, and there is perhaps a renewed perverseness (akin to the comments made by the creators during the shows' original production) in seeing such "crappy" animation now presented *within* such a detailed, high-definition image. The presence of swearing plays into the "edgy" reputation that the show has cultivated and expanded over time, and is unlikely to offend any modern-era fans. Indeed, for those more familiar with the show's

recent seasons, the alterations may not even appear (on the surface, at least) to be particularly transformative.

Although the *South Park* remasters do not announce themselves as bombastically as some of Lucas' and Spielberg's updated works, it must be emphasized that there is a commercial imperative that runs through *all* of these updates. As Brooker indicates, due to the development of the *Star Wars* prequels in the early-2000s, Lucas had a particularly vested interest in making "the movies that were originally released between 1977 and 1983 […] look and feel the same as those released between 1999 and 2005" (quoted in Johnson 2005, 41). As noted, the continued production of new episodes of *South Park* provides a similar encouragement to standardize the viewing experience across the entire series, maximizing profits on older episodes by aligning them more closely with the show's current style (which in itself is responding to the demands of the modern media landscape, and the seemingly vast financial potential of streaming services). The fact that the original seasons were made primarily for viewing on low-resolution CRT televisions, VHS tapes, and dial-up internet is seemingly less important – at least from a brand management perspective – than the perceived demands of the modern consumer base, who will be primarily watching on-demand via Blu-ray, widescreen HDTVs, and various mobile devices.

Criticisms of George Lucas, in particular, partly stem from his refusal to release *anything* but the "Special Editions" of *Star Wars – Episodes IV-VI* in recent years. Fans are not given the option to pick which version they want: unless one is able to track down a used copy on laserdisc or similar, one currently has no choice but to submit to Lucas' updated vision. This is not yet quite the case with *South Park*, as the standard-definition versions of the episodes are still in print, and can be acquired (quite cheaply) on DVD. However, as Denzell Richards (2013, 52) notes, remastered versions of film and television texts now tend to be given a privileged position in emerging media. As the DVD format

slowly transitions into obsolescence, it remains to be seen whether there will continue to be an outlet for the previous incarnations of the episodes. On Hulu in the United States, for instance, the HD, unbleeped versions of *South Park* simply replaced the old ones overnight, with little to no fanfare. Similarly, while the Google Play store does give a choice between purchasing "SD" and "HD" copies of the early seasons, selecting the former now merely limits the consumer to standard-definition quality streaming of the unbleeped, remastered versions of the episodes, rather than distinguishing between the "originals" and the "updated" editions. The impermanence of the streaming systems that underpin an increasing part of our modern "television" experience means that the "upgrading" of historical content – potentially without the viewer even being made aware that the terms of access are about to change – will likely become an ever more regular phenomenon. This may not always be something that fans view negatively: the new "pleasures" of HD and the unbleeped swearing in the remastered versions of *South Park* offer a seductive enticement to give in to this maximized nostalgia, a misremembering of the past. At the same time, for all of the apparent conveniences and improvements, it is important for television studies to ask audiences to consider what may be lost in the impulse to make old texts appear as if they are new.

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[1] This follows the experimental production of an HD remaster of the episode "Good Times with Weapons" (original airdate 03/17/2004), released exclusively via the Xbox 360 console in 2007. (See "South Park to Release" 2007.)

[2] For a concise history of the show's origins, see Weinstock 2008, 6-10.

[3] Binge-watching (and the serialization possibilities that it facilitates) is admittedly not a new concept, with precedents established by television re-runs and syndication, home video collections,

DVRs, and other forms of media delivery (see Kompare 2005). Indeed, *South Park* itself had already flirted with some minor serialization in the past: for instance, the (seemingly permanent) death of Kenny in "Kenny Dies" (original airdate 12/05/2001), was followed by several episodes in season six in which Kenny's soul occupies Cartman's body, leading to Kenny's "reincarnation" as a main character in "Red Sleigh Down" (original airdate 12/11/2002). However, the ease and totality of access to programming on streaming services (compared to the limited daily or weekly re-run blocks on television, or season-by-season releases on DVD) is perceived to have had a significant impact on both production strategies and viewing practices (Jenner 2018, 111). *South Park* continues to maintain a balancing act between series and serial elements, with each instalment usually still driven by a plotline that will be resolved by the end of that episode. From the eighteenth season onwards, though, the show has been much more explicit about the continuation of certain storylines and character arcs across episodes and even between different seasons – a shift in approach that occurred concurrently with the streaming deal that was reached with Hulu in 2014.

[4] See "6 Days to Air" 2011.

[5] As Trey Parker notes, "I always feel, like, 'wow, I wish I had another day with this show,'" in order to further refine the storytelling, explore alternative possibilities for jokes, and so on. He concedes, though, that this is "the reason that there's so many episodes of *South Park* […]. There just *is* a deadline, and you can't keep going. [Otherwise] there would be so many shows [where I'd say], 'No, no, it's not ready yet […]!' And I would have spent four weeks on one show [… just for it to be maybe] five percent better" (quoted in "6 Days to Air" 2011).

[6] It must nonetheless be acknowledged that watching a film or television show on any new format alters the experience in some way (see Guins 2009, 91-92). Releases of *South Park* on DVD, for

instance, remove the advertisements and network idents of the original broadcast, and provide access to exclusive bonus features that may alter one's perception of the episodes.

[7] The boundaries between the two forms are not always as fixed as one might assume, however. To return to the anniversary version of *E.T.*, the presence of walkie-talkies was not really a "selling point" (despite the comedic insinuation in "Free Hat" that it was). As Raiford Guins notes:

> The walkie-talkies are simply there. […] They are meant to go unnoticed, but this is impossible (at least for the moment until our collective cultural memory forgets). […] The walkie-talkies are visible in that we see them and may notice that a modification to the original *E.T.* has occurred, while they are invisible as a seamless digital composite that can easily and convincingly replace a gun for something nonlethal (2009, 142).

The same is potentially true of the campfire in "Volcano." While there is nothing about the HD version that would draw the attention of the unprimed viewer, the situation may be different for someone who has re-watched the original SD episode numerous times since 1997. It is already possible to find lists compiled online which detail the "fixes" (and occasional new mistakes added) to the HD remakes (see, for instance, "HD Episodes" 2016), highlighting that certain fans do possess the subcultural knowledge to make these alterations "visible."

[8] Although one could experience some early *South Park* content that featured strong swear words without bleeps – such as the original *Spirit of Christmas* shorts, the R-rated feature film, and several of the soundtrack albums – these were created under different circumstances than the television show and marketed as separate products.

[9] This statement is not entirely true, as some – but not all – of the files with unbleeped swearing were actually located. As such, the HD versions of seasons one and two contain an inconsistent mix of bleeped and unbleeped audio, rather than simply presenting the episodes as they first aired.

[10] Perhaps the only *South Park* instalment to have actually been censored is "201" (airdate 04/21/2010), in which Comedy Central – without Parker and Stone's input – used a black bar to cover images potentially identifiable as the Islamic prophet Muhammad, and bleeped parts of the episode's dialog (for reasons other than swearing). "201" remains in this "butchered" (Parker and Stone 2011) form on DVD and Blu-ray. Parker and Stone had also been refused permission to present Muhammad in an earlier episode, "Cartoon Wars – Part II" (airdate 04/12/2006), but in this case they edited the episode themselves ahead of transmission, awkwardly interrupting the action to address the impasse between the creators and the network.

Muhammad did actually appear – without any major problems at the time – in "Super Best Friends" (airdate 07/04/2001), but this episode no longer airs on television or via online services such as HBO Max. "Super Best Friends" was still remastered, however, and appears on the *South Park: The Complete Fifth Season* Blu-ray, released in 2017. Ironically, as part of the widescreen reframing process, the HD version presents certain shots in which the animators have been required to create *new* images of Muhammad – filling in details of his body in crowd scenes, and extending walk cycles to show him properly entering and exiting the boundaries of the expanded, wider image.

[11] The "remastered" versions also potentially obscure the fact that certain characters, such as Eric Cartman, were permitted to utter a variety of racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and other discriminatory remarks that were *not* obscured by bleeps in the original broadcasts of the show, even though more conventional profanity was forbidden.