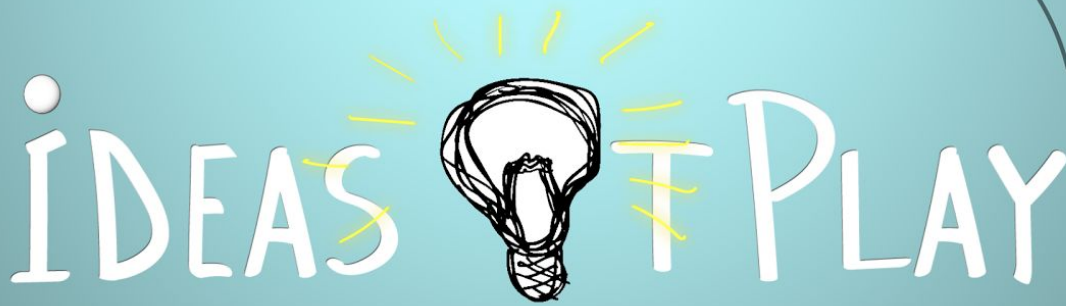




October 2017

Ideas At Play Newsletter



Hello! My name is Jackson and this is the monthly Ideas At Play newsletter! This month we're looking at Rick and Morty, Bojack, You're the Worst, Big Mouth, and Nathan for You.

This special reward is meant to thank my Patreon supporters and provide a look into a lot more of the stuff I've watched from the previous month. Each title includes a hyperlink to the show's trailer if you're interested in seeing a sneak peek at it or even if you just need to jog your memory. This is my first time watching all of these shows unless otherwise specified.

I've tried to keep it light on the spoilers, although I realize that talking about a show at all is going to spoil a few things. I've marked where I've deemed it a little more than light, but other than that, enjoy! Feel free to give me feedback or just talk to me in any way either on Twitter (@jackapn2) or email (buntugglies@gmail.com)

Thanks!
Jackson



Rick and Morty

Cartoon Network Eps: 307–310

With its third season in the books, we enter into another long session of over-analyzation and Easter egg hunting. Before you go nuts on what's next from Rick and Morty, it's worth looking back at the season, and series, as a whole.

Rick and Morty is a smart show. It has some obnoxious fans who'll laud its smartness for days who hammer that point home, but just because they're jerks doesn't mean that it's not a smart show. It expertly layers its stories, nesting them in ways that aren't just cheeky or clever but actually serve to advance the story. Sure, some of the Dan Harmon Meta-jokes™ just remind the audience that they're watching a TV show where the characters and creators know that too in a wink-wink kind of way. But a lot of these meta-jokes work on another level (see: Pickle Rick). They have a high degree of difficulty because they work in three parts. One, they are elaborate situations meant to be funny on their face. Two, they provide commentary on their own preposterousness. And most importantly, three, they advance the story by providing interesting character insights. This season was more an exploration of that style of storytelling than the first two, and it introduced a lot of elements of serial, or the continuation of one story from episode to episode.

This season that story was the family's search for identity in the wake of their parents' divorce. We look at it from all angles, from Summer and Morty's frustration with their parents to Beth's search for purpose to Rick's smugness at becoming the unrivaled patriarch to Jerry's pathetic but sinister emotional manipulation. Structure is everything in this show and that's why it attracts such a nerdy audience. I don't say that in a derogatory way (unless you're one of the nerds [harassing the female writers of this show](#), in which case "[Peace Among Worlds](#)"); I'm a TV nerd and that's why I like Rick and Morty. It plays with structure cheekily, and the more TV you've watched the more you recognize their subversion of typical patterns and tropes. But getting too cute that way might force the writers into an uncomfortable corner.



While I enjoy the serial aspects of Rick and Morty, I genuinely wonder how the show will come to completion. One of the biggest concepts behind Rick and Morty is the idea of infinity. Infinity is fascinating as both a limitless and limited storytelling device. On the one hand, it offers endless permutations of the same characters and stories. It's the most common theme on the show, hammered home in the finale, that everything is happening infinite times across infinite dimensions. But on the other, infinity means that there is nothing special at all about *our* Rick and Morty. They aren't even unique. In an infinite multiverse, *everything* must be infinite. There must be infinitely *different* Ricks but there also must be infinitely *the same* Ricks. It removes the stakes of everything we've seen on screen, a fact highlighted by the way the show hit a soft reboot at the end of this season.

It feels like there has to be another shoe to drop. Maybe the answer is that transdimensional entities are the only thing capable of being a real antagonist on the show, but in an infinite universe there are infinite places to hide from said antagonist, but also infinite versions of that antagonist to chase you. Maybe I should just shut up and wait for the next season, whenever that'll be.



Bojack Horseman

Netflix

Eps: 401-412

As someone who talks about television to a near unhealthy degree, it might surprise you that I refuse to talk or read about Bojack Horseman.

Hey, then why am I writing this? Well, I'm bending my rule. I'm not going to talk about any specifics of the show: the flawed and human but animal characters, the hilarious puns and alliteration, the powerful commentary (Thoughts and Prayers, Piece of Shit), or the gut punching lessons about the nature of



depression and existential dread. Instead I want to share the story about how I started my relationship with this show and how that gives it such a special place in my heart.

For years, I'd held off on watching the show for a number of reasons. I tend to be resistant to watch shows with deeply devoted niche fan groups. Their rabid fandom can be a big turnoff for me. Fans tend to overlook flaws and overhype strengths. If you agree with them, it can be very fun, but if you don't, it can be toxic, even if you still like the show. Or maybe I'm just a contrarian.

In December 2016, I was home with my family for Christmas, but to be honest, I couldn't wait to get out of there. I was in a dark place, in a bout of the depression that periodically creeps in on me. If you've ever struggled with depression, you might be familiar with the way it makes you crave solitude. You want to actually be as alone as you feel. And let me tell you, the time between Christmas and New Years is the best time to be alone. Everybody was off with their families: my roommates, my girlfriend, everybody in my building, everybody in the city. I made up some excuse about how I wanted to get some work done and went home to my apartment.

I'm not sure what made me decide to give *Bojack* a chance this time, but I did. And I never stopped. It was one of my hardest binges, at one point hitting 24 episodes in a 20 hour span. I'd catch myself, after telling Netflix that, yes, I am still watching (for the 4th time), stop, and try to do something else. But I just couldn't stop thinking about the show; I was just itching to return to that total escape. A half hour later I'd be right back in front of my TV.

Maybe I was at a point in time (and headspace) that any show would have hit me that way, but it sure didn't feel like that at the moment. *Bojack resonated* with me. The way it handled its themes of loneliness, depression, and relationship with self were so in line with how I felt in that moment that I couldn't help but get sucked in. I wasn't any happier, but I was at peace, finally able to face the place that I had tried so desperately to hide from myself.

Watching something in solitude like that is the best way to watch something that you truly connect with. It's rare, but if you've been lucky enough to do that yourself, you already know what I mean. It's the only way you can truly have an authentic reaction. You can laugh in that snorting way that annoys your friends, and sob hopelessly without shame.

With hot takes and opinions rampant on the internet, it can be hard to form your own opinion of something so popular, and it can be easy for that opinion to be corrupted by the critical intelligentsia. That's not an indictment, it's something I'm part of. I love analyzing what makes art work in what way, but sometimes the way we interact with art is much more personal than that. It's something that you have to hold on to, because the longer it lives in your mind, the more it's yours.



Nathan For You

Comedy Central

Eps: 400-404

If you're not familiar with the show, Nathan for You is a semi-reality series built around the premise of helping small businesses in the most roundabout and elaborate ways possible. Some of the most notable achievements of the show: selling TVs at \$1 in an effort to get Best Buy to match the price, creating a Holocaust awareness jacket company, and Dumb Starbucks. It's hard to explain. Just watch the trailer.

This is a show that I have a complete love-hate relationship with. Some episodes have me laughing as hard as anything on TV, and others I have to turn off because they're just too painful to keep watching. It's the definition of cringe comedy. But this season presented an episode that I had a genuine problem with.

In the second episode of what is now its fourth season, Nathan attempted to sell chili in a hockey arena after the restaurant owner was repeatedly turned down to be on the vendor list. His plan was to build a fat suit and fill it with chili so that he could smuggle the product into the arena and sell it. While the problems with this invention provided some real laughs (including lathering himself with heat resistant gel and taking a blowtorch to the crotch), Nathan's biggest problem was in trying to dispense the chili from the suit. You see, the motor that pushed the chili out of the suit through small tubes was metal and would never be able to get past the security wand metal detectors at the gate. The workaround for this was to dupe a doctor into writing a note claiming he had a pacemaker he didn't have, present that note at the gate, and boom, he was in.

Notice my word choice: boom. Obviously the chili was not a weapon or dangerous to anyone, but nationally televising a method for how to get a metal object into a crowded area was problematic to say the least. Tack on the fact that this episode aired mere days after the deadliest shooting in modern



American history and you end up with a half-hour of television that is, at best, tone deaf. My immediate thought was that this was something that only a white man as innocuous-looking as Nathan Fielder could pull off and then I remembered that the Vegas shooting was by a white man, and that in fact most mass shootings are by white men. The whole episode made me feel sick to my stomach. And the chili looked like diarrhea.



You're The Worst

Comedy Central

Eps: 401-407

If you haven't already seen my video essay on *You're The Worst*, go check it out right now. Okay, so now

****SPOILERS****

You're the Worst is a show determined to challenge itself. Last month I wrote about this in the context of *Rick and Morty*, but it's something the show has been doing since its first episode. The whole concept of *You're the Worst* is a challenge to the romantic comedy genre. It ditches the idea of will-they-won't-they and instead focuses on trying to show an unrealistic relationship realistically.

Seasons 2 and 3 introduced the ideas of personal growth within a relationship. Gretchen was forced to face her clinical depression in what is the most accurate depiction of depression I've seen on screen. Jimmy struggled with the loss of the father he loved to hate and the specter his father cast over his entire life. Both characters worked through all of their issues and came to a place of genuine growth. We saw



their evolution to a more mature relationship—so much so that at the end of that third season Jimmy proposed to Gretchen. Then she said the word “family” and he ran.

Now in its fourth season Jimmy and Gretchen are definitively apart. It's weird. And it's supposed to be weird. Breakups are weird. It's an abrupt change from the status quo. In some ways it's like time travel, waking up one day older and wiser, but in the same place you started: single. Everything looks the same as it did the day before, but slightly different. Gretchen has insisted on staying in Jimmy's house, since he was the one who ran, but their historically petty conflicts are very different in this new context.

Everything about *You're the Worst* this season is different in that way. Jimmy is still a writer but not the writer he thought he'd be. Edgar and Lindsay are still reliant on our main couple but are now the functional members of the group, unsure what their new roles mean. Even the opening credits are different.

It's this changing context that gets at the realism in *You're the Worst*. Sure, Jimmy, Gretchen, Edgar, and especially Lindsay are characters that could never exist in real life, but their relationships with each other do. We understand what it's like to be in a relationship that other people don't seem to get, to struggle with growth within a relationship unit, and being scared of growing up. And now *You're the Worst* is exploring the end of those relationships. I'm not sure if Jimmy and Gretchen will ever get back together, just like you can never know if any couple will get back together in real life. After all, OTPs (One True Pairings) are a fictional idea. They're only present in TV. Well, most of TV. For *You're the Worst*, it's all about the march forward, not looking back at our mistakes or who we used to be. Only time will tell what will happen to Jimmy, Gretchen, and the gang as they continue to grow but I am sure that their relationship will keep changing.



Big Mouth

Netflix

Eps: 101–110

Big Mouth is not a show meant for everyone. Maybe not even most people. It's incredibly raunchy, perhaps the most sexually explicit show I've seen, which is saying something for a show whose main characters are 12. It's not 100% boners and vaginas, though. At least 5% of the show is heartfelt.

It gets to the meat of what makes puberty so terrifying: change. That change takes shape in physical appearance and hormones but also through evolving friendships and in becoming a young adult. Our relationships with our parents change, friends become romantic interests, and we're faced with a whole new dimension to our identity. Big Mouth tackles all of that stuff, and does it through the conduits of animated genitals and hormones.

At its best, the humor is gross but smart, effectively satirizing puberty and hormonal stages in a way that's accessible to anyone who's gone through puberty. I can remember those awkward random boners in middle school and the struggle of trying to fit in even when you weren't totally sure of who you were. It can also serve as realistic sex ed, explaining—mostly male but at times female—puberty as if it was being taught by well-informed high schoolers. They debunk myths as characters make mistakes and learn in a very sex positive way.



At its worst, *Big Mouth* is nothing more than that notebook the weird kid in middle school filled with doodles of dicks and boobs. It can easily slip into a parade of jokes that are little more than the shock value of talking about 12 year old genitalia. The creators seem genuinely shocked at what Netflix would let them get away with—a recurring joke that mostly works but doesn't excuse the show's most egregious dirty jokes.

Ultimately I came out conflicted on *Big Mouth*. The scene where a furry monster skull f**ks a severed head was, as the show notes, "a bit over the line." But on the other hand, it does seem to accurately capture the completely messed-up nature of going through puberty—how the world feels like it's collapsing around you, when in reality none of it matters.