

Now the story of a wealthy family who lost everything and the one son who had no choice but to keep them all together. That's right, today we're talking about Arrested Development, the critically acclaimed comedy and cult classic from Mitch Hurwitz that everybody discovered just a few years too late. It follows the quirky and rich Bluth family after their father is arrested and their assets are frozen, leaving them in limbo. A sort of arrested development.

The show is chalked full of jokes, firing one after the other so quickly that it's nearly impossible to catch them all at first glance. TV critic Alan Sepinwall described it as "An incredible Rube Goldberg contraption of a sitcom" and, honestly, I can't think of a better description. Every joke builds on the previous one, carrying momentum from one moment to the next before bringing all of its moving parts together for a big payoff at the end.

But how does Arrested do it? How does it wring comedy out of every last second of its 21 minute run time? The answer is by creating its own *language* of running gags, character types, double meanings, and much much more.

So that's what I'm going to talk about today: how Arrested Development sets up and delivers its jokes. Although Netflix revived the show in 2013, it's undeniably a different show than when it was when it ran on Fox in the mid-2000s, so we're only going to be talking about those original three seasons. We're going to look at Arrested in a lot of detail, so consider this your spoiler warning. I'm Jackson and this is Ideas at Play.

So what do I mean when I say that Arrested Development creates its own language? Well it might be easier if we start with an example. Take the idea of the catchphrase.

These are expressions recognized for their repetition. A lot of times, the use and reuse of these phrases can change their meaning over time, especially as the context changes. They're kind of like memes in that way, boiling down a sentiment into a brief moment that viewers can then be transported to immediately as soon as they're mentioned.

The best ones summarize a character or storyline down to their essential parts. Take Joey's "How you doin'?" The accent tells us he's New York Italian. The delivery tells us that he's confident. We can tell that he is and on the prowl so often that he has his approach refined to three words, which also tells us that he's not a terribly sophisticated or smart person. Every time Joey repeats it, we're reminded of all of these character traits.

Arrested Development takes this idea and runs with it, offering us new catchphrases all the time and repeating them early and often so that they get stuck in your head. Listen to how many times we hear "No touching" and "There's always money in the banana stand before they're combined for the final punchline.

The reason this happens so excessively right off the bat is so that other characters can pick it up and run with it.

We recognize it, and seeing it in a new and different situation makes it unexpected, and funny.

Much like the famous comedic triple, the first instance establishes the joke or phrase, the next couple instances establish a pattern, and then the punchline subverts our expectations. Every time a different family member takes up a catchphrase, we understand that they're not all that different.

It reinforces the idea that these characters never change or learn, that they're in a state of arrested development.

But wait, if I said catchphrases are supposed to be so unique to a character or storyline, how does *Arrested* continue to recycle them?

Well *a lot* of these running gags have double meanings based on wordplay, ranging from a popular restaurant for Sunday brunch named Skip Church, a lawyer named Bob Loblaw who has a law blog, or almost anything Tobias says:

Wordplay obviously isn't unique to *Arrested*. It's often played for one-off joke in lots of sitcoms. (*Cheers*). But in *Arrested*, it opens up the possibility for misinterpretations by its characters, a staple of any sitcom. We see the bigger picture that characters can't, so when they make a decision, we can see where it's going before they do. It's where we get the "situation" in situation comedy. *Arrested* consistently combines the two ideas, hinging its situations on its wordplay. Think of the limited knowledge each character has as the setup of a rube goldberg machine, and then these wordplay jokes as the nudge that pushes the whole thing into motion.

Take this example from the season 2 episode "Good Grief." George Michael, while sulking over a recent breakup from his girlfriend Anne, discovers his grandfather - or poppop - George Sr. hiding in an underground bunker.

George Michael stows his grandfather away in the attic. When Michael catches him bringing food up to said attic, he immediately thinks that George Michael has hidden Anne up in the attic. This idea alone is funny.

Eventually George Michael decides to come clean.

But Michael takes that to mean something else since he believes it's Anne that's in the attic.

Because *Arrested* hinges these situations on unexpected wordplay, we often don't see the jokes coming either. But the show is able to accomplish that same surprise with its visual gags by having them pop up completely unexpectedly, and using that new context to add to the joke.

Early in season 2, Tobias becomes obsessed with joining the Blue Man Group, after mistaking them for a depression support group. But Arrested takes that gag and brings it in unexpectedly in the next episode, "The One Where They Build a House," Tobias follows Lindsey around, covered in blue paint. In Lindsey's scenes, we see Tobias in the background blending in with various blue objects, until the idea is subverted and he ends up in an unexpected place, underneath Lucille and Oscar having sex. Then we get another subversion at the end of the episode, where he isn't in blue camouflage, but instead using the diamond cream that Lindsey brought up periodically throughout the episode. *"My nipples are bleeding"*

Every character has eccentric gags built into them, which was the goal of creator Mitch Hurwitz from the very start.

By sitting in on these characters' lives in such an intimate way, there's time to explore the family's many ridiculous details. The show only needs to write its eccentric characters into situations where their quirks are on full display. For example, take Buster's most prominent quirk: being an overgrown mama's boy. Stick him with his siblings making fun of her and he doesn't quite get it.

Stick him in a relationship and it's with his mother's best friend, who shares the name Lucille. When his relationship with his mother hits a rough patch, he rebels by swimming into the ocean, something she never let him do, and then being attacked by a loose seal.

If you haven't seen the show, it must sound like I'm speaking a foreign language. These jokes don't mean anything without having been established, no matter how many times I, or the show, call back to them. Luckily, narrator Ron Howard is here to translate what's happening on screen and add a little extra humor.

What this does is allow for a frenetic pace and pack in as many jokes as Arrested does. In mapping out the two episodes we talked about earlier: "Good Grief" and "The One Where They Build a House", I found that scenes only last about a minute on average. Even if you forget what is being called back to, that's okay. The very next scene, or even line of dialogue, will call back to something else.

Arrested is using this language, and its translator, to program our minds to be ready for each callbacks and catchphrases. More importantly, this language of repetition - and our tour guide Ron Howard - allow this language to change and morph over time. Eventually we all lose track of where these jokes came from in the density of the show, but we still enjoy them. That's because they gain new contexts every time they're used, creating a network of references and callbacks that can mean different things to different people. So when you think about a character trying to teach another character a lesson, your mind might jump to this moment:

And someone else might think of this one:

The point is that it doesn't matter because it's a constantly evolving joke, and its meaning changes slightly each time it's referenced.

Arrested Development's distinct style isn't just for adding flair. The language of intra references and running gags leaves the audience primed and ready for the punchlines despite the sheer amount of stuff that happens in every episode. It's all built on this unique language that serves as a foundation that truly is...

*"Solid as a rock"*

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