Phineas & Ferb: Children's Television

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Abstract: While critics often condemn children’s television as a hyper-commercial and lowbrow electronic babysitter, they often neglect to analyze how such programs actually engage young viewers. By looking at the narrative structure of Phineas & Ferb, Jason Mittell suggests that children’s television can engage its audience with more sophistication and intelligence than might appear at first glance.

One of the primary ways that people think about television is in comparison to other media, with television typically serving as a cultural “bad object” when viewed next to literature, film, or other media regarded with more respect and legitimacy. When held up to such cross-media scrutiny, television is frequently dismissed as crass, hyper-commercial, formulaic, and catering to the lowest common denominator. Of course, those who make such dismissive generalizations rarely take the time to look closely at television programming, differentiating among distinct shows and genres that might challenge such conventional wisdom. Instead, television is regarded from afar and painted with a broad stroke using the framework that was most famously articulated by FCC Commissioner Newton Minow in 1961: television is a “vast wasteland.”

Within the television medium itself, some genres themselves function as bad objects, derided in comparison with more respected genres like serious dramas, sophisticated comedies, informative public affairs programming, or legitimate sports broadcasting. Daytime soap operas, trashy talk shows, and exploitative reality TV are all placed on the low end of cultural hierarchies that help legitimate television’s more respectable programming. But probably no genre has been the object of more moral hand-wringing and cultural scorn throughout the medium’s history than children’s television. Countless books and editorial columns have decried the perceived damage that television has allegedly inflicted on generations of children, and such lamentations have fueled policymaking aimed at protecting...
kids from the worst of what television might do to them. Such condemnations treat children’s television as an undifferentiated mass of lowbrow shows aimed at turning already slack-jawed, zombified kids into brainwashed consumers, junk food eaters, and cultural illiterates.

Are there programs that warrant such condemnation? Certainly there are many horrible children’s programs—just as there are horrible primetime dramas, news programs, and documentaries, not to mention films, novels, and works in every other creative medium. It would be easy to redeem the genre of children’s television by highlighting the exceptional examples of shows that succeed in educating their young viewers and appealing to parents as well, as with groundbreaking educational programs like *Sesame Street* (PBS, 1969–present) and *Blue’s Clues* (Nickelodeon, 1996–2006). But the bulk of children’s programs, especially those aimed at school-age viewers, aim to entertain far more than to educate, so to complicate these blanket condemnations of the genre, we need to look closely at a show whose goals are more commercial and entertaining than educational. To understand how children’s television operates on its own terms, we need to ask what appeals to kids and to take into consideration how they engage with popular programs. Thus, let’s take a close at one of the most popular children’s shows of today: Disney Channel’s *Phineas & Ferb* (2007–present).²

At first glance, *Phineas & Ferb* seems to live up to the most dismissive caricatures of children’s television. The show is incredibly repetitive and formulaic, with nearly every episode offering only a slight variation on the main plot structure. The characters are broad caricatures, with unsophisticated animation highlighting hyperactive dialog and action rather than nuanced visuals. The content is fairly crass, focused on children breaking rules, contentious sibling rivalry, and clichéd espionage action. And Disney has capitalized on its success by extending the brand through licensed merchandise, including numerous CDs, videogames, DVDs, clothing, websites, and enough action figures to fill a toy-store aisle. In short, when critics dismiss children’s television as mindless, formulaic, hyper-commercialized pap, *Phineas & Ferb* seems to fit the bill as a prime example.

However, we must go beyond the first glance—*Phineas & Ferb’s* young fans certainly do. Just as soap operas make little sense to novice viewers glancing at a random episode without the benefit of serialized backstories and relationships, a show like *Phineas & Ferb* becomes much more complex and nuanced once you can appreciate it in the context of an ongoing series. Children typically watch their favorite shows regularly and repeatedly, viewing the same episode frequently within the multiple times that a show may air on a given day or week, or replaying the same DVDs endlessly. *Blue’s Clues* leveraged this preference for repetition for educational aims, creating an episode structure which young children could learn and follow easily, and then predict behaviors based on repeated
viewing. Phineas & Ferb’s structure is not designed with cognitive or developmental benefits in mind. At the same time, while the creators seem to know that kids enjoy a certain degree of repetition and predictability in their storytelling—a lesson learned from generations of bedtime stories and fairytales—Phineas & Ferb does not merely offer simple formulas for the sake of pleasing undiscerning young viewers; instead, the show’s pleasures stem from a complex interplay of repetition and variation.

To understand the nuances of the show’s narrative form, we need to look closer at the show’s core formula. The title characters are stepbrothers of an unspecified age (probably around ten), and every episode is set during their seemingly eternal summer vacation. After an initial bout of boredom, the brothers come up with a “Big Idea,” announced by Phineas, whose catchphrase is “Hey Ferb, I know what we’re gonna do today!” Notably, Phineas is the talkative brother, with Ferb saying at most one or two lines per episode. They then build an elaborate invention, such as a shrinking submarine or an escalator to the moon, or undertake a fanciful mission, like becoming a boy band sensation or searching for the lost city of Atlantis, while their fifteen-year-old sister Candace tries in vain to “bust” her brothers to their mother, Linda. Candace also has her own goals, which typically involve getting Jeremy, her crush, to pay attention to her, and Phineas and Ferb’s big ideas often inadvertently interfere with her plans. Meanwhile, the family’s pet, Perry the Platypus, is secretly Agent P, a spy who slips away every episode to get a mission from Major Monogram to defeat arch villain Dr. Doofenschmirtz. Perry gets temporarily captured by Doofenschmirtz, who offers a monologue about his plans to take control of “the tri-state area” through evil plots, like stealing all of the region’s zinc or making everybody else’s voice higher, and using inventions like the Monkey Enslave-inator, Make Up Your Mind-inator, or Turn Everything Evil-inator, as well as typically providing a flashback to his troubled childhood in the German village of Gimmelshtump to provide a rationale for his evil ways. Invariably, Perry escapes and foils Doofenschmirtz’s evil plans (prompting another repeated catchphrase, “Curse you, Perry the Platypus!”), with a side effect of the evil plot impacting Phineas and Ferb’s big idea in a way that undermines Candace’s attempts to bust the boys at the last possible moment. For instance, in “The Flying Fishmonger,” the boys dig a giant gorge in their backyard, but due to the malfunctioning of Doofenschmirtz’s machine that kicks sand in people’s faces (the Who’s-Crying-Now-inator), it gets filled up just as Candace brings her mother to bust them. Episodes typically end with Perry rejoining the family and Phineas saying, “Oh, there you are, Perry,” resetting the narrative for the next installment.

This elaborate summary of the basic Phineas & Ferb formula applies to the majority of the show’s storylines, with most episodes comprised of two independent
eleven-minute segments that follow this plot structure, as well as containing numerous repeated catchphrases, running gags, brief song segments, and familiar callbacks to other episodes. Not only is the show quite silly in its plots and characters (and dialogue, songs, and gags), but it is highly repetitive and formulaic—viewers know what to expect in any given story within fairly rigid parameters. And yet it’s incredibly pleasurable, fun, and clever in its own way. It’s easy to imagine that critics who regard children’s television with typical skepticism would see such use of formula and repetition as markers of the show’s poor quality, but I would argue that repetition serves different functions within the series. The success of Phineas & Ferb shows how formula and form can function within a creative work not as markers of mass production or laziness, but as parameters that enable creativity. This is a common notion in other media, wherein the rigid structures of poetic forms like sonnets or haiku, for example, or the strict formal requirements of various song types in both classical and popular music create frameworks for creative innovations. Nobody condemns a Shakespearean sonnet because the rhyme scheme or meter is predictable; instead, we admire how poets can work within formal constraints to create moments of inspiration and surprise.

I am not suggesting that Phineas & Ferb is the cultural equivalent of a Shakespearean sonnet, but rather that there are more ways to define creativity than sheer originality or lack of formula. For the show’s fans (young and old), one of its chief pleasures is seeing how each episode mines its predictable structure and expected repetitions in new ways. It is the pleasure of “theme and variation,” involving a response to how norms are subtly adjusted in each episode, rather than an experience shaped by a fully unpredictable narrative. This type of storytelling is particularly appealing to children, whose repetitive viewing and learning styles privilege the discovery of patterns and rules—by repeatedly watching or hearing stories, kids learn what to expect from a narrative and how subtle variations can make a difference. Through this repetition, little variations in Phineas & Ferb pay off with pleasurable humor and reward long-time viewers for paying close attention. For instance, Phineas and Ferb’s friend Isabella usually enters an episode with her tagline, “Hi guys, whatcha doin’?” spoken in a distinctive (and highly imitable by her young fans) sing-song voice. But in a number of episodes, other characters say the line or a variant of it, which often triggers a moment of reflexive self-awareness, such as one in which Isabella scolds someone for stealing her line. Such subtle variations not only create moments of pleasure among fans who recognize the show’s patterns but also reward long-time careful viewers by acknowledging the show’s embedded formulas.

Rather than addressing a dumbed-down viewer inattentive to the show’s formulaic repetitions, Phineas & Ferb treats its young fans as savvy and sophisticated,
attuned to the details and patterns inherent in the show's form. The plots are frequently ludicrous, but often the point of an episode is to anticipate the ridiculous ways that the competing outlandish inventions of Doofenschmirtz and the young brothers eventually intersect and cancel each other out, even though only the silent Perry is aware of the two different events and sets of characters. Young viewers watch episodes knowing full well that eventually the two plots will come together at the story's climax, but not knowing precisely how. In “The Fast and the Phineas” for instance, Doofenschmirtz’s Deflate-inator seems to have little to do with Phineas’s participating in a high-profile auto race in his mother’s tricked-out remote-controlled car—until Doofenschmirtz’s gun causes a blimp to crash into a broadcasting tower, cutting out the signal to the race’s TV coverage just as Candace is showing Phineas racing to Linda. While the dual plotlines in *Phineas & Ferb* are designed to be watched by viewers who know full well that they will formulaically converge in the end, the show's formula invites kids to speculate and imagine how the plotlines will come together in unpredictable ways, what previous episodes will be referenced, and which of the show’s conventions will be varied.

Such an approach to storytelling that focuses less on “what will happen?” than “how will the story be told?” is part of a larger trend of narrative complexity in television, where savvy viewers marvel at the storytelling machinery as well as getting immersed in the story. This approach has been termed “the operational aesthetic,” and it is typically found in adult primetime programs like *Lost*, *The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad.* For its part, *Phineas & Ferb* offers a junior version of the operational aesthetic, catering to kids who watch television programs intently and repeatedly. The plot mechanics of multiple threads coming together at the episode's climax is reminiscent of complex adult sitcoms like *Seinfeld*, *Arrested Development*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, in which a central pleasure comes from anticipating the payoff of an elaborate, multi-threaded narrative machine. While certainly more casual viewers might enjoy the goofy humor and catchy songs of *Phineas & Ferb*, the show’s narrative design offers savvier fans of all ages the more elaborate and expansive pleasures that come from embracing the complexity and variety beneath the repetitions and formula. This differs from other kids’ media that embeds adult references to amuse parents while kids enjoy slapstick humor or goofy characters—a strategy common to *Looney Tunes* and *Sesame Street* alike. By contrast, *Phineas & Ferb* gives both kids and adults the same pleasures of complex construction and payoff from narrative anticipation.

Not all episodes of *Phineas & Ferb* follow its formula precisely, however. While most episodes present variation and innovation within the smaller moments of new inventions, unlikely plot collisions, shifts in the character catchphrases, and expectation of Ferb’s saying his single line, a few episodes violate the show’s core
formulaic plot structure and key story events. For instance, in the episode “Phineas and Ferb Get Busted!” (March 13, 2009), Candace finally succeeds in busting her brothers, resulting in an entirely distinct plot structure: the boys are sent to reform school, and Candace guiltily decides to bust them out, and despite there being no explicit B-plot with Perry, Candace sees Perry and Doofenschmirtz battling during their escape in a scene that finally reveals Perry’s secret identity to the family. Of course it all turns out to be a dream (first Candace’s and then Perry’s), but the episode offers a significant variation to the show’s formula and thus shatters expectations for fans used to its standard plot structure and character roles. Such non-formulaic episodes are distinctly pleasurable in the context of the show’s normal strict adherence to patterns—which is to say that if every episode were less formulaic, such violations would not be such significant and fun exceptions.

One common element in such non-formulaic episodes is reflexivity, where the show “winks” at the audience about its plot formulas or expectations. In “Phineas and Ferb Get Busted,” such reflexivity emerges early, as Candace and her mother talk about how boring it is that the same thing happens every single day, with Candace trying to bust her brothers and Linda finding no evidence of wrongdoing. After Linda does see the boys’ mischief, however, she mentions how frequently Candace claims they are up to something, and a quick montage of flashbacks to nearly every episode in the first season appears, in effect acknowledging that viewers are fully aware of the show’s formulas. Reflexivity has been a key part of animation for decades, from Bugs Bunny directly addressing the audience to The Simpsons referencing past episodes and poking fun at its corporate parent, Fox. Phineas & Ferb’s particular brand of reflexivity focuses mostly on the show’s use of repetition, calling attention to what some critics might see as a weakness as being a source of creative variation and viewing pleasure instead.

Two non-formulaic episodes that highlight the show’s use of repetition and pleasures of variation are “Phineas and Ferb’s Quantum Boogaloo” (September 25, 2009) and “Rollercoaster: The Musical!” (January 29, 2011). Both of these episodes engage directly with the events of the show’s very first episode, “Rollercoaster” (August 17, 2007), revisiting the original’s plot and key events through complex storytelling. The story of “Rollercoaster” established the show’s basic formula: the boys create a gigantic (and physically impossible) rollercoaster, Candace tries to get Linda to see the coaster, and Perry foils Doofenschmirtz’s plan involving a massive magnet and the world’s largest ball of aluminum foil in a way that makes the coaster disappear before Candace’s eyes. “Quantum Boogaloo” is a time-travel story, with the boys going twenty years into their future, only to enable adult Candace to travel back in time to bust her brothers in their very first summer adventure: the events of the “Rollercoaster” episode. Adult Candace’s successful busting also inadvertently saves Doofenschmirtz, which creates
a dystopian future where he is in control of the tri-state area. Complications pile up, leading to three versions of Candace all fighting over whether to bust or save Phineas and Ferb, but everything is eventually put back into temporal order for the next episode. While “Quantum Boogaloo” is one of the program's most complex and convoluted episodes, as befits a time-travel tale, it would be even more confusing to a novice viewer who doesn't know the show's formula and the initial story of “Rollercoaster.” Thus, in such instances, episodes work to appeal to fans who accumulate knowledge about the show's storytelling strategies.

“Rollercoaster: The Musical!” is even more reflexive and intertwined with the show's initial episode. The latter episode starts with Phineas nostalgically remembering the fun they had building the rollercoaster and saying, “We should do it again, but this time as a musical!” The rest of the episode replays the events of “Rollercoaster” with minor variations, but with nine musical numbers added. The songs are particularly reflexive, being primarily centered on often repeated catchphrases like “Whatcha Doin’?” or “Hey Ferb, I know what we're going to do today,” or focused on the show's formulaic plotlines, as in “Mom Look,” in which Candace sings about all of the mischief that her brothers have done throughout the summer (and that previous episodes featured). There is no doubt how the plot will turn out, as it's a virtual replay of the initial episode, but the episode's joy is watching the familiar story replayed with character's meta-commentary on the action through song. Like so many Phineas & Ferb episodes, “Rollercoaster: The Musical!” asks its viewers to focus less on what might happen but more on how the story will be told, especially in relation to past episodes and well-established formulas.

Thus Phineas & Ferb presents an interesting conundrum: every episode is almost identical on the level of plot and character, and thus you can understand the show easily after watching only a single episode, but you need to watch many episodes to understand the show's deeper and more complex appeals. Arguably, this pattern is an extreme version of a broader tendency within American television, wherein complex serialization and cumulative backstories are common in many of today's most acclaimed primetime shows. Phineas & Ferb is far from being a serial, as most episodes can be watched out of order, but the cumulative effect of watching the show is attuning yourself to the serial build-up of its formal dimensions rather than remembering ongoing plot events and character developments.

Steven Johnson has argued that much of contemporary popular media make a positive cognitive impact on viewers, specifically suggesting that videogames and narratively complex television “make us smarter.” It's impossible to know whether these claims are accurate without undertaking direct experimental research on viewers, and even such research methods would fall short of proving direct cognitive effects. But when watching a show like Phineas & Ferb, and talking with its
Phineas & Ferb’s first episode “Rollercoaster” starts a running gag with an adult authority asking Phineas, “Aren’t you a little young to be a rollercoaster engineer?” to which he replies, “Yes, yes I am.” The revisionist “Rollercoaster: The Musical!” restages the familiar scene as a musical number, complete with dancing engineers.

young fans, it seems hard to imagine that the program is causing the cognitive damage that anti-television detractors might claim. It certainly makes you pay attention, think about the connection between episodes, and be mindful of television’s formal dimensions in ways that contradict the negative effects of children’s television that many critics take for granted. Researchers have suggested that a key impact of children’s media is to teach children how to learn, even if the contents of what is learned are relatively inconsequential, like cataloguing the range of creatures found in Pokémon. A show like Phineas & Ferb doesn’t teach kids direct real-life lessons like reading or geography, but it does train kids to be careful and savvy consumers of narrative, preparing them for more adult stories that range from complex primetime serials to literary fiction, and even developing an awareness of how storytelling strategies factor into non-fiction forms like news and sports.
So is *Phineas & Ferb* just another example of formulaic lowbrow children's television striving to sell merchandise to unwitting kids? Certainly the show is a product of a hyper-commercial television system that strives to generate ratings and promote merchandise. But creatively, it builds on storytelling strategies that have emerged in recent years to make television more demanding and sophisticated. *Phineas & Ferb*'s adaptation of narrative complexity for elementary schoolers highlights general strategies that television uses to engage children while keeping them entertained, and in ways that counter the stereotypical vision of passive couch potatoes watching an electronic babysitter. The series demands that viewers pay attention to follow a complex narrative structure, contradicting the assumed role of commercial children's television as bad object.

**NOTES**


2. The show regularly ranks among the highest-rated kids’ programs on cable, and the 2011 original made-for-TV movie *Phineas & Ferb Across the 2nd Dimension* ranked as one of the most-watched cable movies ever aired.


**FURTHER READING**


