
November 23, 2008

COMEDY

The Sitcom Digresses

By ROSS SIMONINI

In a recent episode of [Tina Fey's](#) behind-the-scenes sitcom, "30 Rock," [Alec Baldwin](#) mentions a fictional Olympic tetherball athlete named Tyler Brody, and a new screen instantly materializes: a fully realized clip from the phony tetherball Olympic Games, complete with bystanders, a scoreboard and a compressed story line about Brody's failed match. After 10 seconds, the clip subsides, and the show continues. Less than a minute later, another clip pops up: five seconds of [Tracy Morgan](#) screaming inside a Chuck E. Cheese's restaurant. A minute after that — and this is all before the opening credits — the Brody clip is revisited in a flash, then expanded with more faux Olympic events (synchronized running, octuples tennis), stretching out the joke as far as it will go.

As erratic as this sounds, the episode plays seamlessly. To the television watcher, constant asides are now recognized as a basic component of the contemporary sitcom vocabulary. Verbal digressions — "Remember the time when . . ." or "What would it be like if . . ." — often lead to alternative scenarios, tangents and realities, each with new characters and sets that can consume long stretches of the show's running time. Much has been made of how "30 Rock" is revitalizing the classic "Frasier"/"Friends"/"Seinfeld" sitcom, but Fey's program is, like most of the deeply funny and cutting-edge comedies of the last few years, a bold experiment in narrative.

The most conspicuous of these experiments has been the so-called post-reality-show sitcom style of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and "The Office" (both the U.K. and U.S. versions), in which laugh tracks and live studio audiences are replaced by documentary techniques of meandering single-camera work and awkward, lifelike dialogue. Shows like "Arrested Development," "Scrubs," "Family Guy" and "30 Rock" have taken the experiment a step further, reconfiguring the methods with which comedy tells stories. Instead of using the typical sitcom narrative (six characters in the same four rooms enduring a humdrum, linear story line), these shows explore their situations through collage and a restless stream of consciousness.

The hyperhumor of "Arrested Development" came from its writers' ability to mold the story's structure to the timing of the jokes, so that the show behaved more like a sketch comedy than a situational one. Episodes leapt from flash-forwards to multipart digressions to one-second-long digressions to digressions within digressions, every digression itself a discrete skit fit for early, NBC-era [David Letterman](#) or Fey's alma mater, "[Saturday Night Live](#)." Some of the episodes just floated off into an endless chain of tangents until plot and plot-tangent became indistinguishable, a trend that will presumably continue with "Sit Down, Shut Up," the new program from the creator of "Arrested Development," Mitchell Hurwitz.

These types of asides are standard for drama: the show "Lost," for instance, relies on hazy flashbacks and dream sequences to construct its labyrinthine plots. In digressive comedies, however, the overarching plots are often inconsequential or bonehead-simple, and the digressions themselves are what give the characters meaning and the show its substance. Unsurprisingly, it was "The Simpsons" that introduced the digressive gag into the sitcom arsenal. Instead of drawing on cartoon staples like Acme explosions, "Simpsons" writers made use of the pliability of animation and gave pop-culture allusions entire scenes of their own. The creator of "Family Guy," Seth MacFarlane, followed suit and pushed this technique to the extreme, hopping from sketches about [Steve Buscemi's](#) teeth to Aquaman to a diabetic Fat Albert. "Scrubs," one of the first live-action shows to appropriate this technique from animation, nodded to these cartoon roots, using sound effects and hyperbolic acting as stock digressive tools.

On deeper inspection, these narrative techniques recall the Postmodern literature of the 1960s and '70s, a time when writers

of metafiction began following in the lineage of “Tristram Shandy,” stressing interruptions of story over story itself. In “Gravity’s Rainbow,” Thomas Pynchon spent 10 pages discussing a sentient light bulb; [Robert Coover’s](#) “Pricksongs and Descants” ambled through multiple realities; [John Barth’s](#) “Sot-Weed Factor” was called an “anatomy” of a story.

Metafiction emerged from a group of self-aware writers who analyzed their own work like critics; and in the same way, today’s digressive sitcoms come from a generation of comedy writers (and viewers) who understand the ins and outs of the most popular format of 30-minute storytelling. Avant-garde literature gave America its first tradition of subverting narrative, but what was once a wild experiment in language has become an accepted counterpart to our Internet culture, where digressive Googling and link-clicking are a way of life. The dusty sitcom has caught up to the modern mind.

Ross Simonini is the interviews editor at The Believer magazine.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
