The Office: a Progressive Workplace Comedy

Television Text and Context
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When analyzing a piece of television, it is important to ask how it fulfills its genre’s expectations. Genres are attached to a set of conventions that become fun, familiar, and ritualistic for their audiences. Recently, due to technological and cultural changes in how media is delivered and viewed, audiences have been demanding a new level of sophistication, complexity, and innovation within genres. As old conventions grow tired, the most successful shows are pushing the envelope and exploring new techniques and storytelling devices. The most effective of these shows will go on to set new standards to be met and further challenged by the shows that follow them. The Office is a great example of a progressive workplace comedy, a subgenre of the sitcom genre, satisfying the genre’s conventions while simultaneously reshaping the assumptions linked to the workplace comedy. Season 9 Episode 12- “Customer Loyalty” contains many examples that support this argument.

According to Jason Mittell’s essay “Telling Television Stories”, the workplace comedy features “a group of unrelated characters united by their profession and typically set in their office” (Mittell, 248). The office comedy is a unique subsection of the sitcom because it allows for a diverse cast, and characters can easily be replaced, added, or subtracted. These shows do not have to uphold the same formula as family sitcoms, although the relationships between characters often mimic those of a family (Mittell, 246). In addition, a sitcom is expected to provide its audience with light-hearted comic relief, and episodic mishaps that are happily
resolved by the end of the episode. There are many examples from the episode “Customer Loyalty” that support how *The Office* upholds these expectations. First, there are many comical and easy to follow episodic plot lines: Jim sends Dwight on a search for the Holy Grail, Dwight tries to convince his coworker Darryl to stay with Dunder Mifflin instead of moving to Philadelphia, and Nelly accidentally encourages a romance between Peter and Erin by assigning them to a collaborative project. Each of these events leaves the audience laughing and enjoying the relationships between the characters, safely taking comfort in the formula of the workplace comedy.

Although *The Office* upholds the conventions of the office comedy quite well, that is no longer the only measure of what makes content interesting and successful. Many critics view sitcoms as mulaic and uncreative, and so a well respected sitcom must push it’s boundaries (Mittell, 248). One way that *The Office* does this is by adding serial plotlines, an increasingly common technique in the world of sitcom. In “Customer Loyalty,” Pam and Jim get in a serious argument that ends unresolved, Peter and Erin’s relationship is expected to continue growing, and Darryl will continue traveling back and forth from Scranton to Philadelphia. Leaving some issues unresolved in this manner adds complexity and re-watchability, creating a loyal and dedicated audience. The content in “Customer Loyalty” also caters to the increasing demand for sophistication within genres, because the nature of Pam and Jim’s argument is so drastically different from the light-hearted banter that is typically expected of sitcoms. This argument was intended to leave the audience emotional and unnerved, anxious for the relationship to return to equilibrium in the
following week’s episode. We may be able to interpret the argument as a form of genre mixing; the episode’s dramatic unconventionality adds a new layer of character development, and thus, further engages the audience. Finally, “Customer Loyalty” is an excellent example of a progressive episode because of the ways in which it breaks the 4th wall. The Office is a member of the “mocumentary” family, meaning the story is told in documentary style with one-on-one interviews and commentary. This storytelling device is already a powerful interference with the 4th wall, but “Customer Loyalty” pushes the boundaries of this technique even further. After Jim and Pam’s argument on the phone, Brian, the previously unseen boom mike operator from the documentary The Office is based on drops his mike to comfort Pam and encourages the cameramen to turn off their cameras. This move left the audience baffled; after nine seasons of the camera crew’s identities remaining completely unknown and irrelevant, one of them is introduced directly into the plot as a reoccurring character in an intense moment of drama. This extreme self-reflexivity added a huge layer of innovation and complexity into a previously semi-conventional storyline.

As innovative new media technologies and an increased demand for quality television grow, the most successful television shows are responding by increasing the complexity of their content in order to keep audiences engaged. The Office, as demonstrated in this essay through examples from the episode “Customer Loyalty”, truly pushed the boundaries of the workplace comedy by effectively using techniques such as genre mixing, multiple plot lines, complex characters, and self-reflexivity. The shows ability to adhere to a required formula while simultaneously
incorporating new storytelling devices contributed largely to the show’s overall popularity and success. These progressive techniques have placed the series in a well-respected light, as a show that set new standards in its genre and challenges future workplace comedies to match and further innovate the ever-changing conventions of sitcom.
Works Cited