

## Dator's 2nd Law of South Park: Imagining (poorly animated) Futures of Religion, Technology, & Culture

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If one looks past the inflammatory language, adolescent humor, and rather poor animation, *South Park* is one of, if not, the most profoundly political shows on American television. Airing since 1997, Comedy Central's popular program is known for its fiery satirization of the here and now, but it also serves as an unlikely reservoir for "images of the future," which function as the very lifeblood of Futures Studies. As Dator elucidates, "Futures Studies is not about correctly predicting The Future. It is about understanding the varieties and sources of different images of the future, and of coming to see that futures studies does not study 'the future', but rather, among other things, 'images of the future.'" (Dator, 2009, p. 6). In an age of big data and strategic foresight, this sentiment, which resides at the heart of the Manoa School of Futures Studies, is as important as ever. When Nate Silver's algorithm correctly predicted the outcome of the 2012 American Presidential election down to the electoral vote tally, which was lauded by numerous pundits as being too close to call, some commentators cheerfully noted, "Predicting the Future Is Easier Than It Looks" (Ward & Metternich, 2012).

Predicting the future is obviously not what futurists (should) do, but the ascendancy of Silver portends crucial questions about the types of theoretical and methodological allegiances that are integral to the discipline, which has always been a multi- and trans-disciplinary endeavor. At the heart of Dator's assertion lies an implicit contention that Futures Studies *is* Cultural Studies, which engages how cultural production, including various media, broadly defined, shapes our experience of the world. In support of this linkage, *South Park's* prescience on the politics of social change, especially concerning the futures of religion, technology, and culture, merits a closer look and, perhaps more importantly, offers a point of entry for thinking the futures of Futures.

"Goobacks," the seventh episode of *South Park's* eighth season, chronicles the fallout from beings from the distant future (3045 to be exact) who have come back in time to find work. As one might imagine, these future Americans, who are a "hairless, uniform mix of all races" that "speak a complete mix of English, Chinese, Turkish, and, indeed, all world languages," incite all sorts of conflict (Parker, 2004). As an image of the future, "Goobacks" not only takes on immigration debates in the present but also illuminates contentions about the futures, particularly from those weary of the U.S.'s shifting demographics. This sentiment was expressed most succinctly during Fox News' election night coverage by a

nonplussed Bill O'Reilly, who quipped, "it's not a traditional America anymore" and "50% of the voting public wants stuff" (Molloy, 2012). In tackling the politics of social change eight years prior, "Goobacks" offers a decidedly critical lens from which to contextualize contemporary debates and imagine possibilities for the futures. Indeed, the episode heralds another Manoa School maxim: Dator's 2nd Law of the Future, which famously observes, "Any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous" (Dator, 1995).

Figure 1. Goobacks (courtesy of Comedy)



In Season 10, *South Park* takes on the year 2546 as Cartman, one of the show's central protagonists, freezes himself to avoid waiting for the Nintendo Wii, a highly anticipated gaming console circa 2006. In the serialized 12th (Go God Go) and 13th (Go God Go XII) episodes, Cartman is awakened to discover that 1) everyone he has ever known and loved is dead, 2) the entire world is atheist and at war, and 3) no one in the future plays video games. Cartman's fervent drive to attain the Wii along with the actions of competing atheist groups, who are merely fighting over the most logical name (e.g. Allied Atheist Alliance versus Unified Atheist Alliance), certainly resembles the often-cited reason for dispensing with religion: irrational violence. Turning this critique on its head, however, *South Park* astutely reframes the debate and presences the problem as being "isms," primarily extremism, rather than religion itself.

In addition to religion, technology obviously plays a significant part in both episodes, and Cartman, with the help of sea otters riding ostriches (see Dator's 2nd Law), is able to procure a Wii at the New New Hampshire Museum of Technology. When informed by a "maintenance guy" that his ancient Wii cannot be connected

to his futuristic float-screen, an enraged Cartman vents, “There’s got to be some way to hook it up! It’s the freakin’ future!” (Parker, 2006). Cartman gives voice to the frustrations that come along with accelerating rates of technological change and, even more importantly, the political dynamics underlying social change. As Dator puts it, “structure matters” (Dator, 2004).

Figure 2. Go God Go XII (courtesy of Comedy)



While there is much that one might draw from *South Park's* rich imaginings, the ultimate value of the above episodes centers on the primacy of images, even those that are poorly animated, of the future to Futures Studies. While the rise of algorithmic modeling portends an increase in public expectations for prediction, Futures should (and can) not lose sight of its bread and butter, regardless of the source. In support of this assertion, it is perhaps advisable to restate Dator's 2nd law: “Any useful idea about the future might appear on South Park.”

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