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## Why It's Time We Stop Categorizing TV Comedies

By [Stephen Falk](#)



Photo: FX, NBC, Showtime



*The 2016 Emmy race has begun, and Vulture will take a close look at the contenders until voting closes on June 27. Stephen Falk is the creator of FXX's *You're the Worst*. It's Emmy time, and that means someone's going to get*

stirred up about the categorization of a funny show as a drama or a dramatic show as a comedy. This is not just due to the fact that callous studios are trying to best position their shows to win, but also because, when discussing art (or whatever TV is), categories are reductive and intrinsically problematic. To understand the current discussion, it's helpful to look back at the old debate over "single-camera" comedies versus "multi-camera."

For a long time, a persistent bias that existed around television was the idea that if a famous actor was doing TV, it was only because her movie career had shit the bed. That bias is now mostly dissolved — except when it's true, and then we all just kinda quietly *know* but don't need to say anything. Another bias continues, one that's relatively new and as understandable on a surface level as it is baffling upon deeper consideration, and that is the idea that multi-camera sitcoms are fogleish and stupid and thus, for now, pretty much dead, save *The Big Bang Theory*, which is a show many people watch. (I'm told it has a catchphrase?)

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The argument often centers on the notion that, to the younger generations' ears, the more vaudevillian, setup-punch line, comedic rhythm is deeply unhip and square compared to the more subtle, "real" humor of single-cams. While I get the disdain for the inherent thirstiness of the laugh track, the notion that somehow the form is forever broken and outdated seems shortsighted — as is the converse notion that single-cams are automatically hip or somehow cutting-edge. (*Bewitched*, *Gilligan's Island*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Andy Griffith Show* were all single-cam.)

Recently, articles have been written about how, thanks to Netflix, [Friends is very popular with millennials](#), a group of people I suspect to be purely fictional, like hipsters or funny Republicans. With that news, and the realization that multi-

cams are thriving on kid networks like Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel, any lingering fear I had that writers of trend pieces were right and the form was indeed dead vanished. Funny is funny. “Chanandler Bong” would not have been funnier if it was shot with one camera and no audible audience laughter.

I am the creator of a show called *You’re the Worst*, which is a single-camera comedy on FXX. We are a single-camera show for very specific reasons — I wanted a more filmic look, didn’t want a laugh track, and dislike doing punch-up on the fly, and FX doesn’t usually make multi-cams. But my goal with the show has always been to have as wide a tonal palette as possible, from the goofiest physical humor that would be at home on a stage at Warner Bros. to stylized, stunty tracking shots to moments of intense drama. I’ve aimed to leave us open to telling whatever story we’re interested in telling, in the way most artistically appropriate, regardless of what that does to our “category.” And in doing so, I have, rather greedily, sought to indulge not one or two, but all of my influences from 30 years of avid sitcom watching.

However, I never put a thought into what form of show I was drawing from: single, multi, “hybrid”; simply the sitcoms that inspired me went into the mix that became *You’re The Worst*.

They include: *Cheers*. *Cheers* is an example I go to constantly when discussing, well, anything, but specifically creating characters. Every character in that bar is so specific and useful from a storytelling point of view. Any person could walk into *Cheers* and instantly there is conflict, or at least conversation. Carla is going to react to something in a different way from Diane, who will in turn see it differently from Sam, Cliff, Coach, or Norm. *NewsRadio* had an equally strong ensemble for generating a story. *Mad About You* taught me that a sustained romantic comedy could work on television without relying on the question of *will they or*

*won't they?* That writing staff also took inspiring risks, from doing flashback stories to a full episode in a hallway outside their crying infant daughter's room during sleep training. *Arrested Development* and *The Simpsons* awed me with their world-building and attention to comedic detail. *The Office* had a favorite TV-executive watchword that is nonetheless important, and that is *heart*. The long-game approach to ensemble-building on *Parks and Recreation* was inspiring for me. From *All in the Family* and *Sanford & Son* and *Veep*, I took the lesson of what a sublime pleasure it is to hear really great insults delivered by amazing actors. From *M\*A\*S\*H*, I learned that television could take great risks and be something transcendent and confusing and "important," as well as just be hysterical on a joke level. From *Weeds*, on which I wrote, I took fearlessness of storytelling (thanks to creator Jenji Kohan), specificity of vision, and narrative restlessness. And it is not just American television that inspired my show. Brit-coms like *Pulling*, *Spaced*, *Gavin & Stacey*, and *The Young Ones* gave me reassurance that characters do not have to always behave in a "likable" or "relatable" way — words that American television executives love but to me seem far less important than the question "Are they interesting and cohesive and specific?"

While these inspirations are seemingly all over the map, the connective tissue is that they are all very funny. So regardless of specific comedic genre or how many cameras I might use, I ask, "Does it make me laugh?" If so, then I'll watch. And steal from it.

When looking at the Emmy race and extrapolating from there the direction television comedy is going, binary questions like single-cam versus multi- now seem kind of quaint. Web shows are becoming TV shows. TV shows are moving to the web. Adult Swim makes some 12-minute-long shows better than most half-hour shows, which are actually

21 minutes — except on pay cable, where they're 25.

Streaming comedies are now routinely 30 minutes (and, I believe, for the most part, not helped by the extra time — brevity and tautness are good for comedy).

In terms of blurring the lines, lately there has been a trend of television comedies that seem very interested in feeling “real,” but aren't necessarily as interested in being “funny.” I have no problem with those shows and very much like many of them, but the question is often raised, “Should they be considered comedies just because they're around half an hour?” Sure! I don't care. Our show is considered by some to be a “dramedy,” though that word is clearly half-formed and gross and should be killed with fire. But like the distinction between multi-cam and single-cam, it is useful only to a point; the blurring of traditional categorizers is ultimately a good thing that will lead to more risk-taking and form-breaking in television storytelling. So bring me your joke-sparse, web-series-turned-37-minute show airing exclusively on those televisions on gas pumps. If it's good, I will watch the shit out of it. I will just probably grumble a little if it beats *Veep* at the Emmys.