Archer is weirder than ever in season 10’s episodic space adventure

Archer debuted in 2009 as a sort of animated fusion between James Bond and *The Office*. Adam Reed’s FX show chronicled the misadventures of titular superspy Sterling Archer (voiced by H. Jon Benjamin) as he deals with covert international missions and, more significantly, HR, accounting, and working for his mother at ISIS, the International Secret Intelligence Service.

But when real-world events caught up with *Archer* and being an ISIS agent wasn’t a laughing matter anymore, Reed reinvented the show. The writers largely abandoned the office setting in favor of a series of themed seasons that got progressively stranger after Sterling was put into a coma at the end of a season 7 plot paying tribute to the 1950 film-noir classic *Sunset Boulevard*.

Since then, the show has ostensibly been taking place in his subconscious, with its cast of cantankerous characters transported into a classic noir and a pulp adventure. Their latest outing, *Archer: 1999*, is the weirdest yet, recasting the characters as the crew of a salvage spaceship and largely ditching the traditional season-long plot in favor of an episodic romp through science fiction clichés.

[embedded content]

The best thing to come out of the show’s shifts in focus is the way *Archer* can now reinvent the central characters every season, while still maintaining their dysfunctional dynamic. Most improved this season is Cheryl Tunt (Judy Greer), originally the incompetent, neurotic personal assistant of Sterling’s mom, Malory Archer (voiced by Jessica Walter, with

all the contempt and haughtiness she brought to *Arrested Development*). Reed has consistently tried to bring extra comedic punch to the character by salting her with a hodgepodge of traits. She's an ultra-rich heiress with a pet ocelot. She sniffs glue. She likes being choked. She spontaneously decided to become a country singer. But while her one-time counterpart Pam Poovey (Amber Nash) managed to evolve from a puppet-loving HR director into a drag-racing, brawling badass and Sterling's best friend, Cheryl never really came into her own.

That's finally changed this season: she's playing an ace fighter pilot in the mold of *Battlestar Galactica*'s Starbuck. "I'm going to have to keep doing stupid fighter-pilot missions, and they're so boring, because I'm so good," she whines while making a list of pros and cons about whether she should rescue the crew from the gullet of a giant space squid in episode four, "Dining with the Zarglorp." Her grudging competence can be even funnier than her past haplessness. Sterling occasionally being sober and serious enough to actually show off that he's smart and capable of doling out precise action-star violence has been a source of humor for many seasons of the show. Having another character with no impulse control who needs to be coaxed into doing the job they're very good at just adds to the fun, rather than undermining the bit.



Image: FXX

Cheryl is still regularly accompanied by Pam, who Nash described as Chewbacca to Sterling's Han Solo last season when the two were co-pilots of a cargo ship. That's been taken a step further this season: Pam is now a giant rock monster who's even tougher and cruder than usual. There's a weird gag in Reed's scripts for the first two episodes where she's regularly mugging for the camera and accompanied by a laugh track as if she's the fan favorite on a sitcom. Happily, later episodes drop that business in favor of better, though similarly bizarre, jokes like the fact that humans can smell when Pam's species is aroused.

Doctor Krieger (Lucky Yates) started as a version of James Bond's gadget supplier Q who was perpetually developing troubling side projects. But he's steadily grown into a member of the main cast. He was particularly enjoyable as Sterling's wisecracking parrot Crackers during season 9, aka *Archer: Danger Island*. But he gets back to his engineering roots in *Archer: 1999* as Algernop Krieger, an artificial human constantly quoting Isaac Asimov's laws of robotics and getting bashed by the rest of the crew for wanting to be a real boy. Ethical programming still doesn't stop him from getting up to

no good, and a side plot in “Dining with the Zarglorp” that none of the other characters even know about is one of the funniest things in the first half of the nine-episode season.

Not all the season 10 changes work as well. Reed voices Ray Gillette, who started as another spy and a more good-natured foil to Sterling. The nice guy attitude faded over time, but he was never vindictive enough to compete with the characters who started at each other’s throats. He was barely in season 8, and he didn’t have much to do as a French colonial officer in season 9. He’s even more useless this season as a spacefaring courtesan, a parody of *Firefly*’s Inara. It’s a good gag, but the writers don’t seem to have a way to sustain it.



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The rest of the crew hasn’t changed much, despite the new setting. Lana Kane (Aisha Tyler) was Sterling’s ultra-competent spy ex-girlfriend in the original run, and here, she’s his ex-wife, sharing control of the ship due to a joint custody agreement. As usual, her job is to maintain a level head and keep everything running smoothly while chastising Sterling for wasting fuel and ammo, and for generally being

irresponsible in the name of looking cool. Malory Archer is also in her usual role of command and control. Though, here, she inexplicably has the ability to turn into a ball of energy that can possess machines. She's still a bitter alcoholic who only cares about herself and Sterling. Cyril Figgis (Chris Parnell), as the ship's first mate, remains Sterling's hated rival for Lana's affections.

There's a lot of potential in this wild new scenario, but season 10 gets off to a relatively slow start, with a two-part episode where the crew tries to get paid for rescuing an alien noble and winds up in the clutches of perpetual series villain Barry Dillon (Dave Willis). Plots involving the spy-turned-mad cyborg wore thin in the original plot, and they weren't helped when he turned into a gangster cyborg in season 8. He's a droid in the model of *Star Wars*' IG-88 here, but that shift isn't enough for it to feel any fresher when he tortures Sterling. Those episodes are much better when they're devoted to the rest of the crew sorting out their issues after being forced into gladiatorial combat, or when Reed is using the new setting to get meta with "space phrasing," the show's attempt to bring back the constant callouts of innuendo-laced dialogue that were a staple of the early seasons.



Image: FXX

The Tick writer Mark Ganek picks things up in episode 3, "The Leftovers," a rollicking mashup of *Alien*, *Star Trek*'s "The Trouble with Tribbles," and *Cowboy Bebop*'s "Mushroom Samba." The episode delivers some phenomenal jokes and character development as the starving characters resort to eating alien eggs that unleash their buried desires. The episode also shows off *Archer*'s animation chops with a mix of silly sight gags and sequences meant to evoke Ridley Scott's alternately suspenseful and grotesque space horror. The animators have always been great at alternating between delivering big action set pieces and providing humor by just showing characters' facial expressions as they stand around arguing. And they've gotten to show off a lot more in the past two seasons, with *Archer: Danger Island*'s lush tropical landscapes and *Archer: 1999*'s bizarre aliens and big space battles.

Reed has said he plans to leave *Archer* after season 10. As fun as the themed seasons have been, it would be a shame if the series ended before it resolves Sterling's coma. Luckily, after 10 seasons and a host of settings, Reed has provided a strong template if FXX decides to hire someone to take the reins, either to bring *Archer* back to its roots or to provide

a new spin on the characters, possibly in a whole new genre.

Archer*’s 10th season,* Archer: 1999*, debuts on May 29th at 10PM ET on FXX.*

https://www.theverge.com/2019/5/28/18643111/archer-1999-season-10-review-adam-reed-h-jon-benjamin-jessica-walter-chris-parnell-aisha-tyler