How Adult Animation Became the Hottest Genre for Streaming Services

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Key insights:

After three decades in the industry, veteran animator Mike Moon is sure of one thing: Adult animation—i.e., animated projects aimed at grown-ups, not kids—is currently in its golden age.

“There are so many different tones that are being tackled, there are so many different styles,” said Moon, who has headed up the adult animation division at Netflix since 2018. “Everyone is trying to move the needle right now. I don’t think there’s ever been a better time.”

Hit series like The Simpsons, Family Guy and South Park, which started decades ago and are still going strong, have defined a generation of animation. More recently, boundary-pushing cable programs like Rick and Morty and Adventure Time broadened the medium’s potential. Now, streaming services are looking to stake their claim on adult animation’s lucrative future and are looking to add original and classic animation projects to their respective platforms.

Adult animation titles often have wide appeal and have become some of the most valuable IP in streamers’ toolkits.

“There’s not necessarily a distinction between people who watch Rick and Morty and people who watch The Bachelor,” said Craig Erwich, svp, original series at Hulu, which sees

animated shows like Bob's Burgers, Family Guy and South Park among its highest-performing series.

Disney used The Simpsons' massive 30-season back catalog as a cornerstone of Disney+ to help bolster interest among subscribers. Even forthcoming streamer HBO Max, which will boast a deep slate of animated shows from big leaguers like Cartoon Network and Adult Swim, spent more than $500 million to lure South Park to its platform.

On Netflix, BoJack Horseman helped prove the value of animation; Emmy-nominated comedy Big Mouth cemented it. As animated shows like comedy Paradise PD and horror series Castlevania regularly land on Netflix's Top 10 lists, Moon is striking deals with a vast network of animators and creators, including Gravity Falls' Alex Hirsch, animator Shion Takeuchi and Titmouse, the animation studio behind Big Mouth.

"Animation, at its best, is such a perfect synthesis of all of these different disciplines: storytelling, design, acting, music, complete world-building," Moon said. "That's one of the reasons why people love animation. It's a type of escapism different from a CG blockbuster or a big action movie."

Next month Apple TV+ will release Central Park, a musical comedy from Bob's Burgers creator Loren Bouchard, and Hulu will debut Solar Opposites from Rick and Morty co-creator Justin Roiland. CBS All Access is preparing at least two seasons of the animated Star Trek: Lower Decks from Rick and Morty co-creator Mike McMahan. Even the new short-form streaming service Quibi has an animated series in the works.

"We saw years ago there was this thirst and hunger from people to watch great animated shows," said Erwich. "Our library is the foundation of our collection in terms of hours, but we're looking to push the form forward and align ourselves with the best artists."

Investing in kids' animation can help bolster grown-up

viewership Kid-themed cartoons like Adventure Time and Steven Universe have found robust audiences among young adults as well. “Some of the rigid lines between different genres and different age groups or audience profiles for shows have been blurred, and there’s room to blend genres and borrow elements that you might more commonly see in adult animation or anime,” Wee said of kids’ series. HBO Max is looking to leverage that by making four animated Adventure Time specials, aimed at fans who were introduced to the series as kids. “Great kids’ shows generally punch above their weight in the culture because they make such a great impression with a younger, impressionable audience,” Wee said.

As a result of the animation boom, ideas that were once dismissed as too risky for broadcast or cable are now generating interest from streamers with an appetite for experimentation. “Some of these shows are things that weren’t deemed commercially viable just a few years ago,” said Billy Wee, svp, original animation at HBO Max. Other than Adult Swim, “for a long time, you weren’t seeing many others taking big swings because it was so hard to find somebody to support it.”

Animated series can be made for less than some live-action comedies and dramas and are often designed to have a long shelf life, upping their value for streamers that invest in them. Media buyers see that feature as a selling point, too.

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Pages: 1 2

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