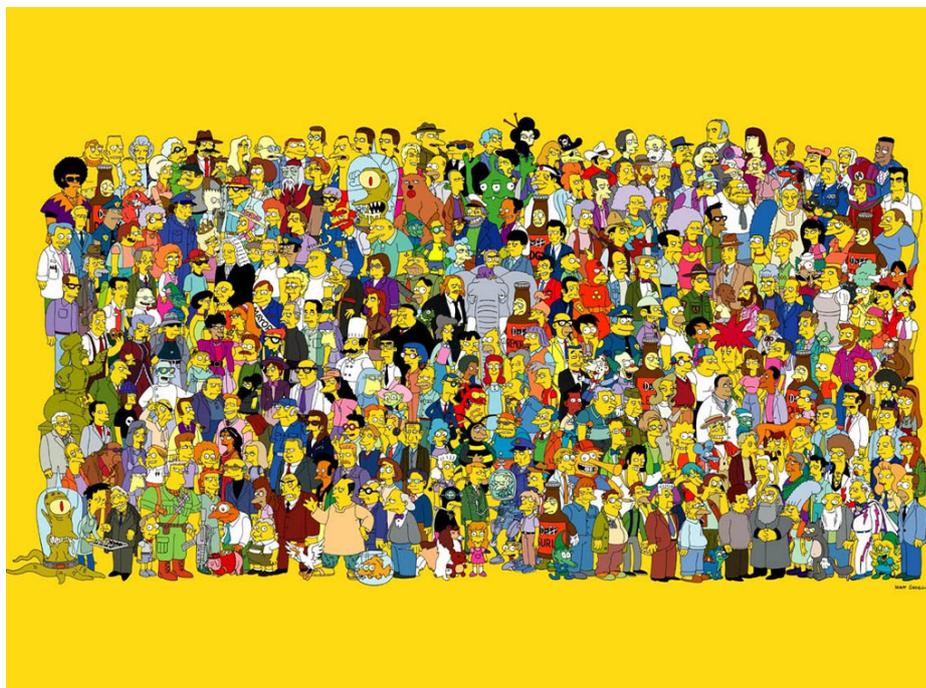


Homer's epic: 'The Simpsons' hits 500 episodes

'The Simpsons', the television phenomenon of a generation, yesterday reached an astonishing new landmark. But should we really be celebrating, or has it lost its edge?



Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, Maggie and the colourful cast of characters from 'The Simpsons'.



ENGLISH & MEDIA

Somewhere in the skies above Springfield, animated clouds part to reveal two looming yellow words: *The Simpsons*. In a classroom below a boy, also yellow, stands on a stool, chalk in hand. 'I will not skateboard in the halls,' he is writing.

That was the beginning. Today – 23 years, 23 seasons, nine comic book series, five albums, one film, 27 Emmy Awards and billions of dollars of merchandise later – the show goes on. Yesterday the 500th episode was broadcast in America, making it the first prime time television show to ever reach that landmark. And still Bart has not learned his lesson.

Creator Matt Groening was initially relieved to get a single episode, having had ideas repeatedly turned down by TV networks unconvinced that there was a market for literate, satirical cartoons. 'I thought it would be a hit with kids,' he says. 'I never thought adults would like it.'

Nowadays modesty is impossible. The show has even contributed to the English language: since 2001 the Oxford English Dictionary has included Homer's catchphrase – 'D'oh!' And when *Time* and *Empire* compiled lists of the greatest ever TV programmes, *The Simpsons* topped both.

It is rare for a TV show to please critics while capturing the hearts of the broader public too. But the cartoon has succeeded in combining great slapstick and quotable one-liners with a sharp, critical commentary on American society.

The show the *New York Times* once called 'the most radical on prime time' has also caused controversy. Two US presidents have criticised its anti-authority attitude. Only last week *Simpsons* dolls were banned in Iran. The 500th episode shows continues to bait conservatives: it features a cameo from the divisive activist Julian Assange, a public enemy in the USA.

In spite of the milestone episode, *The Simpsons'* position as first family of pop culture is no longer assured. Declining popularity has forced its cast to take pay cuts; and in a recent poll of the best episodes, all were from the programme's first decade.

EVERGREEN TERRACE?

This just goes to show, say jaded fans, that another episode is no cause for celebration. *The Simpsons* has been a spent force for years, they say, a walking corpse animated only by its previous brilliance. Programmes that capture the spirit of an era, they say, should pass with that era.

More steadfast fans feel that the *The Simpsons* can still offer a lot, despite being no longer the phenomenon it was. The family have evolved as the culture around them has changed. Enduring pop culture institutions like this are a fascinating cultural barometer.

Q & A

Q What's the big deal? It's just a cartoon...

A Perhaps partly because it is 'just a cartoon', *The Simpsons* has been able to deal with social issues from vegetarianism to nuclear energy, family values to consumer culture. It has featured guest appearances from an astonishing array of celebrities,

including Paul and Linda McCartney, Tony Blair and Michael Jackson.

Q What sort of mark has it left?

A It demonstrated that popular, commercial entertainment can be taken seriously – especially cartoons. Hit shows like *Family Guy* and *South Park* almost certainly could not exist without *The Simpsons*. It was also the most important factor in the success of

American TV network Fox, ironically now famous as a bastion of American conservatism.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Taking comedy seriously just ruins the fun.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Homer's epic: 'The Simpsons' hits 500 episodes

WORD WATCH

Springfield – The name Springfield was chosen by *Simpsons* creators because it gives no clues about the show's exact location: Springfield is among the most common place names in America. It is intended to represent 'anytown, USA,' and is populated by cast that provide a cross-section of the nation – though perhaps a little less sane.

Emmy Awards – The Emmys are

America's most prestigious awards for TV entertainment. Among 'Primetime Emmys', awarded for television programmed at the most popular time of day, *The Simpsons* is one of the most successful shows ever. The highest performer is *Frasier*, with 27.

Julian Assange – Australian hacker Julian Assange is one of the most controversial figures in the world. In 2010 his website Wikileaks shook the world of

international politics by revealing details of confidential diplomatic correspondence. He recorded his part in the new *Simpsons* episode from Britain, where he is currently being kept under house arrest.

Pop culture – Popular or 'pop' culture refers to the mainstream art, entertainment and ideas of a society. It is sometimes distinguished from 'high culture', which belongs to a cultural elite, although not everybody accepts that there is such a clear distinction.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is *The Simpsons* art?
2. Should successful TV programmes keep going until everyone stops watching – or stop when they are still in their prime?

ACTIVITIES

1. Write a plot for your own episode of *The Simpsons*.
2. What makes great comedy? List five crucial qualities, with examples if you can.

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 **NOTES**

