

How *The Flintstones* set the stage for the adult animation boom

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Here are six of the 20 highest-earning animated films of all time. Put them in order from 1 (the highest earning) to 6 (the least highest earning).

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 1. _____ | a. <i>Finding Nemo</i> (2003) |
| 2. _____ | b. <i>Zootropolis (Zootopia)</i> (2016) |
| 3. _____ | c. <i>Shrek 2</i> (2004) |
| 4. _____ | d. <i>Frozen 2</i> (2019) |
| 5. _____ | e. <i>The Lion King</i> (1994) |
| 6. _____ | f. <i>Toy Story 4</i> (2019) |

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

gamble	staple	aspirational	manipulative	pun
expound	prevalent	anachronistic	disheartening	gag

- If something is _____, it is no longer suitable for or relevant to modern times.
- If something is described as _____, it makes people feel less confident or enthusiastic.
- A _____ is an action or plan that involves risks but will bring important benefits if it is successful.
- A _____ is a regular and important part or feature of something.
- An _____ person wants to be successful and have a better job, home etc than they already have.
- If you _____ an idea, you explain it or express your opinion about it in detail.
- A _____ is a humorous use of a word that has two meanings, or of words with the same sound but different meanings.
- A _____ is an informal term for a joke or story that makes people laugh.
- If you are _____, you make people do what you want by influencing them in a clever or dishonest way.
- If something is _____, it is very common in a particular place.

3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

- When did *The Flintstones* first appear on television?
- What was the first animated series to be produced by Netflix?
- Which animated series is described as the nuclear family of the 1980s?
- What was *The Flintstones*' use of the phrase 'Charge it' a reference to?
- At what time of day was *The Flintstones* first shown on TV?
- Which two industries sponsored *The Flintstones*?

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Yabba dabba do! How *The Flintstones* set the stage for the adult animation boom

Without Barney Rubble and friends from 1960, there would probably not have been BoJack Horseman, Family Guy or even The Simpsons

David Barnett

8 October, 2020

- 1 Anyone who was a child in the 1970s onwards probably remembers *The Flintstones* as a Saturday-morning cartoon full of prehistoric frolics and anachronistic dinosaurs. But when it initially aired in 1960, the adventures of Fred and Wilma, the titular Stone Age family, were aimed at adults. They are the direct ancestors of the golden age of adult-orientated animation we enjoy today.
- 2 When it was first broadcast on the ABC network on 30 September, 1960, it went out at 8.30pm, after bedtime for most kids. It was the first prime-time show from the studio set up by the creators of *Tom and Jerry*, William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, and they had spent months trying to convince the networks that an animation aimed at a grown-up audience could work.
- 3 The story is that, once the pilot episode had been produced, the networks were immediately won over – so much so that, in one test screening attended by several network bosses, there was a disheartening lack of laughter from the assembled executives, which the production company learned later was because no one wanted to give away to their rivals just how much they loved the show before the bidding began.
- 4 It was certainly a gamble to air a cartoon at 8.30pm, but it paid off, and *The Flintstones* proved amazingly popular. While we might now consider it just another of the series of cartoons for children that emerged from the 60s, it dealt with very adult subject matter. It was only after its initial run that repeats became a kids' TV staple.
- 5 "We watch *The Flintstones* today, and you can see the lifestyle is clearly based on the post-war boom," says Dr Steve Henderson, the director of the Manchester Animation Festival. "Wilma and Betty are constantly saying, 'Charge it!', which was a very 60s thing with the rise of credit cards. And although there are all these jokes, such as the bird-beak record player and the Brontosaurus crane at the quarry where Fred and Barney work, it's essentially a portrait of a very aspirational modern family."
- 6 It was so aspirational that sponsorship came from pharmaceutical companies, which marketed *Flintstones* vitamins and, famously, the tobacco industry; in the ad breaks, there were animated slots in which Fred and Barney would expound the taste and quality of Winston cigarettes.
- 7 Amid the puns and gags, serious – and sometimes dark – topics were explored. Henderson says: "*The Flintstones* was actually the first show to depict married couples sharing a bed, which wasn't normal for TV at the time. And there are episodes where Barney and Betty discuss not being able to have kids, and when they eventually get baby Bamm-Bamm, they have to enter a custody battle.
- 8 "Fred has a gambling addiction and can be a horribly manipulative individual who will do anything to be able to go bowling." Henderson says, too, that there was even an episode where Barney was going to kill himself. "He stood on a bridge with a rock tied to him and had to be talked down. And when you look at all that, you realize that this was not at all a kids' show."
- 9 While never reaching the popular heights of *The Flintstones*, more prime-time shows followed, notably *Top Cat* and *The Jetsons*. It is not too much of a stretch to say that without Fred, Barney and co, we might not have had *The Simpsons* almost 30 years later and, from there, the adult animation that is prevalent today.
- 10 "While *The Flintstones* were the post-war boom family of the 1960s, *The Simpsons* were the nuclear, 2.4-children family of the late 1980s," says Henderson. "And the success of that caused the networks to start demanding more shows centred on family life, and so we get *Family Guy*, *American Dad!* and *Bob's Burgers*."
- 11 These days, animation is ruled by shows such as the reality-hopping *Rick and Morty*, the dysfunctional spy *Archer* and *BoJack Horseman*, in which a horse-headed former TV star lives a life of drink, drugs and sex-fuelled boredom.
- 12 *BoJack Horseman* was the first animated series from Netflix, and the rise of streaming services has raised the game in adult animation once again. We could be set for an even steeper

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rise in quality and output thanks, in part, to Covid. Henderson says: "Obviously, after *The Flintstones* and *The Simpsons*, everyone wants that success, but they have to do something differently, which is why we are seeing so much inventiveness. We are definitely living in a bit of a golden age for adult TV animation, and I think that's going to increase. Coronavirus has changed the entertainment industry. While animated content has always been seen as the poor relation of live action, now people are seeing that you can make animation with several people

sitting at home and you don't need to get a load of people into a studio to make a show. So I think we're going to be seeing a lot more quality animation coming out of this period."

- 13 If Henderson is right, animation fans will definitely owe a debt to the cartoon series from 1960 on which the current growth was built.

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4 Comprehension check

Choose the correct answers according to the text.

- How did *The Flintstones* differ from other cartoons that children watched in the 1960s?
 - It was broadcast in the evening as well as on Saturday mornings.
 - It dealt with adult subject matter such as gambling and relationships.
 - None of the characters were children.
- Why didn't the executives at a test screening of *The Flintstones* laugh very much?
 - because they didn't find the show funny
 - because they didn't want rival bidding companies to know how much they enjoyed the show
 - because they were expecting an animated film aimed at children
- When did *The Flintstones* become a staple of children's TV?
 - when repeats were shown after the initial run
 - when the second series was made specifically for children
 - in the 1990s, when it was compared to *The Simpsons*
- How might the coronavirus pandemic lead to a rise in the output of animated films?
 - It might force the makers of animated films to be more inventive.
 - The makers of animated films might have extra dark topics for the content of those films as a result of the pandemic.
 - Animated films do not require large numbers of people to enter a studio to make a show, so they might be safer and easier to make.

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5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. a plural noun meaning *happy, lively games or activities* (para 1)
2. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *persuade someone to agree with you* (para 3)
3. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *bring benefits* (para 4)
4. a noun meaning *a place where stone is dug out of the ground* (para 5)
5. a verb meaning *describe someone or something using words or pictures* (para 7)
6. a noun meaning *the legal right to look after a child* (para 7)
7. an adjective meaning *not working normally and not happy or successful* (para 11)
8. a noun meaning *the ability to think of new or original ideas or methods* (para 12)

6 Verb + noun collocations

Match the verbs in the left-hand column with the nouns or noun phrases in the right-hand column.

- | | |
|------------|--------------------------|
| 1. air | a. the game |
| 2. explore | b. an addiction |
| 3. have | c. a debt |
| 4. raise | d. a TV programme |
| 5. owe | e. something differently |
| 6. do | f. different topics |

7 Complete the phrase

Complete the phrases from the text using these words.

adult boom onwards initial centred golden

1. the 1970s _____
2. the _____ age of animation
3. a show _____ on family life
4. _____-orientated animation
5. after its _____ run
6. the post-war _____

8 Discussion

Discuss the following statements.

- Live-action films are much better than animated films.
- Animated films are very good at conveying important social messages simply and clearly.
- *The Simpsons* is the greatest TV series ever made.