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South Park?s unsung genius [1]

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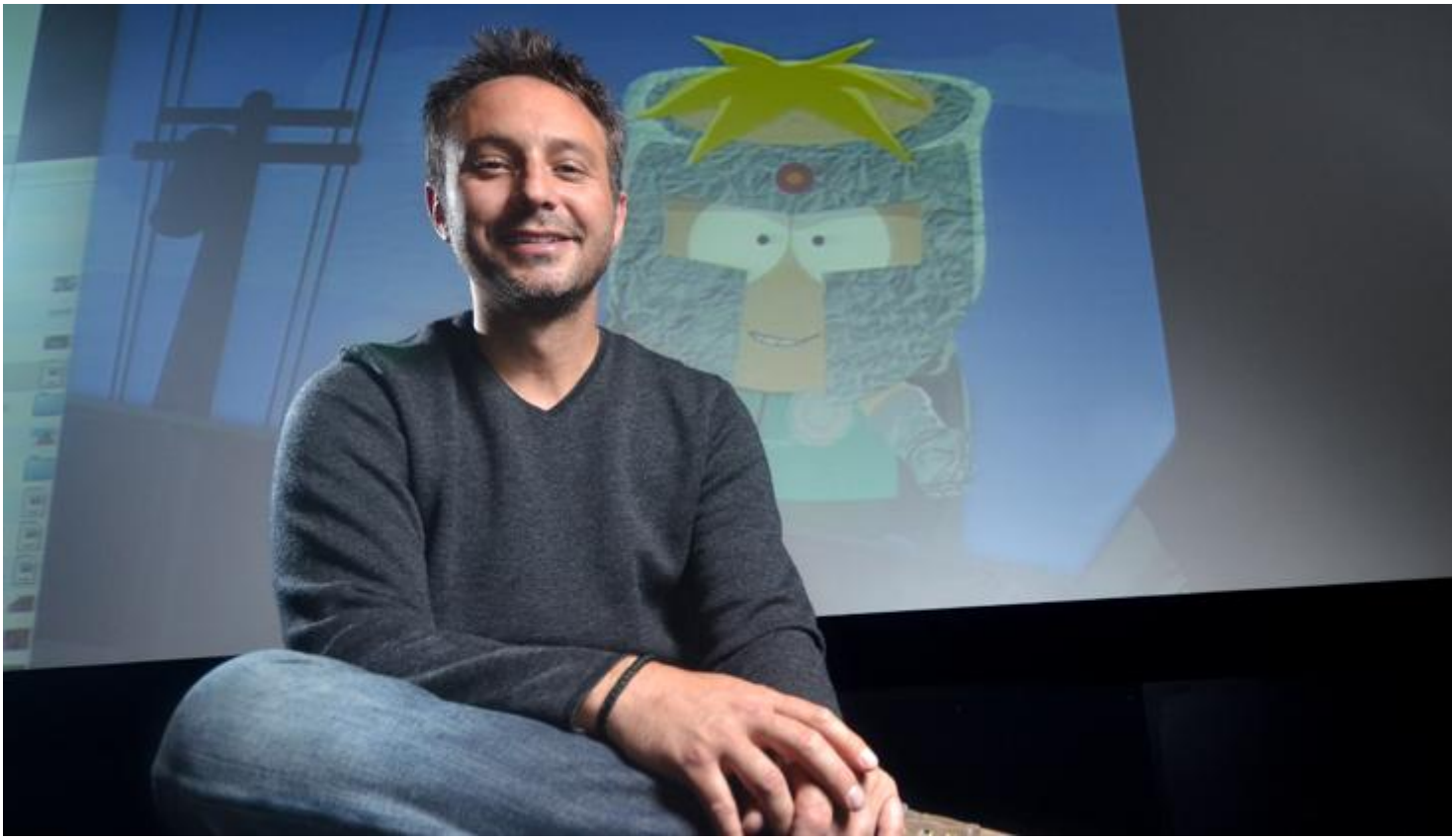

When animation director and co-producer of South Park Eric Stough (Film?95) started work on the quirky adult sitcom show 16 years ago, he cut out the famous cartoon characters from construction paper.

Today, he and his team use digital software to produce a similar effect, lending, in the process, a certain creative genius that has helped the animated sitcom become one of Comedy Central?s highest-rated shows.

?I feel extremely blessed to be doing what I love,? says Stough who has watched the show?s production team grow from just a few people to a team of 80 during his tenure.

The creators of the show, Trey Parker (A&S ex?93) and Matt Stone (Art, Math?93), spotted Stough?s talent for animation while they were attending CU-Boulder, and Parker convinced Stough to join them in the film department to broaden his animation abilities.

?Eric?s long-standing relationship with Matt and Trey is beyond valuable on a day-to-day basis,? says Frank Agnone, South Park?s supervising producer. ?He is as much a part of South Park as Matt and Trey are.?

Stone and Parker first developed the South Park concept and characters at CU in 1992 in a short animation called the Spirit of Christmas. It was, in true South Park nature, as humorous as it was crude but was well-received in its student screening. Stough ? who had worked on various animation and claymation movies at CU ? helped the duo create a second rendition.

?I believed in Matt and Trey?s comedy,? he says.

The second film was a hit on the Internet, becoming one of the first viral videos. Comedy Central awarded Parker and Stone their shot at a show in 1997, and Stough was the first person they hired. During the past 16 years the show has run 237 episodes and won four Emmy Awards and a prestigious Peabody Award.

In the third season Parker wrote one character into the show loosely mirroring Stough. The character ?Butters? borrowed its name from the nickname given to Stough by Parker and Stone.

?It?s very unusual and very surreal,? he says on having his own cartoon character. ?I?m honored.?

For each episode, Stough takes the script Parker writes and brainstorms animation ideas to bring it to life. He conveys his and Parker?s ideas to the animation crew through storyboards and carefully watches retakes to perfect the details in each scene. He then views retakes with Parker four times a day to make further adjustments.

South Park will air 10 episodes per year for the next four years, meaning the show?s production staff only meets a few months a year to complete their work. Each episode is created in six long days to ensure the freshest jokes. Often the day before an episode airs, the crew works a grueling 24 hours to complete it. When the Wednesday evening show airs, Stough and his wife watch it together.

?I can tell if it?s a good episode if it gets two or three laughs from her,? he says.

While he has considered creating his own show someday, for now Stough fully embraces the South Park experience.

?It?s so great to see something come to life from paper,? Stough says. ?It?s a thrill.?

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