

## 30 SECONDS

 $D_r\left(\frac{r^3}{3}\right) = \text{Humor}$ 

Meet the geeks who run  
*The Simpsons* and *Futurama*

When not working on what no less an expert on comedy than Stephen Hawking has called the “cleverest show on television,” six-time Emmy-winning executive producer and head writer for *The Simpsons* Al Jean and four-time Emmy-winning former *Simpsons* writer and executive producer of *Futurama* David X. Cohen would often meet at the homes of colleagues for their weekend math club.

Each has a serious background in science: Jean’s Harvard BS is in mathematics, and Cohen’s Harvard BS is in physics (he also has a master’s in theoretical computer science from Berkeley). *Seed* spoke with the two, wondering:

**Of Hawking, Gould and Nobel Prize-winner Dr. Dudley Herschbach, who was your favorite scientist cameo?**

**Cohen:** I wrote the episode that Stephen Jay Gould was in, but I didn’t meet him because he was recorded in Boston. However, I heard that he passed on his compliments to me, which is definitely more than I got from him when I took his class in college.

**Jean:** The greatest was meeting Stephen Hawking. We were looking for someone much smarter than all the Mensa members, and so we naturally thought of him. He seemed pretty interested in coming on right away.

**Cohen:** We also had Hawking on *Futurama*, and I met and recorded him. It was extremely exciting. He’s one of the most interesting guest stars you could have for an animated show, because when you think about it, he need not be involved to generate his voice—he could just give us permission to use the synthesizer. However, he



clearly enjoys the process and he’s actually very funny himself. We somehow had a discussion about the number 13, and he mentioned that a lot of physics departments end up on the 13th floor because the physicists are the only ones who don’t care about superstition.

**Do you guys ever get into a scientific argument at a story meeting?**

**Cohen:** [Laughs] We rarely got out of scientific arguments. I could go into tons of idiotic ways we liked to waste our time, but one I really remember is an argument about time travel. Early on in the show, we made a vow never to do a time travel episode, because we always thought, “now that’s just preposterous.” We made it three seasons. The number one rule of *Futurama* came into play here, which we actually put in writing with Matt

Groening when we created the show, and that was, “Science will not overrule comedy.” The longer we debate about something though, the less we found that people actually cared.

**Three *Simpsons* writers have science PhDs. What’s so funny about scientists?**

**Jean:** It’s an even higher percentage on *Futurama*.

**Cohen:** We had quite a batch of scientists, if I can use the term scientist loosely to include those who meet the criteria partway, such as myself. Out of 12 writers, I guess we scientists [on *Futurama*] were a plurality, you could say, which is an annoying use of that word.

**Jean:** There’s a mathematical structure to comedy when you look for the perfect line or natural expression for a joke. It’s not a one-to-one correspondence but there definitely exists a similarity. Of course, I don’t want to give the impression that you need a Harvard or math degree to write good comedy, but it’s helped.

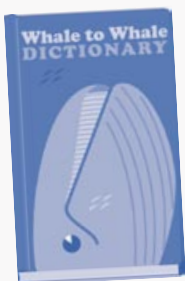
**Do you make a conscious effort to slip some science into an episode every now and again?**

**Jean:** David does actually try to work mathematical formulas into the shows.

**Cohen:** We usually put these things in the background, which is actually the advantage of doing an animated show, because in a live-action show these jokes are really hard to do without being totally ridiculous. If we do them correctly, they don’t derail from the story.

**Jean:** There’s an upcoming [*Simpsons*] episode that takes place at a baseball game where one of the numbers on the uniforms is a perfect number, another is a sum of squares. It’s something that only someone who is really looking out for it will get. A lot of our references don’t stick out. It just looks normal, but we definitely put it there on purpose. It’s subtle because we don’t want to alienate our larger audience. The show’s funny, but anytime we can slip something extra in for a specific audience, we do.

—Joshua Roebke



## 04.3 YOU SAY CLICK, I SAY CLIQUE

For North Americans, understanding a Highland Scot or an East Londoner can be tricky, even though we speak the same language. New research suggests blue whales may experience similar difficulties. Populations of the gentle giants living off the coasts of Chile, Antarctica and the Pacific Northwest were found to communicate with slightly different tones and pitches. The discovery was made using underwater hydrophones like those with which the Navy monitored submarines during the Cold War.

“It is our opinion that the government can take further action to reduce this risk.”

—Dick Crawford, vice president of McDonald’s, on US efforts to protect against mad cow disease.