



By Josh Dean

Photographs by Jill Greenberg

Family Values

Family Guy creator [Seth MacFarlane](#) nabbed a record \$100 million deal with Fox and is teaching Google new ways to exploit the Web. Could this crude frat-boy cartoonist really be a model for business in the modern age?

It's not hard to find someone who delights in attacking the show *Family Guy*.

Which isn't a criticism, per se. Much of the animated sitcom's purpose seems to be to stoke the opposition, to offend the easily offended. But that's not the only reason it annoys people. There is a school of thought that says the show is hackish—crudely drawn and derivative of its cartoon forebears. Members of this school would include, most prominently, *Ren & Stimpy* creator John Kricfalusi, and Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the fathers of *South Park*, which is probably the only show on television that rivals *Family Guy* for objectionable content per half hour. *South Park* has devoted entire episodes to attacking *Family Guy*, portraying the show's writers as manatees who push "idea balls" with random jokes down tubes to generate plotlines. Kricfalusi has said, "You can draw *Family Guy* when you're 10 years old."

What does *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane—who earlier this year inked a \$100 million contract with Fox, followed by a breakthrough deal involving Google—have to say about that?

"I would say, 'How many violas do you have?'"

MacFarlane is hovering over the soundboard in the control room of the Newman Soundstage on the 20th Century Fox lot in Los Angeles. Various engineers twiddle knobs and adjust levels as he looks out on a gymnasium-size room full of classically trained musicians tuning their instruments. Every piece of music on *Family Guy* is recorded live by an orchestra that on this day numbers 56. The only music that ever repeats, even once, are the opening

and closing themes, and those, too, are frequently updated, just because. Now, it is not unprecedented to use a live orchestra in today's TV world. But it is highly unusual. "All the shows used to do it," laments Walter Murphy, one of *Family Guy*'s two composers. "It's mostly electronic now—to save money." *The Simpsons*, he says, still uses an orchestra, as does *Lost*. *King of the Hill* has a small band. And, of course, there's an orchestra on *American Dad*, the other show created by MacFarlane, who is now the highest-paid writer-producer in the history of TV.

MacFarlane, despite being 35 and looking like an average dude, possesses the musical inclinations of a septuagenarian drag queen. A significant percentage of *Family Guy*'s episodes feature extravagant Broadway-inspired song-and-dance numbers (because, really, why have the cartoon doctor tell his patient he's got end-stage AIDS when a barbershop quintet can break the news via song?)—and only some of them are sacrilegious or scatological. Among the features of his new contract with Fox is a *Family Guy* movie he imagines as "an old-style musical with dialogue" in the vein of *The Sound of Music*, a poster of which hangs above his desk. "We'd really be trying to capture, musically, that feel," says MacFarlane, whose father moonlighted as a folk singer. "Nothing today feels like it'll play 50 years from now, like Cole Porter or Rodgers and Hart."

If you're waiting for the punch line here, there isn't one. Critics might dismiss MacFarlane's show for being vulgar, but

when he writes a song, it's going to be lush and jazzy and, at least musically, exactly as you might hear it in something by Irving Berlin. It's all part of a manic attention to detail that not only gives the show its layered humor but also has made MacFarlane a massive, multiplatform success.

But MacFarlane is more than just an eclectic entertainer. Because if you strip away the crude facade, *Family Guy*—indeed, all of MacFarlane Inc.—exposes itself as a quintessentially modern business with lessons that extend far beyond TV land. MacFarlane has divined how to connect with next-generation consumers, not simply through the subject of his jokes but by embracing a flexibility in both format and distribution. In some ways by accident, he has stepped outside the siloed definitions of a single industry and exploited opportunity wherever he could find it. And perhaps most instructive, his success is not predicated on his product being all things to all people. He has bred allegiance from his core customers precisely because he's been willing to turn his back on (and even offend) others—a model of sorts for how to create a mass-market niche business in our increasingly atomized landscape.

MacFarlane is a fairly unassuming young man. He is partial to long-sleeve T-shirts, fraying jeans, and laceless black Chuck Taylors. Various stories have described him as prematurely graying, but today his hair is convincingly black and lightly gelled, and he's wearing wire-rimmed glasses. Beard stubble is a staple. The net effect is the look of a full-grown,

Styling by Brian Primeaux for Art Mix Beauty. Gray heathered henley by Boss by Hugo Boss. Black t-shirt by Jockey. Pants by Joe's Jeans.



thinking man's frat boy, which also pretty well sums up the target of his comedy (minus, perhaps, the full-grown part).

His show concerns the Griffins of Quahog, Rhode Island, whose patriarch is Peter, voiced by MacFarlane. Like Homer Simpson, he is lovable but bumbling, overweight, and a little slow-witted (a recent plot development is that he's mentally retarded, but just barely). His wife is Lois, cartoon sexy and much sharper; she adores him despite his flaws. They have three children (as do the Simpsons): Chris, overweight and dim, in so many ways his father's son; Meg, smart, but underappreciated and ever the butt of jokes about her homeliness; and Stewie, the infant pedant with the football-shape head who secretly wishes to murder his mother. Rounding out the clan is Brian the talking dog. He lusts after Lois, drinks martinis, and has been known to snort the occasional line of blow. (MacFarlane also voices both Brian and Stewie.)

Back in the soundstage control room, with the orchestra on the other side of the glass, a bank of flat screens is frozen on an image of Stewie staring out a window, forlorn. MacFarlane tells me that in this future episode, Stewie has been left home alone while the family goes on vacation.

"Let's try it once with the dialogue," Murphy says to his musicians. Stewie's quasi-British voice—inspired by Rex Harrison, MacFarlane says—booms through the control room. "Oh, Mommy! Thank God you're home! I promise with all my heart that I'll never say or do anything bad to you for the rest of the evening." Comedic pause. "By the way, I disabled the V-chip and watched *so much porn*."

Out in the orchestra room, trombonists erupt in laughter.

It is a violent collision of high and low—classical musicians accustomed to the Hollywood Bowl recording music for a show heavy on poop jokes—and a perfect lens for examining why this man sipping coffee from a paper cup emblazoned with the Fox logo has such a gigantic and perpetual grin.

It would be fair, at this point, to call *Family Guy* a juggernaut. If you're looking to get acquainted, it airs Sunday evenings at 9, just after *The Simpsons*, which it has surpassed as the most-popular animated show on TV. Among males 18 to 34, often cited as the most desirable demo-

Multitasker

In 1999, Fox gave MacFarlane three months and \$50,000 to create a pilot. He came back with *Family Guy*, having drawn every frame and voiced every character. Today, he still writes much of the show, directs it, does dozens of voices, and writes songs. And oversees a few spin-offs, too.



graphic in advertising, *Family Guy* is the highest-rated scripted program in all of television (*American Dad* ranks sixth). It is also the second-highest-rated show among males 18 to 49. It is among the most-downloaded shows on iTunes and the most-watched programs on Hulu. It was the eighth most-pirated show of 2007 on BitTorrent sites.

This spring, MacFarlane will introduce *The Cleveland Show*, a spin-off starring the Griffins' African-American neighbor. The show will be MacFarlane's third in prime time and the first new product of his mega-deal with Fox. (He is also prepping a live-action movie, but no title or dates have been announced.)

A common complaint about MacFarlane's shows is that they are random and disjointed, with episodes that veer wildly

off course for no apparent purpose. A human-size chicken, for example, has been known to show up and battle Peter, apropos of nothing, in elaborate fight scenes that mimic movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and stretch for more than a minute.

The show's tangents are intentional, in no way intended to advance plot. They are there, MacFarlane says, simply because they're funny; plot relevance should never trump a laugh. As a result, *Family Guy* is easily digested in bite-size portions—the breakout gags, like the musical numbers, can be watched in isolation, at any time, and still work. This makes MacFarlane's model of comedy especially well suited to the Internet and mobile devices—perfect for viewing during a boring history lecture or on the dreary commute home on the 5:07 to Ronkonkoma.



Easily masticated comedy, combined with a fervent audience of college kids in baggy cargo shorts bursting with disposable income and electronics, made MacFarlane a perfect fit for Google. In September, the first of 50 bizarre animated shorts by MacFarlane appeared online. Seth MacFarlane's "Cavalcade of Cartoon Comedy," distributed by Google via its AdSense network, is a series of Webisodes that MacFarlane describes as edgier versions of *New Yorker* cartoons come to life. Running from 30 seconds to just over two minutes, the shorts are sponsored by advertisers and noteworthy for a host of reasons. For fans, they are MacFarlane's first non-TV venture and so exist outside the reach of censors and network suits and will introduce a universe of entirely new characters. For the entertainment industry, they mark the first experiments with a bold new method of content distribution (and the entry of the beast Google into its world). But for anyone who cares about the new-media business, this purportedly unsophisticated hack comic has found himself, in some ways by accident, at the intersection of advertising, content, television, and the Web—all of which are blurring together.

Perhaps it's not surprising then that while a MacFarlane product like *Family Guy* may seem slapdash when you're watching it, the creative process behind it is decidedly sophisticated. "He's kind of a modern-day cross between George Lucas and Norman Lear," says his manager, John Jacobs. "He thinks on a big canvas."

Says Norman Lear himself, a man who was once also the highest-paid creator on TV: "I'm crazy about him and his work. I can't think of anybody doing a better job right now of mining the foolishness of the human condition."

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A Family Guy episode is more or less a nine-month undertaking, from first script to finished animation. All episodes take shape in the writers room on the third floor of an unremarkable office building on Wilshire Boulevard that is home to MacFarlane's Fuzzy Door Productions. It's pretty much as you'd imagine it: a conference table surrounded by rolling chairs and covered in computer monitors, action figures, and the assorted detritus of the comedy writer's diet: soft-drink cans, candy wrappers, half-finished bags of beef jerky. MacFarlane takes a chair in front of a dry-

erase board as his 16 writers stagger in drinking coffee and stabbing at cups of fruit. One of them asks the boss how a concert he'd seen the night before had gone, and when MacFarlane complains about the bathroom lines, the guy suggests he stick to "lesbian shows, like the Indigo Girls."

The typical show begins with a single writer producing a script, but then the whole team gets involved, dissecting each scene and line to decide a) if it's actually funny and b) if it can be made funnier. It's a loose but laborious process, each gag chewed over ad infinitum in this peanut-gallery forum. The goal is to produce an episode overstuffed with jokes—something that gives fans plenty to discuss late at night on bulletin boards. "I think we're the most joke-per-minute show on television," says executive producer David Goodman, who's been with *Family Guy* since 2000.

This late summer afternoon, the challenge is to fill out a scene in which Stewie and some friends are at nursery school. Ideas are tossed out in various impressions of Stewie's voice: There's a molestation joke, some poop jokes, a joke about a rogue chicken because, according to the writer who pitched it, "chickens just wander around the yard at some schools."

"Is that safe?" MacFarlane asks. "Aren't chickens aggressive and, like, poke your eyes out?"

Anyone can speak, and jokes are called out with no introduction. MacFarlane sits up front, along with Goodman, reclining in his seat and appearing in no way dictatorial. He'll chime in, but his input seems no more or less important than anyone else's. "If the writers in that room don't laugh—it's not going on," says Goodman. "That's a tough room. If we laugh, it's probably funny."

The prevailing meta-joke about Stewie is that, despite being an infant, he is the most intellectual character on the show, even if the only family member who can hear him speak is Brian the dog.

"Stewie could wear a cop hat and go up to a white girl standing with a black kid and say, 'Are you okay, miss?'" one writer suggests.

Awkward, almost embarrassed laughs break out around the table. It's a joke that could be viewed as offensive, or as fairly pointed social criticism. A digression on race breaks out, before everyone moves on to another idea, about toddlers as obnoxious art critics picking apart one another's finger paintings.

Family, Valued

Fox execs and MacFarlane reps won't put a hard dollar figure on the value of the *Family Guy* empire. But our calculations show it's worth almost **\$2 billion**. No wonder he got a record-setting contract.

Number of copies sold of *Family Guy's* first DVD set: **2.5 million**

Total DVD sales to date: **almost \$400 million**

DVD sales from *Stewie Griffin: The Untold Story*: **almost \$80 million**

Number of **ring tones, voice tones, wallpaper, and games** sold for cell phones:

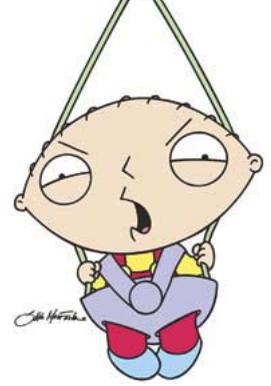
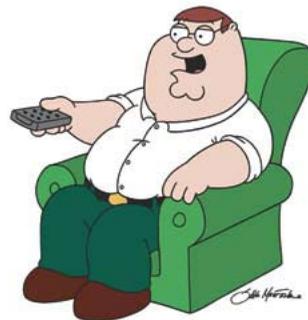
At least 2.3 million

There isn't a comedy writers room in America where the banter doesn't often veer toward the extreme subjects. The difference with this crew is that the extremes are the *goal*. Watch enough *Family Guy* and you'll almost certainly see something that makes you cringe; it might not offend you personally, but you can imagine how someone won't find it funny. *Family Guy* savages politicians and celebrities, and is more than willing to tackle any manner of touchy subjects in the name of comedy—race, Islam, Christianity (Jesus is a recurring character, because FCC rules stipulate you cannot use

Syndication fee per episode: **\$2 million**

Estimated total revenue from syndication fees: **\$400 million**

Networks airing reruns: **Fox, TBS, Cartoon Network, and 20 channels owned by Tribune Broadcasting**



Rate for a 30-second primetime ad: **\$200,000**

Estimated *Family Guy* ad revenue from 2005-2008: **\$500 million**

American Dad ad revenue from 2005-2008: **\$300 million**

More than **500** items have been licensed to **10,000 stores** including Target, Wal-Mart & Kmart

Total merchandise and licensing revenue: **at least \$200 million**

"Jesus Christ" as an exclamation unless the deity himself is present), homosexuality, bestiality, pedophilia, the physically impaired. A favorite example tossed out by opponents is a sight gag that involved a JFK Pez dispenser in which the candy emerged from a hole in the president's head. (MacFarlane later admitted that maybe, just maybe, that one crossed the line.)

MacFarlane doesn't argue with the notion that many of his jokes border on offensive, but the notion that the content is *actually* offensive irks him. Each episode is vetted by a team of Fox censors reading

with the FCC in mind. But beyond that, “There’s an enormous amount of self-policing that goes on and a lot of intelligent conversations about whether a show is worth doing. I would stack the ethics of one of my writers up against the average Washington bureaucrat on censorship any day.” MacFarlane is mystified in particular by the two things that most upset the FCC—two basic elements of human life that, in his view, are far less sensitive than, say, religion. “For the FCC, it’s sexual references,” he says. “But even more than that, shit jokes. Any time we even show somebody

sketches on *Mad TV*.

A few years later, Fox asked MacFarlane, then 25, to develop an animated pilot. They gave him a scant \$50,000 to do it. MacFarlane emerged three months later with a nearly completed pilot, for which he had drawn every frame and voiced every character.

Fox bought the show, gave MacFarlane a reported \$2 million-per-season contract, and premiered *Family Guy* in the highest-profile slot possible, following the 1999 Super Bowl. He was the youngest person ever to be given his own prime-

“I had gone into the meeting not knowing why I was going in there,” MacFarlane recalls. “He said, ‘We’d like to put this back into production,’ and I almost fell out of my chair.”

David Goodman says that when the show was initially canceled, MacFarlane told him his job would be safe if it ever returned. “I’d been on 14 canceled TV shows,” he recalls. “They never come back. It’s never happened before—ever.”

Fox brought the show back in a big way, ordering 35 episodes (22 is typical) and handing over the Sunday at 9 slot, where

MacFarlane doesn’t argue with the notion that his jokes border on offensive. But the notion that they are *actually* offensive irks him.

on a toilet, we get in trouble.”

Which brings us back to the writers room. A source of ongoing consternation is Stewie’s inability to master the commode. MacFarlane assumes the child’s erudite voice and says, speaking in character to his fellow children, “I’d like to make an announcement: It’s the elephant in the room. I made a stool. Now let’s just all go about our business as if nothing happened, and it’ll take care of itself in due time.”

Most everyone in the room laughs. The joke is in.

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Seth MacFarlane was basically fated to this life. His middle name, Woodbury, was chosen by his mother as an homage to the town drunk back in Kent, Connecticut. “Some of the foulest jokes I’ve ever heard,” he has said, “came from my mother.” MacFarlane started drawing at 2 and published his first cartoon, “Walter Crouton,” in a local paper at the age of 8. At 18, he left for the Rhode Island School of Design and, after his adviser sent his thesis film, “Life of Larry” (starring a lovable schlub with a tolerant wife and a talking dog), off to Hanna-Barbera, he was hired to work as an animator and writer on shows like *Dexter’s Laboratory* and *Johnny Bravo*. In 1996, he created a sequel to “Life of Larry” that aired in prime time on the Cartoon Network. Fox development executives took notice and hired him away to work on interstitials to run between

time network show.

It drew 22 million viewers but then became a sort of network foster child. For the next two years, Fox execs moved the show all over the schedule, trying it in 11 time slots, including for a period in the death zone opposite *Friends*. Despite the fact that *Family Guy* tracked well with young men, the show’s ratings were low. Fox canceled it in 2000, revived it briefly the next year, then canceled it again.

Then a funny thing happened. The show lived on over at the Cartoon Network, with even edgier versions specially edited by MacFarlane. Regard for the show was so low that Fox gave the Cartoon Network the first 50 episodes for free; Fox simply asked for promotion of the show’s DVD in exchange. (They were having trouble persuading retailers to stock it—another in a list of miscalculations that seems inconceivable in retrospect.) *Family Guy*’s audience, ignored at every turn, followed the show to the Cartoon Network, dug in, and swelled, regularly beating both Letterman and Leno in the most desirable demographics. When Fox released the first 28 episodes on a series of DVDs in 2003, sales exploded—more than 2.5 million were sold. (In 2005, a straight-to-video movie called *Stewie Griffin: The Untold Story* sold about 3.5 million copies, bringing in almost \$80 million for a single DVD.)

Twentieth Century Fox TV president Gary Newman summoned MacFarlane to his office in 2004 and did the unthinkable: He asked him to restart production.

the show boomed. The 100th episode aired in November of 2007, pushing the show into syndication. Though schedules vary by market, *Family Guy* airs up to TK times a day, with reruns on Fox, TBS, the Cartoon Network and in 20 major markets on channels owned by Chicago’s Tribune Co.

“Animation is something that, if it works, it’s more profitable for a studio than any other show,” MacFarlane says. People don’t buy *Everybody Loves Raymond* T-shirts, but they do buy shirts bearing the devious visage of Stewie, as well as action figures, stickers, posters, and video games. Increasingly, they also buy song clips and ring tones. And Fox, which owns the show, also owns the intellectual property. Reports have valued the *Family Guy* franchise at as much as \$1 billion, and though neither Fox nor MacFarlane’s team would claim that number, a little back-of-the-envelope math indicates that figure is conservative. At a reported \$2 million per episode, *Family Guy* has garnered at least \$400 million up front from syndication. DVD sales have totaled almost another \$400 million, while 80 licensees contribute at least \$200 million in various clothing and baubles, actual and digital. Fox’s ad revenue off *Family Guy* can be estimated at at least \$500 million over the years. “Suffice it to say, with it being a studio-owned show, and being on the Fox network, it’s of substantial value,” Newman told me. And none of this figures in revenue from MacFarlane’s other hit product, *American Dad*.

Team MacFarlane, of course, also rec-

ognized the value of what he has brought to the network. By the time negotiations on a new contract began more than two years ago, the challenge for both sides was how to put a number on MacFarlane's worth, considering that he isn't just a writer-producer but also an animator and actor, and given that nobody is quite sure what the future of TV content will look like but all are quite sure that MacFarlane's work is going to be a big part of it. MacFarlane's team felt the need to let his

to return fire. He wrote a joke in which Peter's perverted friend Quagmire attacks and molests Marge Simpson. Fox, he says, nixed the idea. "They said, 'We want the feuds to end.' I thought it was very conspicuous that this came about only when we decided to hit them back."

What did he do? He left it in anyway, and delivered the edit to Fox, which then edited it out. "It's still a sore point," MacFarlane says. "It's still this wound that has never quite healed that says, 'We don't value you

rally), MRC partners with content creators—whether that's director Alejandro González Iñárritu on *Babel*; or Sacha Baron Cohen on his next film, *Bruno*; or MacFarlane—giving them funding and a share in ownership, plus creative control.

MacFarlane produced the *Cavalcade* shorts with a team of six writers. The animation is instantly recognizable as his, as is the humor. The shorts lean heavily on pop culture (say, "Fred and Barney Try To Get Into a Club," which is fairly self-

TV on the Web

Seth MacFarlane's "Cavalcade of Cartoon Comedy" joins a mixed bag of other attempts at original cyber-shows.



Quarterlife

The teen-targeted drama "aired" in 36 eight-minute spots on MySpace and on a Quarterlife Web site.

DID IT WORK? Well-received on the Web, but later bombed as a full-length NBC show.



LonelyGirl15

After starting as a faux video diary, it broadened into a multiple-character show that ran for two years.

DID IT WORK? The creators recently got \$5 million in VC money and debuted a new project, "The Resistance."



Dr. Horrible's Singalong Blog

Buffy creator Joss Whedon offered this musical, with Neil Patrick Harris, on its own site (and later iTunes).

DID IT WORK? Jury's out. A bonus-packed DVD and soundtrack are on their way.



Squeegees

The debut from ABC's Stage 9 Digital, these teen-targeted shorts arrived on YouTube and abc.com in February.

DID IT WORK? Panned on blogs but paid for by Toyota. Stage 9 has 20 more projects in the works.



Funny or Die

Searching for a way to make money, the Will Ferrell-backed comedy site created a Web-only video for Unilever's Axe Body Spray.

DID IT WORK? Unilever paid a "high six-figure" commission. Will others?

contract expire, "to have him on the open market," explains one of his representatives. For more than two years, MacFarlane worked on *Family Guy* in good faith, without a contract. "There were a couple days when I was 'sick,'" MacFarlane says. "At times, that helps bring the negotiations back when they're stalled."

When the writers strike broke out, he sided with the guild and walked off the set. Fox decided to go forward and edit episodes without MacFarlane's participation—they did own them, after all. MacFarlane called it a "colossal dick move." When asked about it now, he says it's a sore that's been salved (\$100 million has a way of doing that). "They gave us money to go back and edit the shows the way we wanted, and we made nice."

One Fox-inflicted bruise that has yet to fade involves shots taken at *Family Guy* by *The Simpsons*, a show that MacFarlane admires greatly. Most famously, in an episode called "Treehouse of Horror," Homer creates a sea of clones even dumber and more dim-witted than himself. One of these is Peter Griffin. MacFarlane decided

quite as much,' which I can't imagine is true, but . . ." The thought trails off and, perhaps realizing that it's best not to follow this logic, he turns a corner. "To be fair to Fox—for the most part, creatively they have been a very easy company to work with. This was kind of a rare lapse in judgment."

An enormous wallet bulge wasn't the only benefit to MacFarlane's contract hiatus. While Fox was noodling on the deal, MacFarlane's management team went out and signed him up with a little company called Google. The resulting "Cavalcade of Comedy" is outside the bounds of the Fox relationship. "In a completely perfect world," Dana Walden, chairman of 20th Century Fox Television, has said, "he wouldn't be able to do that."

He did. The idea stemmed from conversations between MacFarlane's lawyer and agent and representatives of Media Rights Capital, an L.A.-based multimedia financier. Loosely tied to the talent agency Endeavor (which reps MacFarlane, natu-

explanatory); they're rude (in one, Tara Reid's grotesque belly flab talks); and of course they're crude (a boy is told he is adopted by two parents with nipples that stick out of their chests like javelins; his name, they tell him, is not Michael Stick-nipples but rather Albert Horsefeet Turd-sneeze—who then sneezes a turd that sprouts horse feet and gallops off).

The *Cavalcade* shorts are also distributed in an innovative way: targeting young males where they lurk by popping up in ad windows on sites like maxim.com and fandango.com (while simultaneously appearing on YouTube). "The idea is not to drive someone to a Web site but to make content available wherever the audience will be," explains Dan Goodman, president of digital at MRC.

Also unprecedented is the way MacFarlane is being paid. MRC is not Fox; it can't just write him a nine-figure check. Instead, MacFarlane's status as an equity partner in the deal entitles him to split the ad revenue with Google and MRC. Because the whole idea is new, it's hard to draw parallels to current entertainment

and marketing models but, essentially, MRC provides the funding and sells the ad partnerships, MacFarlane provides the content, and Google serves as distribution outlet, providing the “broadcast” via its AdSense network. Then all three split the profits. It can, and will, be replicated with other content providers. Already, MRC is working with the Disney Channel’s Raven-Symoné on kids-targeted programming. You could easily imagine it with, say, Rachael Ray.

“The idea is to take the TV experience and provide it on the Web,” says Alex Levy, Google’s director of branded entertainment. “But brought to the people you want to reach, when, where, and how you want to reach them.” For a company that likes to say it’s not in the content business, that’s a remarkable statement. Google, in essence, is trying to use its ad distribution network to turn content distribution upside down. (Google calls it the Content Network.)

Each Cavalcade short carries a single advertiser. The first 10 were bought by Burger King, and—in yet another unprecedented move—MacFarlane animated their ads for them. It’s an option available to any of the sponsors if they choose to

lane wins no matter what. He has zero financial risk. Unlike his *Family Guy* characters, every horny frog and lusty princess and sarcastic talking bear is owned by him.

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A couple of years ago, MacFarlane nearly worked himself to death. He collapsed at his desk and was rushed to the hospital. He was sick, he says, and “didn’t have the time to stop.” So he passed out right there under the *Sound of Music* poster. He ended up spending, as he tells it, “a lovely afternoon at the emergency room.”

“We’ve been behind schedule on *Family Guy* since day one,” he explains. “In reality, you can’t do a prime-time animated show in the time allotted, so that always puts a glaze of stress over the whole process.” He takes a breath. “I refuse to let that control my life. I did that in my twenties. Now I insist on a balance.”

MacFarlane has handed off the day-to-day control of both *American Dad* and *The Cleveland Show*, and he is increasingly delegating on *Family Guy*. He still reviews all the drawings and obsesses more than a little

For a show that likes to pick on celebrities, *Family Guy* has little trouble attracting them, especially those whose résumés include the kind of wonderfully awful performances that ultimately get embraced as cult in-jokes: Drew Barrymore, Haley Joel Osment, Gene Simmons, Bob Costas, Phyllis Diller . . . Michael Clarke Duncan was in earlier this morning. Richard Dreyfuss is due to arrive this evening.

Cole has done the show 23 times. Today, he’s doing Mike Brady, reprising a role he played in *The Brady Bunch Movie*. In this script, Mr. Brady is verbally abusing Mrs. Brady in one of those classic pop-culture tangents.

“You know, you can really go as loud as you want,” MacFarlane says in director mode. “We’ve never heard Mike Brady yell before, so this is new territory.” He then assumes the role of Carol Brady.

“Huh, I don’t remember asking for a warm beer,” Cole says, his voice quiet but seething.

MacFarlane, as Carol, flips out: “I didn’t want to quit working—you made me!”

Five minutes later, Cole exits and MacFarlane is off to the next thing, laying down lines in furious fashion, typically in three

“Animation is something that if it works, it can be more profitable for a studio than any other kind of show.”

pay extra for it.

For Burger King, the appeal was obvious. “Seth’s fan base intersects squarely with our audience of young men and women,” says Brian Gies, vice president of marketing impact for Burger King. In other words, MacFarlane’s comedy provides a very powerful and friendly connection to a very targeted audience, one that tends to get the munchies. Says Google’s Levy, “We know where to find them, and we’re putting the advertising in an environment they’re comfortable in.”

There’s no guarantee the new model is going to stick, of course—advertisers could decide they get as much value by just buying regular Web ads and avoid paying extra. But early returns showed viewers were responding well to the shorts. In its first days, Cavalcade instantly became the most-watched channel on YouTube, racking up 2.5 million streams. And MacFar-

lane over the music. There is some stuff he just can’t give up. And what’s easy to forget is that MacFarlane is also the *star* of *Family Guy*. Actually, several stars of *Family Guy*. He voices three of the six main characters, and is in virtually every scene, sometimes playing several parts at once. He’s also the voice of Quagmire, a major secondary player, and hundreds of ancillary characters and one-timers. And, of course, he’s the voice of Stan, the lead on *American Dad*, and almost certain to guest-star often on *The Cleveland Show*. This summer he showed up as a voice actor in Guillermo del Toro’s *Hellboy II* and is very soon planning to step in front of the camera in live-action projects. He also plans to direct movies.

One afternoon in August, MacFarlane and two sound engineers are in the tiny control room outside the recording booths in the *Family Guy* offices. In strolls the actor Gary Cole wearing shorts and sunglasses.

or four takes, which he then selects from on the fly. His sound engineers tag his favorite takes and move on. He swaps from voicing Stewie to Peter to Quagmire to various odd parts, including a bit as Paul McCartney and another as Vince Vaughn.

Next up: A writer is doing Patrick Swayze, who is not, as you might expect, the butt of a cancer joke, but rather a tight-jeans joke followed by repeated takes of the writer growling, as throaty redneck Swayze, “Roadhouse!” It’s another one of those cult jokes, a little snippet of Dada theater.

“Even a hair more badass,” MacFarlane directs, and over and over they go until that one simple word becomes absurd in its own right. You can already hear it as a ring tone. **EC**

Josh Dean wrote about the legal woes of Bodog CEO Calvin Ayre in July/August.

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