

A Train of Thought: The Depiction of Self-Reflection and Change

Mya Smith

[sm1033641@email.ccbcmd.edu](mailto:sm1033641@email.ccbcmd.edu)

May 15, 2021

### Abstract

This article examines themes in the third season of the animated show *Infinity Train*. Using of qualitative content analysis approach, the series was coded, and four themes emerged based on the research. The themes were fear, trust, power, and truth. The findings show how the season is an allegory of self-reflection and change. This anthological series presents themes and messages that animated shows for children usually stray away from. Overall, the success of the show is built from the complex and relatable characters that the audience can learn from.

## Introduction

This study reviews the third season of the animated cartoon series *Infinity Train*. With this series, there are various main characters for each season. The characters find themselves on a mysterious train with an endless number of cars, each one being its own universe, and they must find a way home. Season three of *Infinity Train* focuses on Grace and Simon, two 18-year-old children who have been living on the train for years, leading their cult The Apex. Throughout the season, they travel through train cars with Hazel, a young girl, and her gorilla friend, Tuba, in order to find The Apex after Grace and Simon were separated from them. As the characters go through a different car in each episode, they are confronted with realizations about the right and wrong ways of being a passenger on the train. The third season is a part of this anthological series that presents themes and messages that animated shows for children usually stray away from.

There is usually a certain demographic when it comes to kids' cartoons, they'll keep the show kid friendly and don't usually push the boundaries when it comes to incorporating certain themes. *Infinity Train* is a mystery-horror-comedy-science-fiction show, and it deals with diverse themes and issues that are relatable and intriguing between different demographics, making the interest expand outside the child demographic. Although the show is set in a fantasy world, the protagonists are conveyed realistically as they have real-world issues they have to confront. The train becomes an allegory for self-reflection and confrontation of one's past, and how they can deal with it in the present. The seasons of the show are similar to fables, as there are lessons that the main characters learn through their journeys on the train and what the characters learn becomes a message for the audience to learn and reflect on themselves—hence why each season is called a “book.”

Unlike the other seasons of the show, Book 3 of *Infinity Train* has more complex characters with deeper issues that affect their character development. The third season deals with themes of fear, trust, power, and truth that affect Grace and Simon's perspective about life on the train. With Book 1 and 2, the main protagonists are on the train for a short amount of time and are taught that they have to work through their problems in order to leave the train early on. However, Book 3 reflects how someone is misguided from dealing with their issues and leading themselves down the wrong path for so long, resulting in their inevitable self-reflection becoming a "hard pill to swallow." The season explores the ways of self-reflection and how affects a person's ability to change. The imaginative visuals of the train along with the mature and dark themes between the characters is what draws attention to the show as keeps the audience interested in the mysteries the train has to offer, along with the interest in getting to know and connect with these characters.

### Literature Review

Although the series is targeted towards children, the fanbase of *Infinity Train* expands to an older demographic, from teens to adults. While analyzing the humor that individualizes the

adult cartoons *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy*, Anton (2016) accesses how the rivalry of the fanbases between the shows helps to make each series approach their intertextuality and define their identity with not only the messages and meanings conveyed in various episodes, but also the philosophy behind each show. There is not a large variety of research done that evaluates the messages of child animation; however, there is research that accesses aspects of life that are used in animation to depict realism within the shows and connect to the audience.

There is research that evaluates the aspects that attract an audience to the content that is exposed to them and how it affects their response to it. With the study that investigated associations between personality and conformity, Kosoloff, Irish, Perreault, Anderson, and Nottbohm (2017) found that personality regulates the extent to which individuals conform. Animation may conform to similar themes, however there are themes that can convey the audience in a negative light. Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2018) found through the analysis of *Frankenweenie* that the negative portrayal of “people of color” or other characters that represent them seems to be a reoccurring phenomenon through American film producers and directors. There are cartoons that would be turned down by certain people because the way the content is conveyed through animations is for children. The content conveyed through animations is not solely directed at children. Burger and Toivirainen (2020) investigated associations between embodiments of musical emotions and perception, resulting in observers able to rate the emotions in the animations consistently according to distinct movement features.

There are studies that reflect on childhood behavior and experiences that are used within the development of an animated show. Dealing with the uncertainty of life is an experience studied on infants by Kayham, Gredeback, and Lindskog (2018), which highlighted how they are sensitive to the magnitude of the difference in likelihood between two events. In relation to how

children react, Fradkin and Yunes (2016) explains how vulnerable children—those who were subject to deprivations—establish behaviors and routines which are sustained into and through adulthood. Adding such experiences contribute to how the content of animation is represented on a network to attract a directed audience. Hunting, Grumbein, and Cahill (2018) studied the programming of Cartoon Network, Disney, Disney XD, and Nickelodeon, and found that channels targeted at girls were more likely to contain educational messages than channels targeted at boys. It was shown how Cartoon Network had the fewest female main characters and was least likely to have educational messages in their programming. Recent shows such as *Infinity Train*, which all included female main characters in the first three seasons, shows development from this study of the channel.

### Animation analysis

The series of *Infinity Train* has received recognition for its unique concept with complex characters and themes, writing, visual animation style, and voice acting. It was reported by Tracy Brown (2019) that the creator, Owen Dennis created the series around the feeling of waking up in an unsettling space. The concept of the show was rooted from Dennis's flight to the U.S from China in 2010. He describes a "part of the ocean that's really big and quiet, and it's very still," and looking around the plane, "there were a bunch of people staring into screens in the dark in

this quiet room,” and it felt creepy to him. This feeling was made into the unsettling place of the train, a place where every car is a different experience.

The series uses the concept of Multi-Plane photography, and 2D animation technique developed in the 1930s. The concept is composed of the cell, where the characters are drawn, and the background, a painted scene, which are layered on each other to create the final composition. Using multiple background layers and cells, the relationship of the movement between the characters and their environments become more realistic and dynamic, making the series more handcrafted and cohesive.

During the viewing of season three of the series, observations were made about the visual animation of the show, reflecting on its appeal. The characters typically contrasted from the background, even if some colors were similar, they are either more or less saturated. These backgrounds and the environments of the different train cars are designed minimalistic, some with more detail, but are designed beautifully with vibrant colors. The lighting throughout the series would match the atmosphere of scene, becoming darker with intense shadows and highlights through scenes with darker themes.

## Methodology

This study was conducted through a qualitative content analysis approach. This method was chosen because it allows collecting and analyzing a large amount of visual data, and it

allows patterns to naturally emerge. This is particularly effective because it allows the researcher's ability to find themes with a visual data, finding data that is not originally seen. All ten episode of season three of infinity train were watched, re-watched, and varies elements were recorded.

During the initial viewing, the descriptive statistics, the main characters, plots, conflicts, general thoughts, and ideas were recorded. During the secondary viewing of the season, the episodes were analyzed and coded. A latent coding method was used which made the coding process easier. The codes were recorded into a chart and were grouped, and similar codes were combined. After the coding process, themes were generated.

### Findings

Through a qualitative content analysis approach, several themes emerged. Based on recurring patterns of coding, four themes emerged. The themes were fear, trust, power, and truth. The themes developed as the most significant parts of the season three of Infinity Train.

#### **List of Themes**

FEAR
TRUST
POWER
TRUTH



## **Fear**

Fear was a significant part of the show. This theme is shown in different ways throughout the season with the fear of death, fear of confronting the past, and the fear of abandonment/loneliness. Grace and Simon were scared of the threat of a large null, later being known as Tuba. Most of the Nulls that Grace and Simon encounter are seen as toys or non-threatening, but there were times when they would be seen as threatening due to their size or power. For example, in the Debutante Ball Car episode, Grace and Simon did see the denizen that was in control of the car as a threat; they were big, and the group couldn't leave the car unless they danced, but the denizen wasn't a threat in reality, that's just how they operate as a being of the train. Grace and Simon knew that they couldn't just take Hazel from Tuba, Tuba was going to willingly attack Simon in their first encounter because she was protective of Hazel. After the death of Tuba, Hazel was afraid that Simon would kill her too because of who she really was. Even though the Apex didn't care what happened to denizens, they were still living beings, who were also were afraid to die. The train was shown that it can be a dangerous place—there were quadrupedal roach-dog creatures called Ghoms that sucks out people's souls—and it didn't matter who you were, no one wanted to die at the hands of the train. There was no idea what confrontations the passengers had the face; although the Apex would prepare for different situations, it would still be scary.

There was the fear of confronting the past. Simon didn't want to be around The Cat due to their past; he didn't want to relive the pain that he felt after The Cat left him, it was traumatic. Grace didn't really talk about her past. When she told a story from her childhood about how she was outcasted from the other girls at her dance recital because they didn't know her, she brushed of

that feeling of sadness because she doesn't want to show signs of weakness. She sees her past as a gateway to her weakness being shown: her fear of being alone.

The fear of abandonment/ loneliness resonated with Grace and Simon in their own ways. While she was in her memories, she admits how she is afraid of being wrong, not being enough, and disappointing others; she acted the way she acted—being this controlling person with lies instead of being honest—to avoid being alone. She didn't get the attention she needed from her parents, so while on the train, she created an identity that kept her in charge of something, something that brings her attention. Simon being abandoned from The Cat gave him abandonment issues. He could barely be around her because that experience brought him so much pain. He and Grace have been by each other's side for a long time, so when Grace starts shutting him out, his fears that everyone is leaving him begins to flare.

### **Trust**

Trust within the season was critical to the character development of the characters. The different levels of trust are shown in the show through the teamwork between characters, the friendship between Grace and Simon, and the notion of trusting the denizens of the train.

Simon and Tuba working together to get through The Color Clock Car was one of the most pivotal moments of trust within the series. Teamwork was emphasized fondly in this episode with the phrase "Teamwork begins with two people trusting each other." Hazel wanted that teamwork to form trust between Simon and Tuba, so they could become friends. Simon gave a good show acting like he had some sympathy towards Tuba in order to get them to work together in order to escape the car. But he ultimately used that trust as a weakness to get rid of Tuba when he had the chance.

Simon and Grace were an original team before they formed the Apex. In the beginning of the series, their teamwork is strong as they go through cars, and attempt their capture of Tuba. This was the beginning of their friendship, they trusted each other, they stayed by each other. Simon trusts Grace and her decisions made throughout the series; manipulating Hazel into agreeing with their ideals to trying to stay away from Amelia, until he felt that Grace lying to him after the death of Tuba, and her decisions became unorthodox to him. After finding out that Grace was lying to him after watching her tape, Simon sees how controlling she was, she betrayed him and the morals that they built for the Apex and loses faith in her as a friend.

Grace and Simon grew up on the train believing that the denizens were Nulls—nothing, not even a zero. Grace explains to Hazel that you can't trust nulls because you never know what they'll do, and that she doesn't need to get to know them because she just knows that they're trouble. Hazel counters this position with her relationship with Tuba. Tuba is like a mother figure to Hazel; she protects her and makes Hazel happy. Nulls aren't seen as people towards Grace and Simon, but they do possess human qualities. Tuba had children of her own until she lost them, and Hazel filled that void. This helped with Grace's opinion about denizens; they're not just on the train for entertainment, they are there to help you. Grace does come to terms with her viewpoint on the denizens by the end of the season, as she befriends the origami birds.

After his abandonment with the cat, and the influence Grace had on him, Simon doesn't trust any denizen. Even after the little connection he had with Tuba in the Color Clock car, he still saw her as nothing and wheeled her. Although he had resentment towards the Cat, he still went to her for help. This didn't mean that he still had some trust of her, but he felt like she owed him help for abandoning him.

## **Power**

The hierarchy of the power on the train is what drives the Apex in this season. Power is perceived throughout the season with the notions that having the highest number makes you the leader—the most superior person on the train, and humans are on top, so they are entitled to do whatever they want on the train.

The Apex was formed under the belief that the conductor of the train was a human with the highest number ever, and that made him in charge. Grace having the highest number of the Apex made her the leader. When her number began to go down, she felt that Simon and the rest of the Apex would think less of her. Simon remarks that “numbers are power,” and he expresses that as he takes over the Apex with the highest number ever. The lust to get the highest number takes control of Simon’s mentally; it becomes an anchor to his pain, and it’ll be as if the pain doesn’t matter if your number is large and in charge. The power because a desired lifestyle even though it’s false.

The Apex raid and destroy cars in order to get their numbers up, and they believe what they are doing is a good thing. They would destroy the homes of the denizens and attack denizens without any remorse, no concern for their well-being because they don’t matter. Simon didn’t care that he killed Tuba and felt a funeral for her was ridiculous; the train was for humans and whatever happens to the denizens doesn’t matter, they don’t deserve to be treated like humans.

Although they believe that they have control over the train, there are times when Grace and Simon have to “play by the train rules.” In the first episode, the Apex have to take a bow to unlock the door, in the third episode, the group had to learn the debutante dance, or they would be trapped in that car forever, and in the fifth episode, they had to solve the puzzle-maze in order to unlock the door. The Apex believe that the train was made for humans, by a human, but if they were in charge, why couldn’t they leave cars when they wanted to? Simple, they’re not in

charge. They don't have the power that they believe they have. The train has the true power, as it is supposed to guide passengers through their problems with the environments and puzzles that the train presents.

## **Truth**

As the season hits its climax, Grace and Simon are faced with revelations that go against everything they grew up believing. They are faced with the truth about the train, Simon finds out the truth behind Grace's actions, and Grace faces the truth about herself and the kids of the Apex.

Grace herself was in denial from the truth of the train to keep her power, but she came to terms after she lost her power and her friends. She accepts that she was wrong about everything and uses this to embrace change. The truth about train is that a passenger works through their problems; the worst you do, the higher your number goes, and you have to get your number down to zero in order to leave. Simon doesn't approve of this truth. He doesn't feel the change that Grace and Amelia were trying to explain to him is the right way of the train. After Simon looks at Grace's tape, he felt betrayed by person that he felt was his best friend. Simon sees that Grace wasn't the friend that he thought she was. Grace betrayed the value that the Apex is built on. He doesn't trust anything other than what he believes is the truth after feeling like everyone has been lying to him. The last episode shows how he feels that he is the only one who holds the truth, the one who is always right.

Instead of believing that they were chosen to be on the train for the same reason, to be a united group and get the highest number, Grace explains to the kids of the Apex that they are all on the train for different reasons. They all have their own problems from their own lives that they need

to work out. The truth seemed a little disheartening to the kids, but they have a hopeful notion that they will be able to figure things about themselves individually, together.

### Conclusion

Infinity Train is a show directed at children, but it isn't afraid of incorporating themes like fear, trust, power, and truth in their content that other cartoons won't push towards. The wild nature of this fantasy world brings realistic and complex characters that have to deal with problems that are relatable to the audience. The show becomes an allegory of self-reflection, highlighting the problems that can't be ignored, the truth that people have to face about who they are as a person, and how they should deal with their future. Boundaries are pushed with the layered genre of the show that attracts a larger audience than its demographic, as the lore of the train's story becomes more complex and dynamic each season.

Through the exploration between the different universes shown within the show, there is the added feeling of the unknown, forever waiting for someone to go explore it and find themselves. The characters of season 3, Grace and Simon, represent how people react to their trauma how they choose to embrace changes they should make in their lives. The way they interact with each other, the people on the train, and the way they choose to live has depth is shown through dark and heart-heavy scenes, displaying how the transitions and realizations that people face are ultimately scary, but necessary to learn from.

Infinity Train is a cartoon that isn't just for enjoyment, it provides an opportunity for the audience to relate to a character in a fictional world, allowing them to reflect on themselves and their own lives.

## References

- Anton, A. (2016). Humour and Intertextuality: the Use of Inter-Referentiality in The Simpsons, South Park and Family Guy. *Romanian Sociology / Sociologie Românească*, 14(4), 29–44
- Barbaro, K., Clackson, K., & Wass, S. V. (2017). Infant Attention Is Dynamically Modulated With Changing Arousal Levels. *Child Development*, 88(2), 629–639. <https://doi-org.cbcbcmd.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/cdev.12689>
- Brown, T. (2019, August 9). *Cartoon Network's "Infinity Train" tackles issues many kids shows avoid*. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2019-08-08/infinity-train-owen-dennis>
- Burger, B., & Toiviainen, P. (2020). See How It Feels to Move: Relationships between Movement Characteristics and Perception of Emotions in Dance. *Human Technology*, 16(3), 233–256. <https://doi-org.cbcbcmd.idm.oclc.org/10.17011/ht/urn.202011256764>
- Cartoon Network. (2020, July 24). *Owen Dennis Explains Multi-Plane Animation | Infinity Train | HBO Max*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHuS7oq7I34>
- Fradkin, C., Weschenfelder, G. V., & Yunes, M. A. M. (2016). Shared adversities of children and comic superheroes as resources for promoting resilience: Comic superheroes are an untapped resource for empowering vulnerable children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 51, 407–415. <https://doi-org.cbcbcmd.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.10.010>
- Hunting, K., Grumbein, A., & Cahill, M. (2018). Watch and Learn: Gendered Discrepancies in Educational Messages on Television Channels Targeted at Boys versus Girls. *Mass Communication & Society*, 21(1), 115–141. <https://doi-org.cbcbcmd.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/15205436.2017.1370114>
- Infinity Train (TV Series 2019–2021)*. (2019, August 5). IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8146754/>
- Kosloff, S., Irish, S., Perreault, L., Anderson, G., & Nottbohm, A. (2017). Assessing relationships between conformity and meta-traits in an Asch-like paradigm. *Social Influence*, 12(2/3), 90–100. <https://doi-org.cbcbcmd.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/15534510.2017.1371639>
- UZUEGBUNAM, C. E., & ONONIWU, C. R. (2018). Highlighting Racial Demonization in 3D Animated Films and Its Implications: A Semiotic Analysis of

Frankenweenie. *Romanian Journal of Communication & Public Relations*, 20(2), 5–20. <https://doi-org.ccbcmd.idm.oclc.org/10.21018/rjcpr.2018.2.256>