

My pandemic obsession with workplace comedies

***Mythic Quest* and *Call My Agent* have me feeling nostalgic for annoying colleagues and pointless meetings.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [September 8, 2021](#) issue



WORK/LIFE BALANCE? During the pandemic, many Americans have been watching (or rewatching) shows set in the workplace, like (from left) Silicon Valley sitcom *Mythic Quest*, French comedy-drama *Call My Agent!*, and *The Office*. (L TO R: Apple tv+ / Netflix / Nbc Universal)

Like many Americans during the pandemic, I've fallen into a workplace sitcom rabbit hole in my television watching. This includes the recent *Mythic Quest* and *Call My Agent!*; it also includes rewatching all nine seasons of *The Office* with my preteen. We were not alone. There are entire online communities devoted to the American sitcom and discussion boards debating if obsessive rewatching is a form of dependency.

Even annoying colleagues and pointless meetings can be tinged with nostalgia when one is working alone in sweatpants from a closet. I first discovered *Mythic Quest*

(streaming on Apple TV+) through the show's internet-hyped quarantine episode, which was released in May 2020 just as most American office workers were settling into an uncertain future of working from home. Shot on iPhones from each actor's home, it captured our new reality of awkward Zoom pauses, the intrusion of personal life into the computer screen, and the panicky isolation many people I knew were feeling. It was funny and cathartic, and I was hooked.

Set in the offices of *Mythic Quest*, a fictional multiplayer online video game, the show is a smart parody of the new creative class. The heart of the show is the collaboration and rivalry between Ian (Rob McElhenney), the video game's creator and visionary, and Poppy (Charlotte Nicdao), the lead engineer who is tasked with bringing Ian's vision to life. Representing different kinds of creative genius, they are locked in a tense symbiotic relationship: she craves the bravado and recognition of Ian's position, while he envies her technical expertise.

The show is smart about the obvious gender politics at work here, beyond simply pointing out how hard it is for women to thrive in the tech bro world (though it hits this mark consistently, too). Ian struggles to collaborate or even to acknowledge how much of his own vision is dependent on the brilliance of his partners. As she asserts her leadership, Poppy struggles to unlearn the domineering and manipulative tactics she has absorbed from a lifetime working under toxic male bosses. Just as the success of their wildly popular game depends on their cooperation, so too does their growth as human beings.

If you have a preteen or live in proximity to video games, there is an added layer of snarky delight peeling back the absurd self-importance of video game culture, from the creators down to the teenage YouTube celebrities who can make or break a game's popularity. While the show deals heavily in parody—most of it very funny—it never devolves into mere irony. The supporting characters are drawn richly enough to make you care about their moral development beyond the thrill of pulling back the curtain on a creative industry.

There is a similar behind-the-curtain thrill in the French dramedy *Call My Agent!* (streaming on Netflix), which was another pandemic obsession I shared with half the internet. Set in a prestigious French talent agency, it chronicles the egotistical antics of French agents and their even more egotistical actors. (The more French actors you recognize, the deeper the insider thrill, but the show is addictive even if you don't recognize a single one.)

Call My Agent! traffics in the soap- operatic to move the plot along: hidden parentage, unexpected pregnancies, office affairs, and betrayals. But the real addictive pleasure comes from the micro-dramas between the main characters, who are both real friends and workplace rivals, alternatively carrying each other's burdens and acting out pent-up frustrations like siblings or long-married partners who have forgotten how to communicate honestly.

Despite the distance between Paris and Silicon Valley, these shows share a deeper cultural unity about the demands of work in modern life. Both are set in dream professions, in "do what you love and you will never work a day in your life" jobs. Except, of course, the opposite is true: these are the kind of jobs that take over every part of your life. Workplace relationships become the only field in which moral growth—or degradation—can occur, because these people have surrendered all other aspects of their lives to work, which they insist is not really work but life and passion itself.

This is what *The Office*, which aired on NBC from 2005 to 2013 (now streaming on the NBC Peacock app), was parodying 15 years ago. Michael Scott (Steve Carell), the cringy, clingy middle manager at the fictional paper company Dunder Mifflin, wants to be a charismatic genius boss who creates such a fun, inspiring work environment that his employees won't ever want to leave.

This is, of course, ridiculous at a small paper company in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Michael's employees endure his antics with varying levels of humor, rage, and resistance. In the first few seasons of the show, the sanest character is Jim (John Krasinski), a disaffected paper salesman who is determined to draw strong boundaries between what he gives to work and who he really is. But as the show moves into its final seasons, the parody eases up and even Jim comes to realize that the office where he spends the majority of his waking hours is where the most significant relationships of his life will be formed.

Maybe this helps explain why *The Office* is on perpetual repeat for so many viewers. As more people are required to surrender more parts of their lives to work, whether it is a dream job or not, there may be collective nostalgia for the monotony of a stable job no matter how outlandish the boss. But as the pandemic shifts the patterns of work, there may also be a new desire to carve out space from work and its incessant demands on our time and our very sense of self. Parody and humor can be tools of revelation, helping us see the absurdities of what late capitalism

demands of us. Maybe our resistance is manifesting first as sitting in our pajamas laughing at workplaces where we no longer are.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Watching work from home.”