



Red-Hot American Geeks

The massive success of 'The Big Bang Theory' proves that there's a Klingon-spouting nerd in all of us

By Rob Sheffield

AMERICA'S NEW SIT-com kings? They're a bunch of Caltech scientists who sit around making jokes about Higgs boson particles on the geek-fest known as *The Big Bang Theory*. People may talk more about *30 Rock* and *The Office*, but *Big Bang* stomps them in the ratings way

The Big Bang Theory
Mondays, 9:30 p.m., CBS

Maxwell's demon crunches heat molecules. While Conan and Jay were battling it out, *Big Bang* pulled in more viewers than *both* of them combined. How in the world did this happen?

The secret is that *Big Bang* gets the details right on a nearly subatomic level. From the start, the show paid loving attention to how nerds bond – the first episode had the gang watching bootlegs of Stephen Hawking lectures, in between games of Klingon Boggle. I assumed *Big Bang* would bomb, because the science guys were too realistic.

Yet over three seasons, it's gotten huge by becoming a full-blown celebration of geek culture. When these guys play a game of Rock Paper Scissors Lizard Spock, they go all the way: "Rock crushes lizard, lizard poisons Spock, Spock smashes scissors, paper disproves Spock, Spock vaporizes rock."

In some ways, it's a resolutely old-fashioned sitcom. There are four scientists – Leonard (Johnny Galecki), Sheldon (Jim Parsons), Raj (Kunal Nayyar) and Howard (Simon Helberg). They hang out in what could be the Bundys' living room and banter about physics, comic books and *Star Wars*. They even have love lives: Leonard has a girlfriend, Penny (Kaley Cuoco), the waitress across the hall. After sex, he boasts, "I Googled how to do that!"

It seems like a one-joke *Revenge of the Nerds* premise, but every episode is crammed with bits that *nobody* could possibly get except actual scientists. When someone name-checks a theorem, you can look it up. The equations written on the blackboard in the apartment are not fakes. Since I'm married to an astrophysicist, I will hear my wife laugh at a scene before anybody says a word – and she'll explain that

there's an Einstein coefficient or a Feynman diagram in the background.

Those of us who aren't so hardcore may not get these jokes, but we know what it means when Katee Sackhoff, a.k.a. Starbuck from *Battlestar Galactica*, shows up as herself in Howard's bathtub, telling him, "Always nice to be part of your masturbatory fantasies!" And in a subplot we can only pray lasts, Raj lands a date with the ultimate dweeb prize, Danica McKellar, a.k.a. Winnie Cooper from *The Wonder Years*, now a real-life mathematician who helped create the Chayes-McKellar-Winn Theorem. Every boy's dream!

These guys might look like they're the opposite of the *Jersey Shore* kids – but in a way, they're just like them. Both experiment with chemistry, whether it's sodium hydroxide in the lab or steroids in the Jacuzzi. They all speak one another's language ("GTL" vs. "E=mc²") and respect one another's freakish boundaries. In other words, an idealized America. For a battered and broke country, that fantasy means more than it did a few years ago. No wonder it's a comforting place to visit. The geeks are just like the guidos. Except the geeks get laid more. **FB**

Illustration by IAN KELTIE