

## The Best Show on TV

by Joe Mulder

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"The Office" (NBC) – 2/9/2006 - 4/2/2006  
"Huff" (Showtime) – 4/6/2006 - 8/26/2006  
"Big Brother" (CBS) – 8/26/2006 - 10/4/2006  
"South Park" (Comedy Central) – 10/4/2006 - 11/30/2006  
"The Office" (NBC) – 11/30/2006 - 1/14/2007  
"24" (FOX) – 1/14/2007 - 4/5/2007  
"30 Rock" (NBC) – 4/5/2007 - 4/10/2008  
"House" (FOX) – 4/10/2008 - 10/5/2008  
"Dexter" (Showtime) – 10/5/2008 - present

And we return to my favorite ongoing series of articles, The Best Show on TV. For those of you joining us already in progress, this is based on one of my favorite web pages in all of cyberspace, the WWE Title Histories page (<http://www.wwe.com/inside/titlehistory/>). If you can't spend countless hours of fun looking at a list of who defeated whom, and when and where, to win the WWE title, then I'm not sure exactly what more there is to say between us.

To clarify, this list chronicles a history not of my favorite show on TV, but of the *actual* best show on TV. I'm not deciding what that show is, I'm just reporting the facts. Now, you might think another show is better; that's your business. But you should know that arguing that there was another show on TV that was better than "The Office" on, say, December 12th, 2006 would be essentially the same thing as arguing that Eddie Guerrero was *not* the WWE champion on May 23rd, 2004. You can argue it if you want, but we've got a list to refer to, and you're just going to wind up looking silly in the end.

Anyway, even though you're reading this today, the title officially changed hands, as you can see, back on October 5, with the airing of that evening's episode of "Dexter." I'm writing it up today because last night was as soon as I was able to download a nice copy of the episode off the internet – er, that is... last night was as soon as I was able to come to an understanding of what Season 3, Episode 2 of "Dexter" contained without resorting to any illegal means whatsoever.

For those who don't know, "Dexter" – based on the novel *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay (don't worry, I hadn't heard of it either, although I'm sure it's good) – is the story of a serial killer who only kills other killers. You see, young Dexter's pathology was noticed very early in his life by his foster father, Officer Harry Morgan, and Harry decided, for good or ill, that since Dexter would inevitably become a killer, his urges might be steered in a "constructive" direction via a strict code, producing a Dexter who would arguably aid society instead of injuring it. The end result is Dexter Morgan, crime scene analyst (specializing, naturally, in blood spatter) for the Miami Metro Police Department by day, serial murdering vigilante

by night.

It should be noted that "Dexter" is most certainly not for kids, or even for most adults; in Season 1 particularly, the subject matter becomes intensely dark, to the point that those who haven't grown up in a popular culture awash in slasher flicks and torture porn may well be so put off that it would be impossible for them to get anything out of the show. Not that the violence actually depicted onscreen is necessarily all that brutal; your average scene in *Hostel* or *Saw* makes the worst of "Dexter" look like some fabric softener commercial where a new mom smells her baby's head while tinkly piano music plays in the background. It's more that psychologically, "Dexter" plunges so far down into the depths of the morass of human depravity that you should really make sure you've got a vine tied around your ankle before you commit to diving in.

So why watch it, one might ask. Well, why watch any entertainment? Usually, we watch TV either for the purposes of pure escapism, or to get a laugh, or, perhaps best of all, to get a vicarious thrill from what we see. "Dexter" provides this in spades, because although we'd never admit it, don't we all sort of fantasize that it was up to us to punish the wicked, to decide who gets to live and who gets to die, and to be able to do it with the unambiguous certainty that comes with total belief in our righteousness? We know, of course, that in a practical sense it's not doable because if we tried to do it we'd break a bunch of laws and get caught right away. We also know that in a philosophical sense it's not doable because we're fallible, and in no position to take it upon ourselves to administer justice when there are institutions, however imperfect, set up to take care of that for us.

But Dexter works for the cops, he vets his victims carefully, and he doesn't have a conscience *per se*, so he's the perfect man to live out our aberrant little fantasies on the screen every week. And, since we know that the people he's killing are fictional characters, we get our dose of fantasy fulfillment without any of those pesky horrific, soul-searing nightmares you or I might get from treating flesh-and-blood human beings like Dexter treats his victims.

But "Dexter" doesn't let Dexter off the hook, either; it would be too easy to depict a character who simply has no conscience, no regular human emotions or attachments. Instead, we're given a character who *thinks* he has no conscience, no regular human emotions or attachments. His affection for his foster sister, Deb, belies his claims of inhumanity, and the relationship he "acts out" with his girlfriend, Rita, grows steadily into a real relationship as the series progresses. Dexter's nervousness and discomfort during a Season 2 dinner with Rita, Rita's mother and a very attractive young woman from Dexter's life (I won't spoil it by divulging the nature of the relationship) show that, despite his claims to the contrary, he can certainly pick up on the same social cues and behavioral ticks on which the rest of us rely, as long as they're obvious enough. Think of Dexter as a

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blind man who imagines that he must not have any idea what a "cube" is like; if that man were suddenly given the power of sight, he'd probably discover that his guesses weren't far off at all.

Dexter, though he believes he's "apart from," "different than," is but a few tweaks away from experiencing things just like the rest of us do. And so, if my math checks out, that means we're but a few tweaks away from Dexter. Which is probably why it's such a damn good show.

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