

Silicon Valley: HBO's satire of American tech culture

Kevin Reed
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The second season of the popular HBO comedy series *Silicon Valley* concluded on June 14. Created by Mike Judge, John Altschuler and Dave Krinsky, the satire follows the ups and downs of six young men who live together in a “business startup incubator” in Silicon Valley (located in the southern portion of the San Francisco Bay Area in California).

Richard Hendricks (Thomas Middleditch), a socially awkward programmer, works for the fictional Internet corporation Hooli during the day, but devotes his nights and weekends to his own software project. Richard develops a music app called Pied Piper that contains a breakthrough data compression algorithm. Suddenly everyone in Silicon Valley is interested in getting in on Richard's invention, a business opportunity worth a fortune.

The startup incubator is owned by Erlich Bachman (T.J. Miller). The paunchy, self-absorbed and hedonistic Erlich—who is older and has more Silicon Valley business experience than the others—has acquired some resources from a previous tech venture. According to the terms of the agreement he has with the incubator residents, Erlich is guaranteed 10 percent ownership of any enterprise that hatches there.

In season one, the team is preoccupied with developing Pied Piper into a viable product, building a stable management structure and securing financing to keep the business running. Meanwhile, they face competition from Gavin Belson (Matt Ross), the billionaire founder and owner of Hooli, who is attempting to bring a copycat product called Nucleus to market before Pied Piper.

In season two, after the failure of Nucleus to preempt Pied Piper, Belson and Hooli bring an intellectual property lawsuit against Richard and his team. Suddenly a pariah in the venture capital community, Pied Piper loses investment funding and is forced to find alternative financing. This includes taking a \$5 million investment

from a wacky billionaire Russ Hanneman (Chris Diamantopolous), entering a service contract with the online pornography conglomerate Intersite and joining a cross-promotional campaign with the energy drink company Homicide. None of these turn out well for Pied Piper.

While it is probably difficult to keep up with all of this, the plot is even more complicated and has many more characters than can be reasonably explained here. Suffice it to say that in the course of 18 episodes, the Pied Piper team goes through a mélange of professional and personal challenges that are well crafted and sometimes quite funny.

Silicon Valley is heavy on industry jargon and requires a certain amount of technical knowledge to be followed adequately. In fact, the show has been praised for the accuracy of its tech references. This aspect was so important to Mike Judge that he employed special consultants to work with the writers and actors to make sure the complex terminology is used precisely.

One particularly humorous theme is the lampooning of self-serving Silicon Valley corporate mottos like Google's “Don't be Evil.” There are numerous instances where executives and entrepreneurs make the claim that their goal is “making the world a better place” ... followed by some arcane technical description. In one case, for example, Gavin Belson says in a promotional video, “Hooli is about people ... about making the world a better place ... through minimal message oriented transport layers.” In another, a startup developer speaking before a tech conference asserts, “We're making the world a better place ... through paxos algorithms for consensus protocols.”

To the credit of the show's creators, they satirize Silicon Valley's billionaires—according to *Forbes* magazine, the high tech industry has eight of the 25 wealthiest people in the US—by showing their greed,

egomania and absurd lifestyles. In one scene, Belson publicly laments the “bias against the leaders of our industry ... there is a climate in this country that is very dangerous ... billionaires are people too.” He then goes on to compare the public’s growing hostility toward the super-rich to the treatment of the Jews in Nazi Germany (the speech is almost a verbatim recap of a preposterous letter written to the *Wall Street Journal* last year by venture capitalist Tom Perkins).

The most effective send-up of American billionaire culture is embodied in the character of Russ Hanneman, loosely based on real-life billionaire Mark Cuban. Hanneman—who incessantly reminds everyone that he made his fortune by “putting radio on the Internet” in the 1990s—is vulgar and rude (he talks continuously and very loudly on his cell phone) and ostentatiously drives a \$300,000 sports car, eats \$800 steaks and has “calf implants.”

At one point, Hanneman is informed by his accountant that, due to some failed investments, he is no longer a billionaire. Later that day, the Pied Piper team finds the former billionaire curled up on his couch unable to get up and complaining about the insignificance of his \$986 million and the fact he has been kicked out of the “Three Comma Club.”

If one goal of satire is to use exaggeration to expose the public to an aspect of contemporary society in a manner that is enlightening, then *Silicon Valley* has hit the mark with Russ Hanneman. In perhaps the best scene in the series so far, Hanneman says the following during a business meeting with the Pied Piper team:

“If you show revenue, people will ask how much and it will never be enough ... If you have no revenue, you can say you are prerevenue. ... It’s not about how much you earn, it’s about what you’re worth. And who’s worth the most? Companies that lose money. Pinterest and Snapchat? No revenue. F*cking Amazon has lost money every quarter for the last 20 years and f*ucking [Amazon founder and CEO Jeff] Bezos is the king. No one wants to see revenue. ... I don’t want to make a little bit of money every day, I want to make a f*ck ton of money all at once.”

Rarely have the economic reasoning, concerns and corruption of the financial elite been so aptly and succinctly depicted on television.

The previous works of actor, animator, producer and director Mike Judge (the animated television series *Beavis and Butthead* and *King of the Hill* and the films *Office Space*, *Idiocracy* and *Extract*) have shown him to be an

effective comedy writer, storyteller and director. As might be expected, unhappily, *Silicon Valley* has its share of male-anatomical and scatological jokes and gags that often take the story in bizarre directions just to get a few cheap laughs.

This straining for humor expresses the fact that *Silicon Valley* only goes so far in its satirical critique of high tech culture. This is no surprise. The views of Judge, Altschuler and Krinsky have been articulated clearly in the HBO series’ promotional tagline: “In the high-tech gold rush of modern Silicon Valley, the people most qualified to succeed are the least capable of handling success.”

In other words, according to the show’s creators, the problems and maladies of Silicon Valley are caused by social misfits of various types—startup nerds and computer geeks, on the one hand, and egomaniacal and greedy tech billionaires, on the other—and their inability to manage success. One could hardly think of a more conventional and shallow approach to the complexities of life in Silicon Valley.

To the extent that Judge and his team cannot conceive of a progressive resolution to the contradictions portrayed in their show, they wind up to a greater or lesser degree admiring—with tongue-in-cheek—the culture they are criticizing. While they parody the absurdities of six young men in an incubator, for example, they never bring viewers to a point at which this peculiar phenomenon can be seriously questioned.

By accepting billionaires, venture capitalists and startup incubators as necessary and useful elements of society—and then trying to work out the comedy from there—*Silicon Valley* again and again appears stilted. Without an understanding that the source of the anarchy, greed and plundering that reigns in Silicon Valley is to be found in the profit system itself, the creative possibilities and opportunities for genuinely humorous situations remain too few and too far between.

Despite these limitations, HBO’s *Silicon Valley* TV comedy series is informative and often entertaining. It has been renewed for a third season that will likely premiere in the spring of 2016.



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