

# Rolling Stone

## 'Cuphead': Why 1930s Animation Continues to Grip Contemporary Culture

Surreal attraction of rubber hose limbs and rotoscope landscapes continues to this day in video games and cartoons



'Cuphead' was created by Canadian development Studio MDHR and draws its influence directly from the animated shorts of Fleischer Studios. Studio MDHR

By Jacob Kleinman  
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*Cuphead*'s hand-drawn 1930s-style graphics [stole the show](#) when it was first revealed back in 2014 at E3. In its minute-long trailer, noodle-limbed cups faced off against a cartoon devil, a monstrous bat and a giant evil sunflower. Three years later, the [devilishly hard](#) run 'n' gun game (think *Mega Man* or *Contra*, but in a *Betty Boop* cartoon) still stands out in a sea of [ultra-realistic shooters](#) and [pixelated indie titles](#), making it one of the most exciting and unique releases of 2017.

But if you take a step back, you can find traces of *Cuphead*'s distinct style across a wide swath popular culture. The game's aesthetic roots have been springing up for years in everything from children's cartoons like *Adventure Time* and *Ren and Stimpy* to the [latest Jay-Z music video](#), offering major studios and indie animators alike a boundless, surrealist palette – one that never quite reached its full potential back in the 1930s.

Created by Canadian development Studio MDHR, *Cuphead* draws its influence directly from the animated shorts of Fleischer Studios, which introduced the world to Betty Boop. Fleischer's style is defined by "rubber hose" animation, where animators drew characters with no joints to save time and effort, and Rotoscoping, a method for illustrating cartoons in which every line is constantly wiggling and waving.



Cuphead Studio MDHR

Fleischer Studios flourished until the mid-1930s, when the [Hays Code](#) introduced strict new morality laws in Hollywood and ushered in the age of Disney dominance. The new rules were meant to instill moral values in cinema and they were highly specific. The word "virgin" was [banned](#) and cartoons weren't even allowed to [show cow udders](#), a common comedic trope in animation at the time. By the end of the decade, Fleischer's signature style had been replaced by more traditional visuals, cemented by the release of Disney's first feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in 1938.

Almost a century later, however, Fleischer Studios provided a deep well of inspiration for *Cuphead's* creators.

"It sets no limits to how creative you can be," lead inking artist and producer Maja Moldenhauer said during an in-person demo at Microsoft's Manhattan loft space in August. "If this was a modern game, you'd be constrained to realism, but we were able to personify lots of objects – like jelly beans."



Bimbo's Initiation *Credit:* Fleischer Studios

Outside of the video game industry, the style Fleischer helped pioneer is thriving. Cartoon Network has a whole lineup devoted to mature animation with Adult Swim. The channel's more childish *Adventure Time* series also features an entire Candy Kingdom full of animated snacks, including a race of Jelly Bean People. Characters on the show are often drawn without joints, and one protagonist, Jake the Dog, can transform into any shape he wants.

In an interview with [Animation Magazine](#), executive producer Fred Seibert confirmed that *Adventure Time* draws directly on Fleischer Studios for inspiration. "This kind of surrealism has been missing in the past century," he said.



Cuphead Studio MDHR

That unique style has been making a pop culture comeback since at least the early Nineties, when *Ren and Stimpy* brought dark humor and not-so-subtle sexual references to Nickelodeon's lineup in 1991. The controversial series didn't last very long – it was cancelled a few years later in 1995 – but it spawned a new movement in modern animation.

Since then, we've seen the same influences pop up in [online animated shorts](#), [music videos](#) and [educational cartoons](#). Disney even brought back the classic style for "[Get a Horse](#)," an animated short released in 2013 that directly references the Hays Code ban on cow udders – in the cartoon, a cow appears on-screen wearing a skirt but then coyly lifts it to flaunt her udder at a passing cart.



Cuphead Studio MDHR

When it comes to reviving the 1930s animation style, some things are better left in the past. Racist stereotypes are almost unavoidable in classic American animation – [Disney included](#) – with every ethnicity from African-Americans to Asians depicted in the laziest and most offensive way possible at one point or another. Thankfully, that's not something you'll find in *Cuphead*, where the animators were careful to avoid making any sort of cultural or political commentary with their game.

"It's visuals and that's about it," Moldenhauer replied when I asked what the game might be saying about America in the 1930s. "Anything else happening in that era we're not versed in it. Blame it on being Canadian."



Cuphead Studio MDHR

But plenty of other artists have used the same style to tackle issues of race and sexuality head-on. Jay-Z's music video for "The Story of O.J." drops the rapper into a 1930s-style cartoon, complete with the kind of racist black caricatures you might find in a old Fleischer or Disney short. It also draws on other, more surreal elements of the style; one characters teeth transform into piano keys to match the music, and the New York skyline gyrates like a rotoscope cartoon.



The Story of OJ *Credit: S. Carter Enterprises*

Lorelei Pepi, an American animation artist who focuses on issues of identity and representation, used the same tactics in "Happy and Gay," a short feature that imagines a 1930s-style cartoon world where queer couples were included in popular culture without being reduced to

stereotypes. The short features a variety of stereotypes that were common at the time, including the Asian opium smoker and the effeminate "pansy."

"It imagines a night on the town for gay and lesbian couples 1930s cartoon style," says Lynn Tomlinson, an independent animator and professor at Towson University. "Of course, this nightlife did exist, but it wasn't represented on screen because censorship and stereotypes effectively erased any positive representation of gay characters."



Happy and Gay *Credit:* Lorelei Pepi

The reason why modern culture has circled back to the surreal visuals pioneered by Fleischer Studios may have less to do with art or moral politics and more with economics, Scott Higgins, chair of the film department at Wesleyan University, explains.

Unlike Disney, many of Fleischer's cartoons are in the public domain. They also don't rely on careful shading, so they look fine after being compressed into tiny files for streaming online. As a result, the unique style, invented partially by necessity, has opened the door for creators almost a century later to experiment with surrealist stories and visuals that Hollywood would have shied away from by the late 1930s.



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*Cuphead* will bring that style to new heights in its own way, offering players a chance to inhabit a 1930s cartoon for the first time ever. It's an experience that animation fans like Higgins have been dreaming of for years.

"If I had to live in one decade of hollywood cinema and not see any other movies it would have to be the 1930s," Higgins says. "They are consistently mind-numbingly entertaining. They will stop at nothing to get a laugh out of the viewer."

*Cuphead's* creators have essentially done just that. When the game launches on September 29th for Xbox One and Microsoft Windows 10, we'll finally have a chance to fully explore the world envisioned by Fleischer Studios almost a century ago – minus the casual racism.