



Vincent Waller and Marc Ceccarelli Talk 25 Years of 'SpongeBob SquarePants'

The showrunners share some behind-the-scenes stories while reflecting on 25 years of undersea adventures, timeless humor, and the enduring legacy of Stephen Hillenburg's animated 'Sponge Boy' creation from Bikini Bottom.

By **Victoria Davis** | Wednesday, July 17, 2024 at 1:48pm
 In 2D, 3D, Art, CG, Digital Media, Films, People, Television, Voice Acting | ANIMATIONWorld | Geographic Region: All



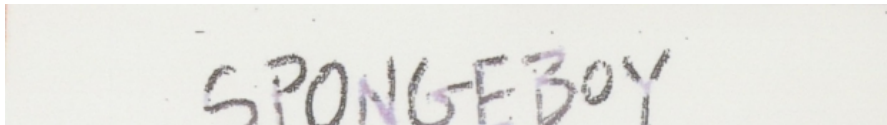
Stephen Hillenburg concept art from 1996. All images courtesy of Nickelodeon.

In 1998, Nickelodeon Animation Studio began airing an animated anthology series with Frederator Incorporated titled *Oh Yeah! Cartoons* as part of Nicktoons lineup. The series remains one of TV's biggest animation development programs, providing opportunities for dozens of filmmakers; 96 seven-minute cartoons were created, which eventually yielded three spin-off shows: *The Fairly OddParents*, *ChalkZone* and *My Life as a Teenage Robot*. Vincent Waller was one of those Nickelodeon filmmakers who created an *Oh Yeah! Cartoons* short. And, in 1999, he was disappointed to learn his short had been passed up for another project.

SpongeBob SquarePants.

But it wasn't long before Waller enthusiastically joined creator Stephen Hillenburg's team to help sustain one of the longest-running American animated series in history which remains, some 14 seasons later, one of Nickelodeon's highest-rated television shows.

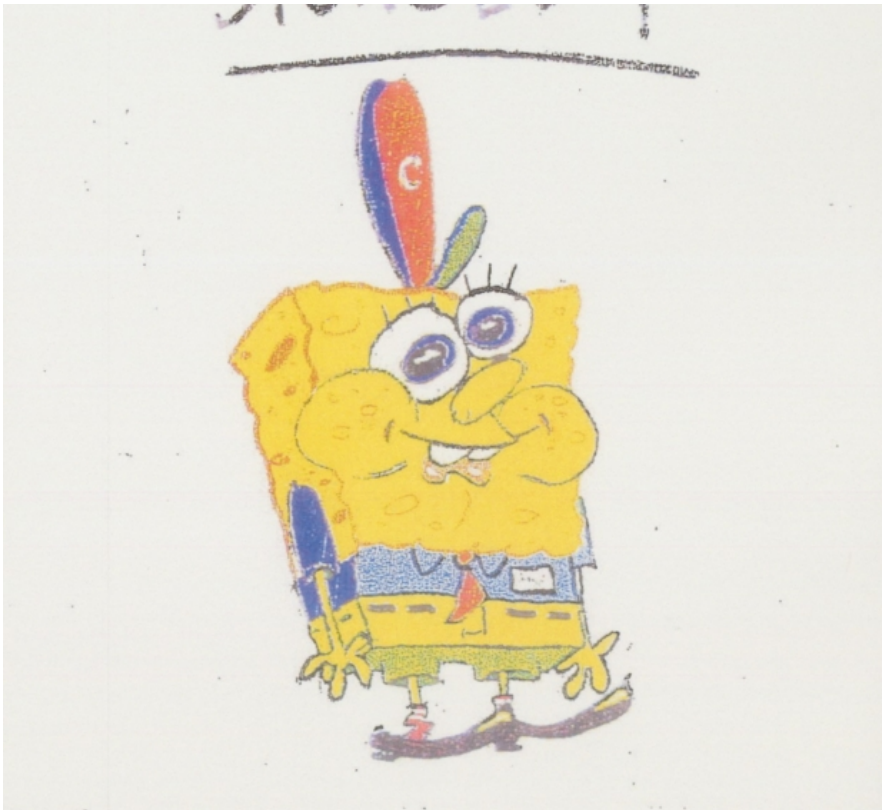
"I don't think anybody knew what this was going to become," says Waller. "I don't think even Steve knew that 25 years from now we would still be talking about SpongeBob, let alone creating new episodes."



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Back when he was a mere "Sponge Boy"

Today, July 17, marks *SpongeBob SquarePants*' 25th anniversary. The show centers on a good-hearted, burger-slinging, yellow sea sponge and his eclectic group of aquatic friends living in an undersea town called Bikini Bottom. Frankly, those who haven't heard of the show may possibly have been living under a rock even longer than SpongeBob's starfish best friend, Patrick. The property has produced four movies – with the latest, *Saving Bikini Bottom: The Sandy Cheeks Movie* releasing August 2 – along with two spinoff series: *Kamp Koral: SpongeBob's Under Years* and *The Patrick Star Show*, both in their second season. Though Hillenburg didn't get the chance to see either to fruition before his untimely passing in 2018, Waller and fellow showrunner Marc Ceccarelli continue working hard to keep Hillenburg's vision thriving.

"His spirit and his comedy are definitely still with us," says Ceccarelli. "We still pull out and reference the original bible that he put together with his drawings. There's still so much in there we haven't done or talked about. Not yet anyway."



Along with four new episodes of *The Patrick Star Show* releasing next week, beginning July 22, the *SpongeBob* crew is also celebrating the original series' silver anniversary by releasing special episodes reminiscent of the early years of *SpongeBob*. Episode "**PL-1413**" released July 15 and sends the villainous Plankton to a Bikini Bottom 2,000 years into the future as a callback to the Season 1 episode "SB-129," where SpongeBob's neighbor Squidward accidentally froze himself and journeyed to the future. "**In the Mood to Feud.**" which aired yesterday, July 16, sees SpongeBob, Patrick, and Sandy finding themselves in the middle of the long-running feud between the Narwhals and the Planktons. The episode not only features more of the Plankton Family but offers a first look at *Kamp Koral's* Narlene and Nobby's parents and their cousins.

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The special episodes, some of which will continue to roll out later this year, will feature more nostalgia like former jellyfishing champion Kevin C. Cucumber and revisit different eras of Bikini Bottom.

"Steve built such a marvelous model to work with," notes Waller. "All the characters and the settings are completely otherworldly, and you feel completely immersed in it. I remember even just looking at those early passes and it already looked like you were wearing goggles and felt like you were Jacques Cousteau finding this world. I was very excited to be a part of it and I still am just as enthusiastic today. That's never gone away."



Waller, now a showrunner and executive producer with Ceccarelli on *SpongeBob SquarePants* and its spin off shows, began on *SpongeBob's* first season as a writer and storyboard artist with, as he said, very little idea about what the future may hold for this sponge character, then named "Sponge Boy." Ceccarelli joined as a writer and storyboard director in 2011, when *SpongeBob's* fame had been well established. Ceccarelli was even a fan himself.

"I was so thrilled they would have me because the comedy in this show was exactly in line with how my brain worked," says Ceccarelli, laughing. "Honestly, at this point, because of how much my brain has melded with this world, I'm not sure if I'd even be able to work on too many other kids' television shows."

Waller adds, "At least, not happily."



One of Waller's favorite aspects of working on *SpongeBob*, especially during the earlier seasons, was how intimate the production process was.

"Back then, it was a much smaller show and Steve and our creative director Derek Drymon would come in, you'd pitch the board to them, and then you'd sit at a table together and they'd work through with you what they wanted to change and how they wanted us to change it," remembers Waller. "They didn't just give you notes and walk away. It was personal and a team process. And it was a learning experience because we all got to see how Derek and Steve worked. There's an episode where the characters are hunting for treasure, and I had Mr. Crabs looking at the map all surprised. Then Derek changed it to have Mr. Crabs' eyes pop out of his head, hit the map, and drag around all over it. They really taught us how to go bigger and bigger with the gags."


Ceccarelli adds, "That kind of thing forever changes the way you think about kids' television."


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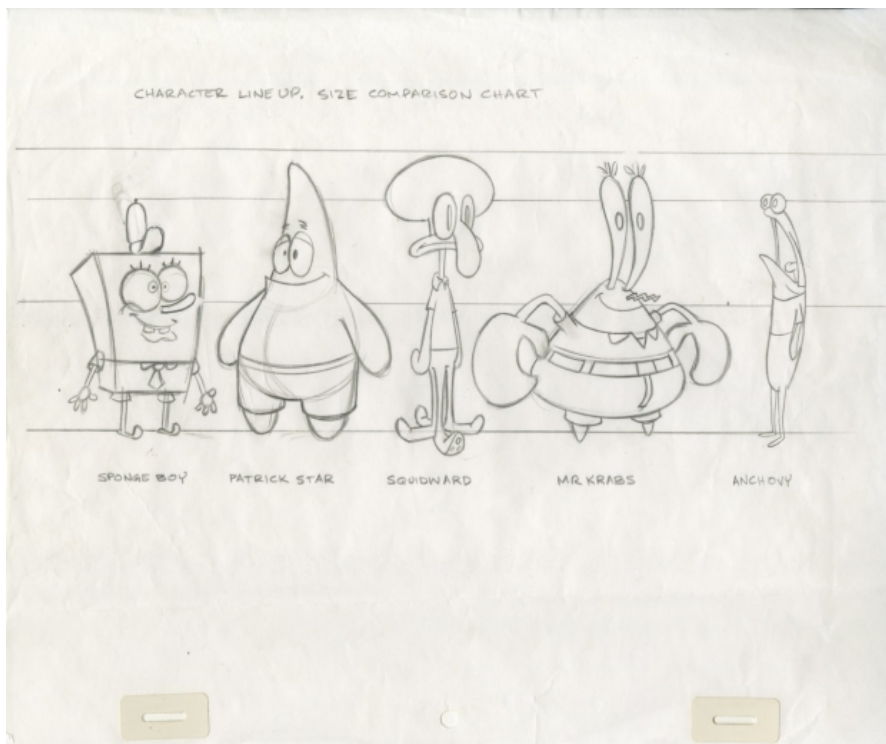
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In fact, the idea of "going bigger" with the show's comedy became a competition among all the members of the production crew.

"An atmosphere really formed where we all were always trying to one-up each other's jokes," recalls Waller. "But it was all very friendly competition. There was no denying when someone put together a joke or funny scene better than you because we'd all be laughing. It was great working with so many people whose only focus is just to be funny."

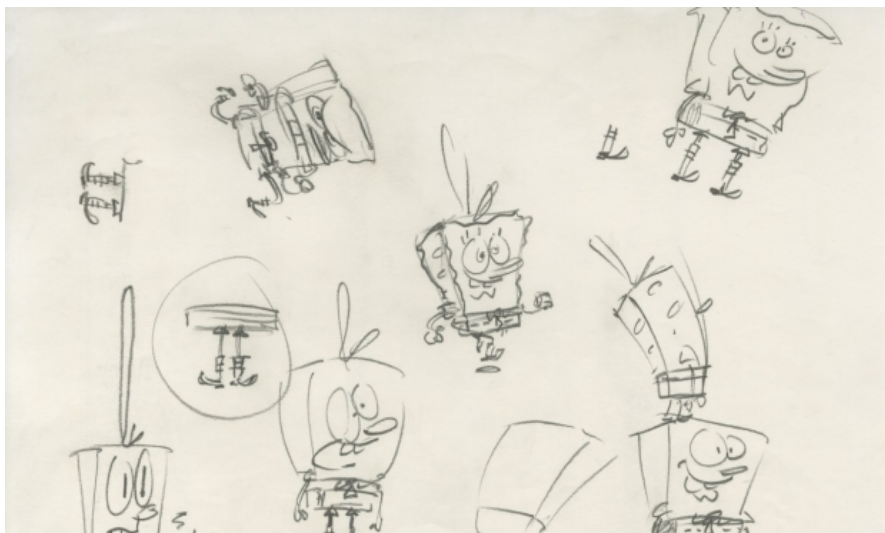


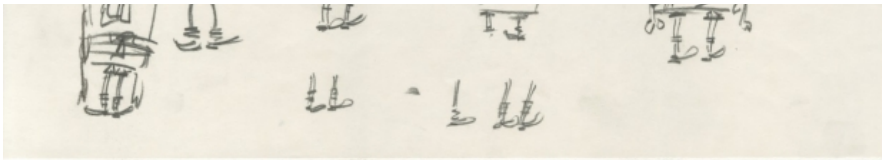
Bikini Bottom also gave the team a huge sandbox to play in, where the jokes are not reliant on pop culture. In fact, most of the comedy comes from many of these undersea characters being out of touch with whatever is going on above the water.

"Bikini Bottom is sort of this cargo cult made of all the debris that's floated down over the years," says Ceccarelli. "And none of them really know what these things are. No one's seen a record player, so they make it a house. It's universal humor. You don't have to know what was happening with such-and-such celebrity at such-and-such time to get the jokes. I think that's why the catalog of the show still stands up and what's made it so timeless."

But SpongeBob isn't all holes and hilarity. At the core of this sponge and his show is a surprising amount of heart that has given this character and his underwater universe plenty of longevity and ability to soak up the fandom of multiple generations.

"In the middle of all these characters chock-full of foibles is SpongeBob, who just wants to be friends with everyone and has this ability to see the best in everybody," notes Waller. "He just wants everybody to get along. That whole first season was just such a joy to work on. SpongeBob was such a good and sweet animal. I had so much fun."





The timeless nature of *SpongeBob* can also be attributed to its ability to flex and flow with the changing times of animation technology. In the past decade, the usually 2D *SpongeBob* and its characters have made appearances in stop-motion and 3DCG, both fully animated and mixed with live-action; SpongeBob and Patrick even made industry history at the **2024 Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards** this month as the first-ever animated hosts of a televised award ceremony.

"I remember working on the Season Eight episode, 'It's a SpongeBob Christmas,' which was the first time the show really dived into stop-motion and that just blew my mind," shares Ceccarelli. "From then on, we've tried to work with Screen Novelties any chance we get, at least once a year."

One might imagine that, with a property like *SpongeBob SquarePants*, lovingly raised in the Nickelodeon spotlight for 19 years, the passing of its creator would leave a dark cloud hanging over the ongoing production. But Ceccarelli and Waller say the mission didn't end, it just changed. They've now been tasked with continuing to make good use of lessons learned from Hillenburg by passing along that knowledge to a new group of artists, who together, keep *SpongeBob SquarePants*' future looking just as bright as ever.



"Even though he's not around, you still have Steve on your shoulder, and we're always thinking, 'What would Steve do? What would Steve say?'" says Waller. "You remember all the rules that he put down and the lessons that still persist. I'm sure, if he could see the things we've done with CG, he'd have plenty of notes and edits, I'm sure. But I also think he would have really gotten a kick out of it."



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.

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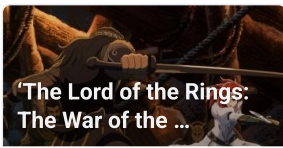
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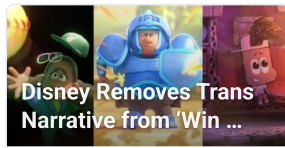
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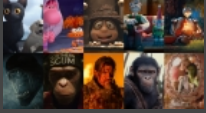
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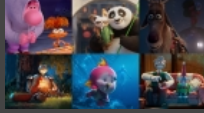
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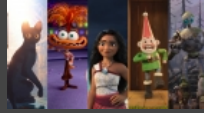
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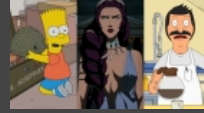
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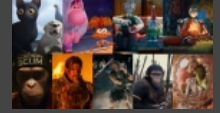
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