Mike Judge Does Silicon Valley

FOR HIS NEW HBO SHOW, THE *BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD* CREATOR AIMS HIS SNARK CANNON AT THE STARTUP SCENE.
BY STEVEN LECKART

📷 ZACHARY SCOTT

THE GOOLYBIB PARTY is well under way, and you can smell the self-congratulatory excess. The company, which says it "disrupts digital media" to "make the world a better place," has just been purchased by Google for $200 million, and its cofounders are celebrating their good fortune with an extravagant bash in a sleek modern mansion. The place is packed with signifiers of contemporary success: reflecting pools, floor-to-ceiling windows, white leather sofas. Venture capitalists work the crowd, chatting up billionaires. Guys in hoodies are slurping liquid shrimp from test tubes (it's a Wylie Dufresne concoction, $200 a quart). A dozen twentysomething dudes play *Battlefield 4* on an ultrathin 55-inch flatscreen. Kid Rock gyrates in a fog-machine cloud atop an elaborately lit stage in the backyard.

Just beyond the foyer, in the kitchen, Mike Judge—creator of such Gen X touchstones as *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *King of the Hill*, and *Office Space*—is hunched in a director's chair, sipping a Diet Mountain Dew and watching the scene unfold across three monitors. He's on this set, 360 miles south of Palo Alto, California, in the rolling hills northeast of Malibu, to shoot the opening scene of his new HBO series, *Silicon Valley*, a satire about a 26-year-old computer programmer whose algorithm inspires a bidding war between rival tech billionaires. (Judge's team calls it *Entourage* with Asperger's.) Judge is 51 but doesn't look it, dressed in a black hooded jacket and skate shoes, with clear blue eyes and a neatly cropped ebbing hairline. When he speaks, it's in a low half-mumble with a tinge of Texas drawl that falls somewhere between Hank Hill and Butt-Head, both of whom he voiced. Judge calls to an assistant director.

"Tell the videogame people to be less lively."

The details matter to Judge. A lot. Over the past two decades, he has channeled his obsession with verisimilitude to construct a series of finely wrought portraits of American sloth, venality, greed, and stupidity. In *Beavis and Butt-Head*, his two teen headbanger couch potatoes sniffed glue, played with live grenades, deep-fried rodents at their fast-food job—and embodied stultified TV-watching America. He seeded *Office Space*, his 1999 live-action send-up of cubicle culture, with artifacts of workplace banality—a whiteboard with a "planning to plan" flowchart, finicky copy machines, tortuously passive-aggressive bosses, and endless paperwork no one actually reads. For *Idiocracy* in 2006, he extrapolated his observations about American anti-intellectualism to forecast a dystopian future where the president is a former professional wrestler, agricultural crops are irrigated with energy drink, and Academy Awards are bestowed on a film that consists of 90 minutes of farting.

Now Judge is turning his astringent gaze on Silicon Valley—which feels like a particularly ripe target right now. We live in a time when top programmers have agents, just like professional athletes. When Snapchat's CEO turns down a $3 billion acquisition offer and is rumored to be dating Taylor Swift. When Sean Parker spares no expense to throw a Hobbit-themed wedding among

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MIKE JUDGE'S LOWBROW HUMOR GENIUS

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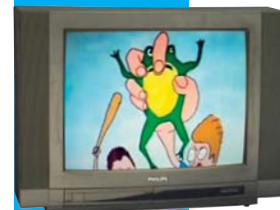
Frog Baseball, 1992
A two-minute cartoon featuring a pair of teen headbangers named Beavis and Butt-Head who chuckle incessantly and annihilate an amphibian.

Beavis and Butt-Head, 1993–1997
The iconic MTV series featuring those moronic teen wasteoids mocking music videos, huffing paint thinner, and repeatedly playing with "FIRE! FIRE!"

King of the Hill, 1997–2010
An animated satire of middle-class America that ran for 259 episodes, centering on a beer-bellied, conservative, football-fanatic Texan dad who sells propane and propane accessories.

Office Space, 1999
Based on Judge's first animated short, this live-action film lampoons cubicle culture, spoofs TGI Fridays, and depicts disgruntled IT workers beating a finicky computer printer.

90

Idiocracy, 2006
Set in an IQ-challenged dystopian future where crops are irrigated with energy drink (Brawndo, the thirst mutilator!), this live-action satire is an unforgiving critique of American consumerism and anti-intellectualism.

Extract, 2009
Judge sympathizes with a straitlaced boss whose dream of selling his artificial-flavor company goes up in smoke when a factory accident causes an employee to lose a testicle.

the redwoods. It's hard to imagine material more in need of the Judge treatment. "Anytime you've got self-important, pompous, powerful people, it's always fun to take a shit on them," says Alec Berg, a writer, director, and executive producer on *Silicon Valley*, whose credits include *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

But *Silicon Valley* isn't just a dyspeptic takedown. Like *Office Space* and *Idiocracy* before it, the show focuses on an intrepid everyman trying to hold on to his individuality and ingenuity against the forces that would crush that spirit—in this case, rapacious investors, corporate megalomaniacs, and visionary gasbags. It's a theme that hits close to home for Judge. When he was 23, before he drew his first animation cel, he worked as a miserable test engineer at a Silicon Valley startup called Parallax, which sold $4,500 interface cards for some of the first high-resolution graphics screens. In that way, *Silicon Valley* is a kind of homecoming for Judge, a return to the industry that helped forge his skeptical worldview.

But first he has to refine the details—and that means toning down the overly energetic gamers. "Very rarely does Hollywood get engineers right," Judge says. "Instead you see some underwear model spouting a bunch of tech babble. Having been on the other side, I just don't want to be responsible for another one of those."

FOR A GUY WHO HAS SPUN WILDLY POPULAR stories based on workplace drudgery, it should come as no surprise that Judge always wanted to be his own boss. In 1985, after graduating from UC San Diego as a physics major, he considered starting a toy company. He and a friend had won best project in Physics 121 for programming a tiny microprocessor-controlled car able to balance objects on top of itself. He also considered producing music or performing sketch comedy.

But Judge found himself halfheartedly donning the gray Men's Warehouse suit his parents had given him for graduation and looking for a regular job. He landed one at a Southern California military subcontractor, programming electronic test systems for the F-18 fighter jet. Poring over schematics in a cubicle was mind-numbing. Judge didn't last long. In 1987 he followed his girlfriend to Sunnyvale, California, the heart of Silicon Valley, cramming everything he owned into his Toyota pickup. He was hired at Parallax, one of about 40 employees.

A day in, when a coworker refused to let Judge borrow his schematics, he knew he'd made a huge mistake. "I kind of laughed like he was joking," says Judge, who deadpans his coworker's uncooperative tone: "I'm serious. I'm tired of people taking them, and they don't bring them back. You cannot borrow them." (This exchange will sound familiar to anyone who remembers Milton, the red-stapler-obsessed stooge in *Office Space*.)

On Judge's second Monday, he called in sick (he called in sick three more Mondays during his two-and-a-half-month tenure). He had no rapport with his coworkers:

They loved the Grateful Dead; he was into Run DMC. (Judge's rap obsession features prominently in *Office Space*, which opens on a skinny white programmer rapping along to Scarface's "No Tears.") And while Judge couldn't wait to leave the office every day, his colleagues habitually put in many extra hours. "It really felt like a cult. The people I met were like Stepford Wives," Judge says. "They were true believers in something, and I don't know what it was."

Judge couldn't stand it, so he quit and toured as the upright bass player in a blues band. The now-legendary story of how he found his way to animation begins in Dallas. In 1989, after becoming fascinated by some animation cels he saw hanging in a movie theater, he bought himself a 1950s 16-mm Bolex camera for $200. He didn't even know how to load the film. But like any good engineer, he tinkered. He shot a few animated sequences, and when the film came back from the lab, he anxiously ran it through a projector. "I was like, oh shit, it looks like a cartoon!" says Judge, who realized he could create his animations without oversight from anyone. "The clouds parted. Even if I have a job I don't like, this is something I can do. Nothing can stop me now."

In a couple of months he had completed his first animated short, *Office Space*. He lip-synched both characters using a stopwatch to map out every syllable, hit a shoe against his desk for footsteps, and composed his own theme music. When he was finished, he mailed a dozen VHS tapes to Comedy Central, MTV, and several animation festivals.

At the time, Judge was also taking graduate math courses at the University of Texas at Dallas. "I had a love-hate relationship with school that was 90 percent hate, 10 percent love," he says. If the pipe dreams didn't pan out, perhaps a master's degree—*disheartened sigh*—would help him land a job as a math teacher at a community college?

Comedy Central bought Judge's *Office Space* short in 1991. The next year, Judge made another short. *Frog Baseball* featured two obnoxious teenagers mocking infomercials, headbanging to Black Sabbath, and annihilating a frog. MTV loved it and hired Judge to produce a series with his two dumb, crude, thoughtless, ugly, sexist, self-destructive little wiener-heads. Judge had gone from workplace outsider to professional wreaker of cultural chaos.

IN THE SPRING OF 2012, Judge and his *King of the Hill* collaborators, John Altschuler and Dave Krinsky, met with Scott Rudin, who produced *The Social Network*, *Moneyball*, and *The Newsroom*. Rudin was interested in developing a new show about indie gamers and thought Judge would be a perfect fit. But Judge demurred, saying he wasn't familiar enough with the culture to pull it off. He was worried he wouldn't get the details right. "That's something that if you get wrong, you just get fried," Judge says.

But Rudin's suggestion got Judge thinking: Earlier Altschuler had had an idea for a farcical *Dallas*-style show about tech money in Silicon Valley. "Programming and engineers—that's a world I know. I know the personality types," Judge says.

In fact, the timing couldn't have been better. Though much of the country was still crawling out of an economic pit, Silicon Valley was booming. Ambitious people were flocking in, and Valley stars like Mark Zuckerberg, Larry Page, and Sergey Brin were pop culture icons. For a satirist like Judge, it was an environment rich with targets.

Judge called one of his high school best friends, whose nephew is a programmer at Google. Judge toured the company's Mountain View campus with Altschuler and Krinsky, interviewed the nephew, and visited Tout, a mobile-video startup in San Francisco's SoMa district, as well as two Los Angeles–based incubators. He hired one of his college roommates, a biophysics PhD who does computer simulations for pharmaceutical companies, to do a bit of consulting.

He also drew from his past brushes with Silicon Valley. In 2000, during the heyday of the dotcom bubble, startups had pitched Judge, trying to lure the creator of *Beavis and Butt-Head* away from TV to produce an animated Flash web series. "It was one person after another going, 'In two years, you will not own a TV set!' I had a meeting that was like a gathering of acolytes around a cult leader. 'Has he met Bill?' 'Oh, I'm the VP and I only get to see Bill once a month.' And then another guy chimed in, 'For 10 minutes, but the 10 minutes is amazing!'" (A similar scene appears in the *Silicon Valley* pilot.)

Judge, Altschuler, and Krinsky's 39-page script for the pilot detailed the story of a coder who stumbles into a technological breakthrough and finds himself in the middle of a tech-industry feeding frenzy. It was full of true-to-life touches. It name-dropped Codecademy, highlighted a Peter Thiel–like college-bashing billionaire, and proposed a juvenile app called Nip Alert, which does pretty much what you'd think it does.

After seeing the pilot, HBO ordered an eight-episode season. Judge didn't have time to celebrate; if he was going to get everything exactly right, he had more research to do. "I didn't want that uncomfortable feeling that I was bullshitting the audience," he says. "When gangsta rap was first coming out, I think it was Suge Knight or J. Prince who said, 'It's gotta work in the street.' It just felt like we had to have street cred."

To get it, they needed a credible, and credibly cool, tech breakthrough. Judge could have gone with a social media app or some other piece of digital fluff, but he wanted to posit a tech breakthrough that engineers would recognize as legitimately interesting. Early on he settled on compression technology—a way of crunching large music files into easily swappable nuggets.

He needed a product that was almost real. In the summer of 2013, Judge and Berg started meeting with Jonathan Dotan, a 33-year-old web entrepreneur and investor who became an associate producer on the show and was charged with creating a believable tech advance. Dotan assembled an ad hoc team with a CTO specializing in NoSQL databases, six programmers, a designer, and a lawyer from the VC firm Cooley. The team created a Scrum development board with 230 Post-its and a compression-specific database schema that was pinned up in the writers' room. ("Some of them were kind of like, 'Does it really matter, guys?'" Judge says.) And Dotan and his CTO seeded various build environments—GitHub, Jenkins, Pivotal Tracker—with accurate code and project specs that would eventually be uploaded to monitors on set. Dotan also brought in Tsachy Weissman, a Stanford professor and compression expert, and his graduate student Vinith Misra. The pair produced two pages of formulas and exposition that explained how a universal lossless-compression engine could theoretically constitute a breakthrough. They presented the paper to Judge in a 45-slide PowerPoint deck—but Judge kept interrupting. "I almost had to pinch myself," Misra says. "He was asking about checksums! It was a surprisingly specific question."

Judge's math chops impressed the cast as well. Comedian and *Portlandia* guest star Kumail Nanjiani, who plays a coder, recalls gazing at a messy whiteboard on set. His character was supposed to point to an algorithm for solving a basic problem. When Nanjiani asked out loud what the formula actually meant, Judge walked over, studied the whiteboard, and launched into a detailed explanation. "I was really shocked," Nanjiani says. "I was a computer science major. He's way more advanced than I am."

The cast provided an extra dose of geek cred. Five of the central actors are Upright Citizens Brigade alums, including Nanjiani, who cohosts the Indoor Kids, a Nerdist Industries videogame podcast; Thomas Middleditch (*The Wolf of Wall Street*), who plays GURPS, a universal role-playing system, in his spare time; standup T. J. Miller (*Cloverfield*, *Extract*), who developed his own profanity-laden app game, *Slang With Homies*; and Harvard-theater nerd Josh Brener (*Workaholics*, *The Internship*). Judge rewrote several of the characters in *Silicon Valley* based on the actors' personalities and their on-set improv. (When I visited the set, three of the leads were legitimately embarrassed to be caught playing Magic: The Gathering on the floor in their dressing room.)

The more you know about startup culture, the funnier *Silicon Valley* is. But you don't have to be an insider to appreciate Judge's humor. Posters adorn the hallways of tech giant Hooli with slogans like DISCIPLINE + PERSISTENCE = SUCCESS. An especially douchey boss wears shoes with articulated toes, and most characters—even extras—wear button-down shirts under hoodies. The show knocks tech icons ("Jobs was a poser. He didn't even write code.") and disses Radiohead for its negative stance on music-streaming services. In one scene, a tech CEO's spiritual consultant declines a seat because he's "not sitting this summer."

But *Silicon Valley* is also packed with inside jokes for engineers. At least one involves the late computer scientist David Huffman, who discovered bottom-up compression; another features Lena Söderberg, whose 1972 *Playboy* centerfold became the standard test image for compression algorithms. But the pièce de résistance is in the finale, and it involves "the most complicated dick joke ever told." The diagrams on the whiteboard were drawn by Misra and Judge himself, and not only are they mathematically sound, they support the punch line. "Mike was standing there telling me how much detail had gone into the dick drawings," says Martin Starr, the spectacled deadpan from *Freaks and Geeks* and *Party Down* who plays a bearded LaVeyan Satanist and system architect. "We were laughing, but he was serious. There was no joke."

IT'S THE WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS and Judge is wrapping up principal shooting on *Silicon Valley*. His production designer has faithfully re-created TechCrunch Disrupt, the San Francisco startup conference, on a Culver City soundstage on the same lot where *Citizen Kane* was shot. The scene is packed with 82 tech startups—24 of which are real. The companies have brought their own banners, T-shirts, tchotchkes, and pitch decks and set up shop next to the fakes. When tech journalist Kara Swisher arrives for a cameo, many of the real CEOs pitch her—for real.

"There have been so many life-imitates-art moments," Judge says, rocking slowly in a black executive chair in his production office, munching on a bag of Cheetos. While he was researching the script, he sent Dotan to present his fake company's fake pitch deck to real VCs for feedback. "They said, yeah, we would invest in that," Judge says.

But perhaps the greatest life-imitates-art element is the fact that Judge himself has become something of a startup CEO. But Judge does it his way. His indie production company, Ternion Pictures, which he cofounded with Altschuler and Krinsky, runs lean. When Judge made *Extract* for a modest $8 million—one-fifth the budget of a typical Hollywood comedy—he raised private financing so he could retain more control.

"I started out making these little cartoons, working on my own, and suddenly I'm in charge of 60 people," Judge says. "I don't like telling people what to do. But I do really like building something and making it work."
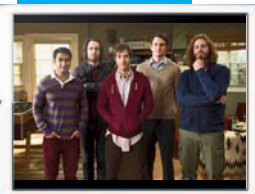
Pied Piper
Kumail Nanjiani, Martin Starr, Thomas Middleditch, Zach Woods, and T. J. Miller play the underdogs of *Silicon Valley*. Their startup, Pied Piper, has something tech giant Hooli wants.
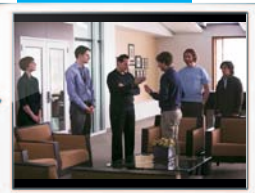
Hooli
In this scene, the Hooli CEO (played by Matt Ross) offers Pied Piper's founder $10 million for his company. The founder flees and ultimately pukes in a trash can.