THE least interesting thing to say about season 4 of *Rick and Morty* is that it is, generally, both good and bad in the ways that the show’s previous seasons have been good and bad. At its best, it is smart, tightly-written, and searingly funny, alternately experimenting with and lampooning the devices of science-fiction and advancing simple but compelling characters along a series of wildly imaginative conflicts. The breadth of literary and cultural history it simultaneously draws from and skewers is impressive and probably as enjoyable for the seasoned SF stalwart as the novice or newcomer, with this season variously digesting *Indiana Jones*, Ernest Hemingway, *Batman*-esque acid vats, *Akira!*, heist movies, *Edge of Tomorrow*, and more. At worst, the season is so loaded with references it becomes difficult for even the conscientious viewer to piece each episode together. Luckily, though, the episodes move at such a breakneck pace that this turns out mostly not to matter very much. Once the viewer settles into the experience, *Rick and Morty* becomes a kind of gamified television, unspooling familiar or almost-familiar references every few seconds.

Of course, this referentiality has been the series’ all-but-explicit subject matter since its inception. *Rick and Morty* has always been self-consciously about itself—or rather, about its own reflexive relationship with science fiction as a genre as well as the conventions of medium, character, plot, and so forth. The formula of a typical episode goes something like this: begin with a well-known media property or fictional trope, jam it together with a handful of other references, lay them out along an archetypal SF plot, and season heavily with complex, depressive, and/or fourth-wall-breaking metahumor. If the show’s aesthetic architecture is an improvisatory jumble of pastiche, reference, and imitation, its narrative engine is fueled by recursion, repetition, and intertextuality. Indeed, much of *Rick and Morty’s* charm comes from its celebration of its own intellectual indebtedness, genially rearranging its own source code with the bottomless delight of a child immersed in a Lego-and-Erector-set playworld. The result is a show which delights in endlessly plumbing its own increasingly reflexive relationship to its forebears, obsessively showing its work.
while at the same time acknowledging that work as at least partially meaningless.

What is novel about this season in particular, however, is that its metafictional churn is applied most strenuously not only to SF as a genre but also to the show itself—or, more specifically, to the tension between its status as both a piece of art and a commercial media product. For example, the season’s sixth episode, “Never Ricking Morty,” finds the titular pair trapped aboard a “Story Train” running along an endlessly looping track—a direct reference to series co-creator Dan Harmon’s famous story circle. While aboard the metaphor, the pair must puzzle their way through a variety of literalized narrative devices to “break the fifth wall” with their “story potential.” The episode concludes with grandpa and grandson happily zapped back to the Smith family home, entranced with what we see now to be not an extradiegetic prison but rather a simple toy train Morty purchased for Rick, who rhapsodizes:

You did the most important thing: you bought something. . . . Your only purpose in life is to buy and consume merchandise, and you did it. You went into a store, an actual honest to God store. . . . And you bought something. You didn’t ask questions or raise ethical complaints. You just looked straight into the bleeding jaws of capitalism, and said, “Yes daddy, please.” I’m so proud of you. I only wish you could’ve bought more.

But when the suddenly train derails, Rick’s mood sours:

Didn’t you hear what I said?! Consume, Morty! Nobody’s out there shopping with this fucking virus!

The episode thus concludes with an elaborately-constructed meditation on the relationship between commodity status, narrative logic, and audience satisfaction—with a character all but shouting the conclusion at the audience in the final thirty seconds—built atop an impossibly contemporary reference.

Such moments are par for the Rick and Morty course: speedrun absurdism maintaining its forward momentum by ruthlessly undercutting its own sentiment. Of course, it is not surprising that an “adult cartoon” should aim to soothe its audiences’ own neuroses by layering bleak cynicism, one-degree-shy-of-treacly moralizing, and wide-ranging pop culture knowledge (BoJack Horseman works in much the same way). Yet, despite its restless oscillation between desire and disdain for true feeling, Rick and Morty mostly manages to remain entertaining and lighthearted rather than
slipping into pointless nerd solipsism.

This is not to say that solipsism is absent, of course, although it’s less a property of any specific part of the show itself and more the cumulative impression the series leaves on your brain. In the show’s best and most pleasurable moments, it plays like a hyperdrive version of *A Thousand and One Nights* (a comparison which the characters all but make themselves). Four seasons in, however, Harmon’s relentless equation of anti-social cynicism with sophistication and intelligence has started to wear through the show’s adventure-of-the-week format in a way that is harder and harder to ignore. In those moments, *Rick and Morty* feels less like a lighthearted romp through SF history and more like asymptotically performative snark, an affectation which unfortunately registers less as scandalous or risqué and more as vaguely annoying. (For instance, the season’s fourth episode includes an incestuous dragon-powered “ten-slut soul-orgy,” a phrase which is as tiresome to comprehend as it was to write.)

When all is said and done, however, the show’s most important assets aren’t its willingness to offend or the breadth of its references, but rather its creators’ pairing of witty inventiveness with a complex take on media and intertextuality. Hopefully Harmon and his collaborators can keep drawing from them for years to come.