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Office: Mockumentary style refreshing

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obliviousness. The scene remains funny but loses depth. He's no longer a grown adult pitifully seeking approval, but a lunatic without a cause. While making the audience cringe at the character's inappropriate behavior was the comedic staple of the original, it is Carell's performance that feels awkward, not the character.

Though Carell's performance digresses, the show's original concept remains intact and maintains a degree of comedic poignancy. The bland monotones of the staid office and the quiet desperation of the characters capture the maddening absurdity of contemporary office culture. In the NBC pilot, Jim Halpert, a sales rep played by John Krasinski, blankly describes his job selling paper before admitting he is boring himself by talking about it.

He passes the time by flirting with the receptionist, Pam Beesly (played by Jenna Fischer) and shares his cubicle with the maddening Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson), who takes his

meaningless job extremely seriously.

In the pilot, Wilson showed potential for making the character his own rather than inviting comparisons to Mackenzie Crook, who memorably played the same role in the BBC version (the character's name is changed from Gareth Keenan). Whereas Crook played the role of sycophant with a quiet creepiness, Wilson creates a louder and more confident yes-man.

The adaptation keeps the same painfully long, awkward pauses that were essential to the original. But because the American version clocks in at 22 minutes rather than the 30 minutes devoted to the BBC episodes, the rest of the show feels hurried.

So far, the show hasn't strayed from the racy topics of the original. A preview revealed an office diversity-training day in which an African-American diversity trainer introduces himself as Mr. Brown, and Carell's character assures him, "I will not call you that."

While later episodes will diverge from the original, the premiere was a

near carbon copy of the BBC pilot, with certain cultural references adapted for an American audience.

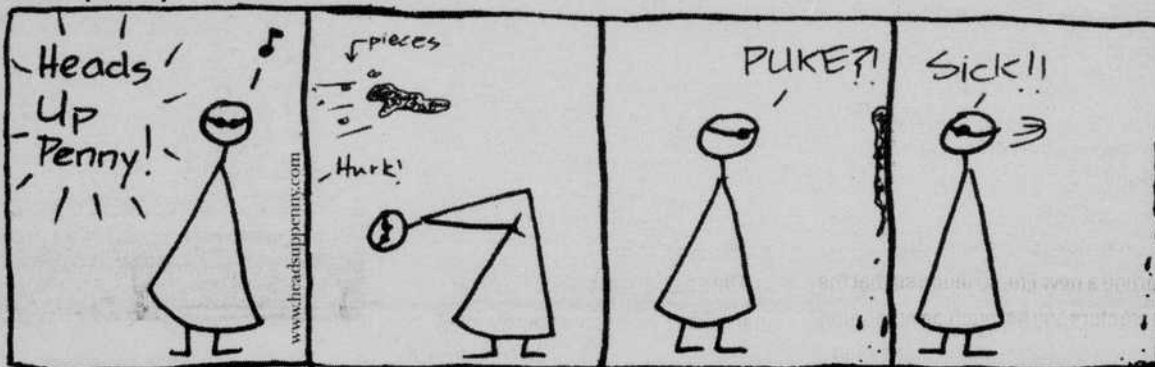
Though the British version played on BBC American and is available on DVD, there's a large audience unfamiliar with it. Neophytes free from the burden of comparing the two versions will find the show's mockumentary style refreshing compared with the predictable punch line approach of standard prime-time comedy.

But the prospect of the new show finding an audience large enough to please NBC seems unlikely. HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and "Sex and the City" proved that American audiences can handle comedy without punch lines or laugh tracks, but FOX's "Arrested Development" has proved the phenomenon is better left to cable, which doesn't require the mammoth audiences that major networks do.

"The Office" airs Tuesdays at 9:30 p.m. on NBC.

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Heads up Penny



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