

Review: Apple-centric 'Modern Family' goes beyond gimmicks

February 24 2015, by Anick Jesdanun



This photo provided by Twentieth Century Fox Television shows, from left, Julie Bowen, as Claire Dunphy; Ed O'Neill, as Jay Pritchett; Adam Devine, as Andy; Sarah Hyland, as Haley Dunphy; and Ty Burrell as Phil Dunphy, in a scene from the "Connection Lost" episode of "Modern Family." The episode, which takes place entirely on Claire's MacBook computer, airs Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, at 9 p.m. EST on ABC. (AP Photo/Twentieth Century Fox Television, File)

(AP)—When "Modern Family" producers revealed that they recorded this week's episode entirely with the iPhone and other Apple products, I was skeptical. I've seen too many good shows decline in quality over time. I worried this 6-year-old show was resorting to a gimmick.

Those doubts quickly dissipated as I watched. The digital medium offered a fresh, clever way of storytelling—with jokes and plot twists not possible with the documentary-style approach that "Modern Family" typically uses.

The episode, "Connection Lost," takes place entirely on Claire Dunphy's MacBook computer. As Claire waits for a flight home, she tries to reach her eldest daughter, Haley, following a big fight. Claire (Julie Bowen) uses Apple's FaceTime video-calling software to communicate with the rest of her family as they try to track down Haley (Sarah Hyland). You see those interactions as Claire experiences them on her computer. The episode airs on ABC at 9 p.m. ET on Wednesday.

Actual iPhones—and to a lesser degree, iPads and Macs—were used to record the characters as they would appear to one another on FaceTime. As anyone who has used FaceTime, Skype and other Internet calling services well knows, video calls are sometimes choppy. That's especially true when Wi-Fi is congested, as would be expected at an airport. Producers did a good job of replicating that effect in post-production. True-to-life, characters look distorted in one scene as they held their devices very close up. I got some good laughs over that.

Another smart move was letting the MacBook's features set the scene. You know Claire is at an airport in Chicago when she chooses "O'Hare Int'l Airport WiFi" in the pull-down menu. Claire then turns to the Messages app to write Haley, "I'm at O'Hare Airport. Boarding in 20 minutes." (That happens to be how much time is left in the episode.) You get a flashback of Claire's fight with Haley when Claire watches video of it on the Mac's iPhoto app.



This file photo provided by courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Television shows Julie Bowen, as Claire Dunphy, left, and Ty Burrell, as Phil Dunphy, in a scene from the "Connection Lost" episode of "Modern Family." The episode, which takes place entirely on Claire's MacBook computer, airs Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, at 9 p.m. EST on ABC. (AP Photo/Twentieth Century Fox Television, File)

Producers chose Apple products partly because their features are familiar to many people. Although there are more Windows and Android devices overall, there are so many manufacturers and models that viewers might have had a hard time following. Apple products are recognizable, even to people who use competing devices. Apple provided the gadgets used, but didn't pay for their inclusion.

The episode does take viewers beyond Apple. Claire visits Facebook and uses Yahoo Answers for help on filing a missing-person report. The Web browser generated much of the humor. Claire multitasked as she talked to various family members. After clicking on an ABC News article on a fire that resulted from a dryer vent, Claire added "vacuum dryer vent" to

her list of things to do. (The article, by the way, was fake. I checked.)

"Connection Lost" weaves in cultural technology trends, including people making calls from the toilet and kids having limited gadget time. Claire's dad, the oldest character in the show, has trouble understanding how FaceTime works. It was stereotypical, but I laughed anyway.

Producers turned to standard graphics to replicate the layout of the MacBook and its various apps. Video clips from Apple cameras were then inserted. Producers initially wanted to record all that on the Mac as a screen grab, but the quality wasn't good enough when projected on a high-definition TV.

The show took some creative liberties. Claire made FaceTime calls with multiple people at once. In reality, you're limited to one at a time. She also got to Google's Street View through a link on Apple's map. The two fierce rivals don't actually link to each other like that.

Producers also chose the iPhone's higher-quality rear cameras even though FaceTime calls use the front ones. Shots of Claire facing her Mac were done with an iPhone mounted above the Mac's camera. Not only does that produce sharper video, it's also more even with Claire's eye line. For other shots, camera crew were used to get the framing right, as a slight tilt could expose the fact that the set had no ceiling. Actors and actresses had their arms out to make it appear they were holding their phones.

I can overlook these cheats. The graphics were so realistic that I reached for my mouse once or twice to try to move a window—before remembering I was watching TV on my computer. I caught a lot more on repeat viewings.

Fun tip: Google the names that appear on Facebook, and pay attention to

suggestions that come up as Claire types in a search.

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