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Why 'Avatar The Last Airbender' Has Endured for Years



By Rachel Sandell

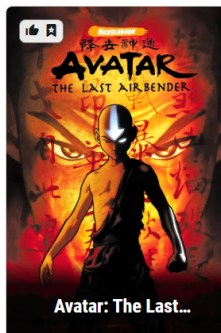
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Rachel Sandell is an experienced editor and proofreader with a love for language and storytelling. A graduate of the creative writing MFA program, The Rainier Writing Workshop, she is the author of five short stories and analyzes the different facets of fiction her spare time. She's also a huge...

SUMMARY

- *ATLA* commits to creating a rich, lore-filled world that makes sense and includes intricate details throughout the narrative.
- The show's detailed animation showcases different bending styles based on real-world martial arts, adding depth to the magic system.
- Despite being a kid's show, *ATLA* tackles mature themes like genocide, political complexity, and redemption arcs with nuance and respect for its audience.

It's been almost twenty years since the premiere, and we're still talking about *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. There's a reason the Nickelodeon cartoon has exploded into a franchise, including comics, book series, and the recently successful **live-action Netflix adaptation**, which was just **renewed for a second (and third!) season**. When it comes to nostalgic TV shows, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is unrivaled in its reign. Children's cartoons have a way of sticking around — but not only has *ATLA* endured throughout the years, it's become one of the best series of its time.



TV-17 Animation Action Adventure Fantasy

Release Date2005 - 2008-00-00

NetworkNickelodeon

ShowrunnerMichael Dante DiMartino

DirectorsGiancarlo Volpe, Ethan Spaulding, Lauren MacMullan, Dave Filoni,...

WritersTim Hedrick, Elizabeth Welch Ehasz, Joshua Hamilton, James...

Franchise(s)Avatar

Cast

Zach Tyler EisenAang (voice)

Mae WhitmanKatara

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'Avatar: The Last Airbender' Commits to Its Worldbuilding and Story

Creating an entire world with its own set of rules, structures, magic systems, and political atmospheres is a tall order for any fantasy story. There's a lot to consider while **building literal worlds**, but *Avatar: The Last Airbender* commits fully to creating a **setting** that makes complete sense and includes intricately woven lore throughout the main narrative.



On the surface, *ATLA* is about Aang (**Zach Tyler Eisen**), the last of the Air Nomads and the last airbender as he wakes up from a 100-year nap frozen in an iceberg to find that the world has descended into chaos while he was away. As the Avatar, a reincarnating spirit whose role is to keep the balance of the world and maintain



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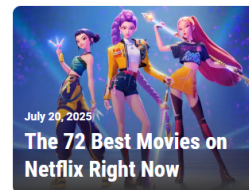
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was away. As the Avatar, a reincarnating spirit whose role is to keep the balance of the world and maintain peace between the four nations and elements, Aang feels the weight of the world as he and his friends, Katara (Mae Whitman) and Sokka (Jack DeSena), embark on a journey to learn all four elements (air, water, earth, and fire) to defeat the evil Fire Lord Ozai (Mark Hamill) before he destroys what's left of the free world, avoiding the raging banished prince Zuko (Dante Basco) along the way.

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On the surface, Aang's journey seems to be the typical children's show shenanigans, with much of Book One spent going on one-off adventures and helping to restore the balance in what little ways a 12-year-old unrealized Avatar can. But soon enough, the show begins to delve deeper into the lore of the Avatar and the world around him. Gradually, the viewer begins to realize, as early as Episode 3, that Aang's powers are linked to something much greater than just one silly kid. When Aang accidentally activates the Avatar spirit, the statues of past reincarnations begin to glow in temples all over the world. This hints at not just spiritual lore that connects all four nations, but also the existence of an entirely separate plane, the Spirit World.

Book Two sees Aang journey farther into the Earth Kingdom and meeting more conflicts that require even tougher decisions and more complicated political spheres, such as the Earth Kingdom stronghold Ba Sing Se, which maintains its peace by cutting itself off from the rest of the world and pretending that the Hundred-Year War doesn't exist — arresting anyone who brings it up.

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The deep lore and the thematic throughlines of the story aren't the only worldbuilding treasures to find in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The concept of bending itself is a simple enough magic system to understand (Water Tribe benders bend water, Fire Nation benders bend fire, Earth Kingdom benders bend earth, and the Air Nomads bend air, with several non-benders from each category scattered across the world), but bending is used in creative and gradually more intricate ways.

Bending water isn't relegated to just weaponizing your drinking water or a nearby river; it can be pulled from the moisture in the air, from plants and vines, and even manipulated within the bloodstream. Firebenders, if they are exceptionally good at self-control, can channel their energy into lightning. Some earthbenders can identify tiny grains of earth within metal and use that as a grip to bend the metal itself. Airbenders can manipulate the surrounding air to grant themselves super speed, flight, or, if they're strong enough, can suck the air from another person's lungs.

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Whereas children's media can be a bit more lenient on the amount of work it puts into a story (kids, while observant and smart, can be plenty entertained by interesting action and compelling characters alone), *ATLA* puts in the extra work to create a full, rich world built upon the pillars of the natural elements, pulling aspects of mysticism to create the underlying Spirit World, and explores its political nuances with care and great interest. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is already a step ahead of many other kid's shows by Episode 3, and it just keeps getting better.

'Avatar: The Last Airbender' Uses Intricately Detailed Animation





The four nations aren't only distinctive based on their bending elements or the color of their clothing. Benders of each origin use visual bending styles that are different from each other and based on real-world martial arts. This is **an effective way to visualize the magic system at work**, as well as give the worldbuilding more detail, as well as characterizing its benders, all at the same time. Some individual benders even have their own specific style as a bending subset.

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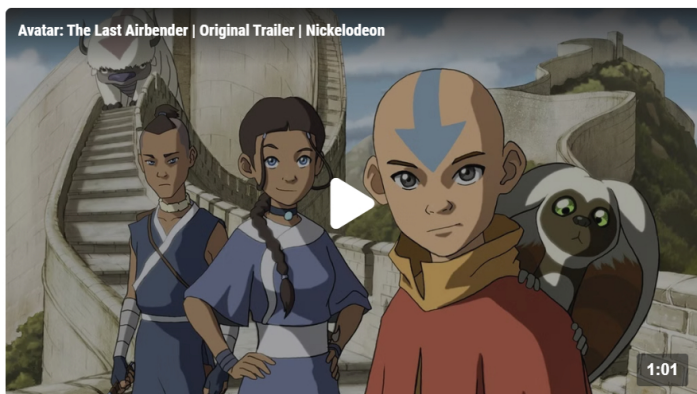
For example, airbenders are loosely based on Taoist monks, in both philosophy and martial art. It takes inspiration from the **Baguazhang style** and emphasizes avoiding and evading the enemy, a strong defensive style. The storyboards and animation were carefully designed to harken back to this type of martial art, adding in the manipulation of air as a result of the movements. All this combined creates the visual representation of bending. **The act of bending itself is beautifully animated**, no matter the type. Fights, army versus army battles, and individual duels are choreographed taking into consideration each type of bending involved, each character's specific style of bending, and the environment in which the fight occurs.

The animation also plays around with color, especially as it relates to worldbuilding. One instance that comes to mind is a moment toward the end of Book One, when the spirit of the moon, Tui, is put in danger. As soon as the enemy strikes, the moon overhead bleeds into a red hue, casting the following scenes in a dark red light. **When Tui is slain, the moon itself disappears**, casting the next scenes into gloomy grays and blacks, punctuated brutally and beautifully by the bright red and orange of nearby battling firebenders.

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There's a lot to be said about the character animation as well. Some moments see characters standing around while dialogue is lobbed back and forth, especially in the first season, but **when people are animated with movement, there's plenty of character and energy**. Fight scenes are peppered throughout the three-season series, usually with at least one per episode, and the animation never falters. No matter what type of bending (or nonbending) is being showcased, there's always something to admire in terms of animation and choreography.

'Avatar: The Last Airbender' Takes Its Audience Seriously



Though there are plenty of aspects to *Avatar: The Last Airbender* to praise (not all of which can be touched on in one single article), *ATLA*'s strongest quality, and the main reason for its endurance throughout the years, is its maturity. In terms of tone, characters, rating, and marketing, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is unquestioningly a kid's show (some of the humor makes this obvious as well). However, **the show doesn't limit itself to being enjoyable only for children**; adults have plenty of moments to admire as well. The series rarely talks down to its audience, and it explores themes that aren't exactly commonplace for children to consume.

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Kids aren't usually exposed to the concept of genocide in the third episode of a Nickelodeon cartoon. The political atmosphere of Ba Sing Se doesn't scream childlike, especially as the city is flooded with refugees seeking shelter from a world-devastating war. **Even the time-tested concept of good versus evil, a mainstay of children's media, is put to the test.** Aang's teachings and beliefs as a monk tell him that killing in any capacity is wrong, yet everyone around him, including his past lives, insists that murdering the undeniably despicable Fire Lord Ozai is unavoidable and essential for the rebuilding of a peaceful world.

Perhaps the best example of *ATLA*'s maturity and nuance comes in the form of one of the most widely popular and realistically portrayed redemption arcs in media. **Zuko spends most of his interactions** with Aang and his friend group as an antagonist, hunting the Avatar so he can return home "with honor." Zuko solidly cemented himself as the villain of Book One; however, by the time Episode 12, "The Storm," occurred, Zuko was already a far more layered antagonist than a viewer would expect. In a flashback, we learn that Zuko's scar, as well as his banishment, is a punishment from his father, Ozai, in retribution for speaking out for the safety of Fire Nation soldiers. **His backstory is told intermittently with Aang's**, simultaneously introducing sympathetic qualities to his character and drawing parallels between him and the protagonist. From this moment onward, Zuko's redemption is hinted at, and the viewer can see its beginnings, especially continuing into Book Two.

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The best part of **Zuko's redemption arc** is that it doesn't come quickly or easily. When given the chance to redeem himself in "Crossroads of Destiny," Book Two's finale, he once again chooses to side with his father and betrays even the trust of his loyal uncle. With Book Three starting out seeing Zuko getting everything he's ever wanted, he's still angrier than ever. Through his failings, and with the support of his loved ones, Zuko begins to see the error of his ways and makes the steps to correct them. Through him, and through several other notable characters (Sokka is an underrated, yet perfect example of stellar character development as well), *ATLA* uses its character development and understanding of nuance to **tell a mature story that respects the intelligence of its audience.**

Avatar: The Last Airbender's wide audience appeal (to kids and adults alike) has cemented it as **one of the most popular and praised shows of its kind.** *ATLA* endures because it commits fully to its story and worldbuilding, uses animation as a medium to tell that story creatively, and is unafraid to tackle complex and nuanced topics, all while still being a fun watch for all ages.

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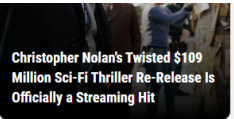
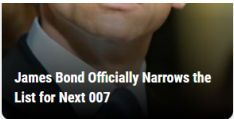
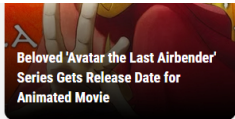
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