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Ordinary lives – extraordinary journeys:

Television entertainment from game shows to reality TV

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Introduction: Thinking about texts

This article defends the thesis that game shows were a key influence in the development of reality TV, and understanding of the latter depends on our knowledge of the former. The thesis is developed in two parts. Game shows are a living paradox of media and communication studies: they rank among the most popular TV programmes yet remain the least analysed by the discipline. This oversight has created a knowledge gap that the first section addresses. What are game shows made of? What are the core elements that distinguish them from any other genre? This research identifies these elements and analyses the way they combine to form stories that are unique, yet formatable and repeatable.

The second section examines the relationship between game shows and reality programming. While it is often assumed that game shows are of no cultural significance, this article argues that they played a central role in the evolution of reality TV. It highlights the similarities between the two genres and demonstrates that the latter adopted many of the storytelling techniques pioneered by the former.

Game shows are rarely analysed and when they are it is in isolation from other genres. Thus, this research seeks to make a double contribution to media and communication studies: it addresses a knowledge gap and thinks about game shows in relation to other types of programmes. It aims to take game show research out of its silo

by thinking about the genre in the context of the development of a televisual discourse.

From a theoretical perspective, this research applies a sociological approach to discourse on genre theory (Chalaby, 1996). A genre conceived as discourse is a historical and intertextual category. Texts remain the object of analysis but are approached through the discursive practices that shape them and the discourse they are part of. This article focuses on the storytelling *practices* that characterize various genres, relying on the practice-oriented branch of narrative analysis as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Vladimir Propp or Tzvetan Todorov. Key texts include *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (Vogler, 1998), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 2008) and, for television, *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story* (Yorke, 2013).

This article uses a mix of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of interviews with UK-based TV executives and producers conducted over many years while researching TV formats. It took me several years to connect the dots and realise the significance of this material, hence the time gap. Only after a long incubation period did I read these interviews from a fresh perspective. Secondary sources include the two most influential texts written on the subject (Fiske, 1987, Whannel, 1992), more recent scholarship (e.g., Hoerschelmann, 2006; Holmes, 2008), and works written by practitioners. This article is written from a British viewpoint. Illustrations are provided by British shows and transnational TV formats are identified by their British titles. Only the original network that aired the programme first is mentioned.

'What will you do with the money?': Understanding game shows

Raymond Boyle's observation that TV entertainment is under-researched still stands for

game shows (Boyle, 2018: 6), and only a few attempts have been made to understand how they work. Much of the literature focuses on what they represent and finds them wanting. They are either derided as trivial and vulgar or vilified for promoting individualism, reinforcing existing social power structures and glorifying consumerism. Other scholars place game shows in the context of policy, citing them as an example or cause of the erosion of public service media and the commercialization of television (e.g., The Committee on Broadcasting, 1962; Wayne, 2000; Freedman, 2003).[1] While scholarship has picked up, game shows are often either overlooked or ostracized. They never figure in television studies and popular culture textbooks, and Whannel's remark that 'so many books on television ignore quiz and game shows entirely' remains true to this day (Whannel, 1992: 183).

The purpose of this research is to look at game shows for what they are and what they do. This section analyses them from within, considering how they tell a story and create drama without a script. In doing so, it identifies three primary and three secondary constituents: the engine, the challenging journey and ordinary people as contestants; the host, celebrities and ritualistic moments. These elements define game shows as a genre, and the way a programme orders them distinguishes one game show from another. In brief, a game show *uses engines and orders story-building elements to form a distinctive narrative progression that mixes drama and playfulness*.

The first constituent part is the *engine*, which sets the gameplay and structure of the contest. Do contestants battle against each other (e.g., *The Weakest Link,* BBC Two; *Impossible*, BBC Two), or against a team of experts (e.g. *The Chase*, ITV 1; *Eggheads*, BBC Two)? Is the play interactive with contestants playing head-to-head (e.g., *Unbeatable*, BBC One), or in succession as in *Mastermind* (BBC One)? Do contestants

play individually, in pairs (*Pointless,* BBC Two), in teams (*University Challenge*, ITV), or with their families (*In with a Shout*, ITV1; *Family Fortunes*, ITV1)? How many contestants are involved in the gameplay at any one time: one (*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* ITV1) (henceforth *Millionaire*), four (*The Chase*, ITV1), five (*Mastermind*), twenty-one (*Impossible*, BBC Two), one hundred (*The 1% Club*, ITV1), or 456 (*Squid Game: The Challenge*, Netflix)? How many contestants pass each round and what is the gameplay mechanic used to eliminate them? How many rounds are there, and what does the grand finale look like?

The engine sets the nature of the trials and the *challenge* at hand. Both Fiske and Whannel list prizes as game show ingredients (Fiske, 1987: 222-3; Whannel, 1992: 189-91), but what matters most is the *journey* to reach the prize. According to Paul Smith, the creator of *Millionaire*, the show's appeal does not reside in the fact that people can win a million pounds, 'it's seeing people under genuine pressure … making a life changing decision' (Smith, interview 2009). Everything *Millionaire* does is designed to support the drama, from music to lighting, and the two cameras permanently pointed at the contestant miss none of it:

> Of course it is a drama, it's a human drama. And what is most exciting about it is seeing these people wrestle against the questions, the tactics that they're going to use. Are they going to use a lifeline or are they not, and when they do use a lifeline are they going to take any notice of the information that is provided to them, or are they going to ignore it, certainly in the case of phone a friend and ask the audience. And are they going to have the guts to go all the way, or the foolishness to go all the way depending on how one looks at it, and so on (Smith, interview 2009).

Millionaire places much emphasis on the life-changing opportunity on offer but game shows with symbolic prizes work equally well because contestants have to display skills and/or knowledge to win the contest. Many games incorporate fate in their gameplay (Holmes, 2008: 16, 108-111), but few are based on fate alone because winning a lottery does not constitute a journey.[2] Game shows tell a story because contestants summon their courage, take on a challenge and fight to win.

Game shows can broadly be divided between those that set physical or intellectual challenges (a few are hybrid). Programmes such as *Ninja Warrior UK* (ITV1) or *The Cube* (ITV1) set strength and agility trials, but most game shows quiz contestants.[3] Questions are among the few components that are scripted and contribute to set the tone and atmosphere of the programme (Holmes, 2008: 86-117). As John Fiske writes, 'an entirely different category of knowledge… produces entirely different sorts of shows' (Fiske, 1987: 219). On the basis of his classification, four types of shows can be distinguished. *Jeopardy!* (Channel 4), *Mastermind* and *University Challenge* seek academic knowledge. 'Everyday' knowledge is more accessible to the general public and includes a fair amount of popular culture; it is tested in games such as *Wheel of Fortune* (ITV) or *Tipping Point* (ITV1). Shows such as *Family Fortunes* or *Play Your Cards Right* (ITV), which seek the most common answers to survey-based questions, test contestants' 'knowledge of the people' (Fiske, 1987: 220). *Question of Sport* (BBC One) and Ken Bruce's *PopMaster* - until recently BBC Radio 2's flagship show - test specialist knowledge. Some quiz shows pose different challenges: alphabetic and numerical skills for *Countdown* (Channel 4) and *Limitless Win* (ITV1), lateral thinking for *Only Connect* (BBC Two), and logic for *The 1% Club*. Many game shows increase

the difficulty of questions as each round passes, a mechanism that helps to build tension.

The engine determines the prize money structure and its role in the gameplay. The prize can be symbolic (*Mastermind*) or life changing (*Millionaire*). *The $64,000 Question* best exemplifies the long tradition of US game shows with large prizes but the trend was resisted in the UK by successive broadcasting authorities (Whannel, 1992; Hoerschelmann, 2006; Holmes, 2006).[4] The prize plays a passive role when it remains unchanged throughout the process and is active when the amount of cash a contestant can win varies throughout the process: *The Wall* (BBC One) is so designed that contestants can win up to around £1 million but never get near this sum as their prize goes up or down depending on skills and luck. In most game shows, contestants build up the prize they can win. *Million Pound Drop* (Channel 4) innovated by reversing the process: contestants are given £1 million at the start and the challenge is not to lose it. Whilst the process seems counterintuitive, tension arises as contestants 'desperately try to keep hold of it' (Flynn, interview 2014).

While the representational qualities of documentaries have been acknowledged, it is often forgotten that game shows have featured *ordinary people* at a time when they were far and few between on TV screens (Whannel, 1992: 193-5; Holmes, 2008: 118-39). All game shows feature ordinary people - it being given that ordinariness is a constructed category (Teurlings, 2001) – but some make contestants the focus of attention. Such programmes regularly featured on US networks between the 1940s and 80s and include *Truth or Consequences*, *People Are Funny* and *Queen for a Day* (Graham, 1988; Schwarz et al., 1999).

Two shows in this vein stand out on British television: *Game for a Laugh* (ITV, 1981-85) and *Surprise Surprise* (ITV, 1984-2001, 2012-15). The latter involved tricks,

pranks and surprises for members of the public, while the former revolved around practical jokes. Before the advent of reality, these programmes were called 'people shows'. Michael Hill, the producer of *Game for a Laugh*, reveals the thinking behind the show:

> Well in the case of *Game for a Laugh* a show where the people are the stars. … There are a hundred different ways to do all of this stuff, why do we always have to ask questions and answers, let's have fun with people. Let's put people in situations and laugh at the circumstances that befall them (Hill, interview 2010).

Whilst the ethics is dubious, these shows antedate talent competitions that purposely construct comedic situations at the expense of contestants (e.g., *The Apprentice*, BBC One) or put them on stage for the sole purpose of laughing at them.

There is nothing random about contestant selection and the journey to the stage can be long. Each game show has a detailed selection process based on the criteria set by the producers.[5] This process aims to test the personality and, when necessary, the knowledge of contestants (Graham, 1988: 99). Producers are generally looking for contestants' ability to project a likeable personality. Charisma, confidence, enthusiasm and energy are some of the sought-after qualities. For the games where luck plays a part, projection, energy, and an interesting back story are essential. Quiz show producers look for people with the knowledge to succeed in the game, in which case the casting process involves some sort of examination, and possibly a pre-game rehearsal (*Jeopardy!*).

For *The Cube*, an agility-based show, the producers seek 'big' characters who are

'real people' (Adler and Eastwood, interview 2015). They turn down people who are desperate to be on television,[6] people with sob stories, and people with worthy causes. In order that viewers relate to their contestants, the answer they are looking for when they are asked what they will do with the money is 'I need a bigger car' or 'I need a new [kitchen] extension' (Adler and Eastwood, interview 2015).

John Fiske states that 'quiz shows produce particularly active, participatory viewers' (Fiske, 1987: 223). One reason is that the audience test their knowledge and compete with the contestants, a process facilitated by multi-choice answers, a device developed by *Millionaire* and imitated ever since. Another reason is that game shows' central figures are people with whom viewers can relate, generating a process of *identification* that lies at the heart of the genre. *The Cube* producers explain this process by expanding on the kitchen principle:

> And because these [money needs] are what 99.9% of the audience can relate to. And then all of a sudden what we find is we put characters in there who are real people. The audience absolutely empathise not only with them because they can see this is a person who feels a little bit uncomfortable in this environment. That's how I'd feel. So tell me about yourself, oh there's my kids, there's my family, you know, there's nothing extraordinary about them. The most extraordinary thing about them is that they're on telly and they're ordinary (Adler and Eastwood, interview 2015).

All secondary elements play an important part in the narrative. From a storytelling perspective, the *host* is the narrator who tells the story so that the audience can hear it (Lacey, 2000: 107). In their classic demeanour, hosts are friendly, warm and supportive.

They welcome, introduce and root for the contestants, rejoicing with winners and praising losers. They must connect with the audience and contestants, have a sense of humour, a gift for banter and the ability to ad-lib at will (Graham, 1988: 69-94). Some game shows put a premium on the comedic abilities of the host (e.g., Rob Brydon's *Would I Lie to You?*, BBC One; Michael McIntyre's *The Wheel*, BBC One). With time, the persona hosts adopt has diversified. In the early 2000s, *The Weakest Link* became a worldwide hit (in localised versions) partly thanks to the stance adopted by Anne Robinson in the original British show. Her haughtiness contrasted with the joviality of other hosts and reversed the identification process. Anne Robinson turned contestants into school children, placing emphasis on a space - school - that game shows have long drawn from (Fiske, 1987: 224-5). Most game shows bank on viewers wishing to be on stage, while *The Weakest Link* gives the audience a sense of relief that it is not them in the studio (Young, interview 2009). Challenging quiz shows (*Jeopardy!*; *Mastermind*) demand an authoritative host. Paul Smith felt that 'although the host [of *Millionaire*] was to be a friend and a supporter - an emotional supporter of the contestant - they had to be knowledgeable, worldly and experienced' (Smith, interview 2009).

Celebrities are a regular occurrence and offer three options. Most shows need strong enough mechanics to stand up on their own without recourse to celebrities, but some feature them in their charity versions (e.g., *Pointless Celebrities*). Certain shows mingle contestants with celebrities, often cast in a supporting role to the contestants. British TV's most illustrious example is *Blankety Blank* (BBC One), while *The Wheel* constitutes the latest incarnation. Panel shows rely exclusively on celebrities (e.g, *Have I Got News for You*, BBC Two; *A League of Their Own*, Sky One, *Would I Lie to You?*), where their wit and sense of humour are part of the appeal.

Game shows are not rituals in the sense of Claude Levy-Strauss (Fiske, 1987: 217-8), or media rituals in the sense of Nick Couldry (Couldry, 2003), but do contain *ritualistic moments*. Welcoming and closing statements, catchphrases and jingles, are repeated day after day and remain identical for many years. These repetitive features serve a dual purpose. They tell the audience that today's show is simply a new version of a story they know and like. It is akin to the opening sentence of fairy tales, 'once upon a time', inviting readers and listeners to a narrative universe set 'in a different world' and 'in 'another dimension' than theirs (Lacey, 2000: 6-7). Ritualistic moments also support story progression by providing markers at turning points.

Amidst the razzmatazz and flashing lights, it is easy to overlook that the typical game show tells a linear story with a beginning, middle and end. It begins with contestants with the courage to accept a challenge in front of an audience. It continues with their endeavour to win the prize, the skills and knowledge they display, and the tactics they use to overcome obstacles and beat the opposition. It ends with the grand finale that delivers a positive or negative outcome. The audience witness the entire process, wondering how it will end, rejoicing with the winners and lamenting with the losers. There is no script but a story, and no Hollywood star but ordinary people with whom viewers identify: key principles which will be remembered by reality TV producers.

Why TV game shows matter

TV game shows deserve our full attention because they are among the most established of TV genres and because of their long-lasting influence. The craft of game show producers has never been recognized, yet producing one that endures is an exceptional

feat. As Mark Goodson, the world's most prolific game show creator, exclaimed:

> Creating a game isn't like conceiving a drama when you say 'let's do something about a transit cop'... In drama you can reach out and pick up a start-off notion. In games you begin with a blank page. It's almost like trying to create a new sport. Think of a new sport. Think of how few new sports really come along (in Graham, 1988: 50).

Of the hundreds of projects submitted to broadcasters every year, only a handful are commissioned. Of these, one may get the public's attention and stay on air. The happy-go-lucky persona of game shows is deceiving; light entertainment requires as precise engineering as any other genre. They matter because of their long history and their unique place in popular culture. Game shows have been on air since the dawn of sound broadcasting and effortlessly transferred from radio to television in the 1940s, embracing the new medium's visual language in the process (Camporesi, 2000; Holmes, 2008). They played a central role in the rise and normalization of consumer culture in the 1950s and 60s (Turnock, 2007). Game shows have experienced highs and lows but when one catches the nation's mood it reaches ratings heights achieved by few other genres. In the UK, *What's My Line?* (BBC) and *The $64,000 Question* (ATV) in the 1950s, *Double Your Money* (ITV) in the 1960s, *Sale of the Century* (ITV) and *Family Fortunes* (ATV) in the 1970s, *The Price is Right* (ITV) in 1980s, *Crystal Maze* (Channel 4) in the 1990s and *Millionaire* in the 2000s, are among the programmes that marked generations of viewers.

Game shows can stay on air for years, sometimes decades, a feat matched by few other programmes. With interruptions, and sometimes transferring to another channel,

University Challenge has broadcast since 1962, *A Question of Sport* since 1970, *Family Fortunes* since 1980, and *Countdown* since 1982. The genre remains popular and continues to feature daily on the schedules of British terrestrial broadcasters.

Game shows matter because they have been far more influential than people think. Telling a story without a script, creating tension with gameplay mechanisms, taking ordinary people onto a journey and turning them into heroes for a day, are all things game shows producers did well before the advent of reality TV. The connection between the two genres deserves more attention than it has received so far.

Influencing reality TV

Scholars have long debated the origins of reality TV. They acknowledge the hybridity of the genre and the diversity of its origins, evoking programmes from a variety of genres spanning entertainment and journalistic formats. On the entertainment side, soap operas (Corner, 2000: 687; Hill, 2005: 23) and hidden-camera programmes often get a mention. The latter pioneered true-to-life portrayal of people in real situations, with shows such as *Candid Camera* airing on multiple US networks throughout the second half of the 20th century (Clissold, 2004; Bignell, 2005; McCarthy, 2009; Murray, 2009).

The question that really preoccupies scholars, however, is the following: how real is reality TV? 'Shaping the real', 'staging the real' and 'performing the real' are among the scholarly titles that investigate various reality TV sub-genres (Kilborn, 1998; Corner, 2002; Kilborn, 2003). The dominant thesis states that reality TV stems from documentaries, such as fly-on-the-wall documentaries and docusoaps on the evolutionary path towards the new genre. Their intention is to offer audiences a 'window on the world' and a 'relatively unmediated view of reality' (Kilborn, 1994:

422). A classic example are those observational shows on police and emergency services, a genre that emerged in the late 1980s with titles like *America's Most Wanted*, *Cops* and *Rescue 911* (Kilborn, 1994: 426; Corner, 2000; Brunsdon et al., 2001: 45-51; Kavka, 2012: 51-3; Dovey, 2015). John Corner states that *Big Brother* 'has certainly been an important moment in the emergence of reality television from its documentary origins' (Corner, 2002: 268). Acknowledging the differences between the reality format and documentaries, the way *Big Brother* performs the real and claims to represent it, places it within the '"postdocumentary" culture of television' (Corner, 2002: 257). There is no doubt that the documentary is among the key source genres of reality television. However, this research postulates that the influence of documentaries has been overplayed whilst that of game shows has been ignored.

Game shows appear occasionally in lists of genres that have influenced reality TV (see Hill, 2005: 49). Annette Hill designates talent and reality competitions (below) as 'reality gameshows' (Hill, 2005: 31-39). Game show scholars have also noticed a connection between the two genres (Hoerschelmann, 2006: 149-55; Holmes, 2008: 25-30). However, the link is never explored and no one - to my knowledge – has explained which game-show components were borrowed by reality TV. Further, when the two genres are mentioned side by side, they tend to be conflated. It is the case with Hoerschelmann who questions the label 'reality' and states that 'the bulk of reality television appears to be quiz shows in disguise' (Hoerschelmann, 2006: 150). The idiom 'reality gameshow' equally blends two genres that are indeed distinct and represent different evolutionary branches of the televisual discourse.

Reality TV represents a clear evolution from game shows. The genres are always differentiated by their practitioners (producers and commissioners alike), as they

involve different sets of production values and techniques, they use related but modified story-building elements, and construct distinctive narratives. In terms of story-building and narrative progression, four sub-genres can be identified in the reality realm, which enable us to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the influence of game shows on reality TV.

Observational documentaries aim to record real-life situations with seemingly little interference and mediation. While they are character-driven and constructed, they are not pre-structured by fixed format points. *Bangers & Cash* (UKTV), *The Cruise* (ITV) and *Our Yorkshire Farm* (Channel 5) highlight the genre in the UK. *Factual entertainment* programmes vary greatly but tend to have a structure, a situation (a precinct), clear format points, an ending per episode, and sometimes a competitive element. Such shows are relatively cheap to produce, do not require a studio, and constitute the staple diet of daytime schedules. *Come Dine with Me* and *Wife Swap* count among the most influential; they have been adapted countless times and have led to multiple variants that are still on screen. *Reality competitions* are tightly structured, involve a competition element, an elimination process, and a public vote. While *Big Brother*, *I'm a Celebrity… Get Me Out of Here!*, *Survivor* and *Love Island* differ in terms of narrative, they share each element. *Talent competitions* have a competition-centric structure which involves contestants being judged on skills-based performances. They feature a panel of judges, a weekly elimination process and a public vote (with a few exceptions, e.g., *MasterChef*). Talent competitions look for a compelling narrative arc and place great emphasis on the winner's journey. Some of UK television's highest profile shows belong to this group, including *The Apprentice*, *Britain's Got Talent*, *MasterChef*, *Strictly Come Dancing*, and *The X Factor*. Schematically, the influence of

documentaries wanes as we progress from the first to the last reality sub-genre, and the impact of game shows travels in the reverse direction.

Commercial connections

Reality programmes feature, with elements of variation, all the components examined in the first section. They too are unscripted and have engines which define the rules and format points (Keane and Moran, 2008). They feature ordinary people as contestants who face a challenge or contest, hosts (or equivalent), celebrities (in various roles) and ritualistic moments. There are also similarities in the ways these genres are commercialized and circulate around the globe. These similitudes are briefly evoked and only constitute circumstantial evidence of the link between the two genres.

The TV producers that launched the most emblematic reality shows circa 2000 had a background in entertainment. London-based FremantleMedia, which co-produced *Idols*, *The X Factor*, and *Got Talent*, also possessed the world's largest library of game shows. In the 1990s, Pearson Television (Fremantle's former name), acquired two game show production firms: Grundy, from Australia, and All American Communications. All American's library was extensive and included *Baywatch*, but what Pearson were really after was the titles from the Goodson-Todman library, which included *Blockbusters*, *Family Feud (Family Fortunes)*, *Password* and the library's crown jewel: *The Price is Right* (Dyke, interview 2010).

Alan Boyd was among FremantleMedia's in-house producers that formatted *Idols* and made it work as a TV show. He too had extensive experience in entertainment. He produced multiple game shows, among them the high-rating *Blankety Blank* and *The Generation Game* at the BBC in the 1960s and 70s. At London Weekend Television

15

(LWT), his producer credits span *Blind Date*, *Game for a Laugh*, *Surprise Surprise*, and *You Bet*. FremantleMedia was populated by former LWT staff, an ITV franchise with an unmatched track record in light entertainment (Allen, 2005). Boyd's four decades of experience, and that of his colleagues, gave them the ability to transform a project (*Idols*) written on a 'tiny piece of paper' into an era-defining show (Boyd, interview 2009).

John de Mol formed Endemol with Joop van den Ende, another Dutch producer, in 1994. The firm pioneered reality TV with shows such as *Love Letters*, *All You Need Is Love* and *Big Brother*. Before the merger, John de Mol Productions specialized in light entertainment and was the Dutch licence holder of shows such as *The Dating Game*, *The Price is Right* and the *Wheel of Fortune* (Moran, 1998: 35).

Game shows and reality programmes travel around the world in a similar manner, as formats. A TV format is the adaptation of the structure of a show (re-)produced for a foreign audience. Some elements of the package stay the same as the show travels while others may vary, which is why formats are referred to as 'cooking recipe[s]' (Moran, 2006: 20). The format trade debuted in 1951 with *What's My Line*, which travelled from the USA to the UK. For the first time, a broadcaster (the BBC) agreed to pay for the concept and package of a show – its format – as opposed to something tangible such as a tape or script. The trade progressively opened up to new territories and game shows formed the backbone in the ensuing four decades. American producers had the largest distribution agreements and their libraries travelled farthest. These included Chuck Barris's *The Dating Game* and *The Newlywed Game*, Merv Griffin's *Jeopardy!* and *The Wheel of Fortune* and Marc Goodson's *The Price is Right*, *Password*, *Family Feud*, etc. (Cooper-Chen, 1994; Moran, 1998; Chalaby, 2016: 17-34).

When reality shows emerged in the late 1990s, they adopted the same distribution mechanism. It is rare that the international market acquires tapes of reality programmes: adaptation rights prevail as broadcasters prefer to produce their own version. Instead, a reality show with decent domestic ratings is formatted abroad. All sub-genres of reality TV have known adaptations, from observational documentaries such as *One Born Every Minute* or *Educating...* to all reality and talent competitions. Together, game shows and reality programmes constitute the essentials of the format trade, and the world's fifty most travelled formats belong to either of those categories (K7 Media, 2021: 21-4).

Game shows and reality programmes travel as formats because they have no script. They are made of storybuilding blocks that can be identified and described, and therefore duplicated and adapted. Further, game shows and reality TV feature ordinary people who are relatable and with whom the audience identifies (or against in some cases). For this process to take place, contestants need to look and sound familiar and thus must share viewers' language and culture.

Storytelling in unscripted TV entertainment

Game show producers were the first to tell a story and create drama using gameplay mechanisms and story-building blocks instead of a script. This section explores how these techniques transferred from game shows to documentaries, leading to the formation of a new hybrid genre.

The key difference between documentaries and reality TV resides in the *quality* of the reality that is on display. Game shows and reality programmes construct stories by setting the gameplay and format points on which the narrative development rests. They do not script a villain but cast contestants and engineer format rules with the aim of

17

creating one. They do not write romance but build the setting and the gameplay that encourages flirtatious behaviour.

These principles have been adopted by factual entertainment producers. While the sub-genre has a foot in documentary culture, the storytelling mechanisms its producers have adopted mark a sharp departure from its origins. Stephen Lambert, the British producer behind *Wife Swap*, *The Secret Millionaire*, *Undercover Boss* and *Gogglebox*, explains how the shift has occurred:

> I became very interested in the idea of how do you format the documentary, how do you *create a situation* where you can still make an attractive idea for good documentary makers to come and work on it, but it's returnable, there is a format. And also where there's a guaranteed beginning, middle and end, that essentially you will *create a situation* that you can then use documentary skills to capture what happens, and that to a large extent the narrative plays itself out without too much intervention once you've put people in the starting position. And the first show that we did this with to any great success was *Faking It*, which just worked (Lambert, interview 2012; author's emphasis).

Even though documentary makers create drama by accentuating features and focusing on enduring characters, they always *access* a situation (e.g., an airport, a secondary school, an A&E service). As factual entertainment shows make the transition from accessing a situation to creating one, they change the quality of the reality they are filming, moving from a given to a constructed one. Producers of factual entertainment formats no longer try to get access to naturally occurring events or institutions but create a situation that only exists because they have created it. For instance, in *Wife Swap*, the

18

story is concocted by telling two spouses to swap families, with the task of observing the host family's routines in the first week and imposing their rules upon them in the second. These spouses do not meet by chance but because TV producers predict that swapping two wives, one of which is strict with her kids and the other lets them do as they please, will create great drama. In any reality format, such as *Big Brother*, *Come Dine with Me*, or *I'm a Celebrity...* characters meet and interact because producers have decided that this bunch put together would make good television. Indeed, in their selection of contestants, casting coordinators are instructed to take into account the general atmosphere the producers want to create (Butler, interview 2009). Reality producers build their own *precinct*, established for entertainment purposes. Within it, they create rules and format points, through which contestants have the opportunity to grow and demonstrate their qualities.

    All stories told on television have a structure, whether it is a news item, a commercial, or a documentary. In game shows and reality programmes, the structure is critical and perhaps made more apparent than in any other genre. The first question commissioners ask producers pitching a game show is about the ending. If they are unimpressed with the answer they will decline the commission (Hill, interview 2010). Most game shows are structured into several rounds, broken by commercial breaks. Contestants often ascend the ladder through an elimination process, which they must win to access the following round. As rounds pass, the game increases in difficulty and intensity. The grand finale includes the last gamble, success or failure. Likewise, creating a situation facilitates the process of storytelling in factual entertainment. Stephen Lambert explains why:

So it's very hard to find naturally occurring situations where you can get access to the beginning, middle and end of them. A lot of what we do in observation, in traditional documentary telling is we tell a lot of past tense stories, people can tell you about what the beginning was and maybe what the middle was and you might be able to show a little bit about the end, that could be in the present tense. Or occasionally you'll get access to something, but very often where you were able to follow through development but first of all it happens over a long time, which makes it difficult for television budgets, or it doesn't quite resolve (Lambert, interview 2012).

When a precinct is created, it is far easier to structure the story with key moments, cliff hangers, and a finale. *Wife Swap* ends with a confrontation between the two wives, encouraged by the producers to say exactly what they think. The game show influence goes further.

Fiske and Hartley wrote that 'the distance between dancing and sport is not great' on television (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 136), and established the connection between *Match of the Day*, *Come Dancing* (the ancestor of *Strictly Come Dancing*), and game shows. They are all programmes structured by competition, which display ritualized conflicts where goals and achievement matter (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 136-49). TV producers turned documentaries into reality television when they imported the competitive element of game shows in the process of creating a new genre. In the 1970s and 80s, British terrestrial broadcasters scheduled a number of leisure or 'lifestyle' shows, reflecting shifts in the nation's consumer culture. *Gardeners' World* , *Food and Drink*, *Masterchef* and *Top Gear* are among the most illustrious examples (Brunsdon et al., 2001: 54-7; Boyle, 2018: 104-7). These shows were informative and didactic, and entertainment was low on their list of priorities. This all changed when a little-known

TV producer decided to create a cooking show with an element of competition. With

Ready Steady Cook, Peter Bazalgette invented a new hybrid genre:

> Now my modest part in this was sort of creating formats that did not fit into the previous
> categories, because television entertainment was either drama, or it was a game show or
> you had kids, or you had documentary. You didn't have sort of formatted reality shows,
> you didn't have formatted leisure shows and so on and so forth. So kind of what we were
> doing is we were creating, essentially we were creating hybrids. And *Ready Steady Cook*
> is, on the one hand, a sort of what the Americans call a how-to show, because it shows
> you how to cook recipes, on the other hand, *it's a game show with a competition*, and it's
> got an element of human interest as well because you get two members of the public in,
> you talk about their lives and what's happened to them and so on. And again I don't know
> whether we set out to rewrite the rule book but that's what happened (Bazalgette,
> interview 2009; author's emphasis).

Not all reality programmes have a competitive element, but most do. From daytime staples *The Bidding Room* and *Bargain Hunt* to prime time shows *MasterChef* and *Britain's Got Talent*, reality has embraced competition. From a storytelling perspective, a competition brings countless benefits. It gives the narrative a 'natural' curve and an arc that stretches from beginning to end. It creates excitement by generating *predictable unpredictability*: the contest is set in a known structure and is a variation on a familiar theme. It creates drama by differentiating winners and losers, between those whose dreams have come true and those whose hopes have been dashed. Many reality producers shape the contest in order to reach the holy grail of dramaturgy: the hero's

transformation (Yorke, 2013). As Stephen Lambert states: 'you're looking for a format that will deliver transformation … at the end you want people to be in a better place than they were at the beginning' (Lambert, interview 2009).

The shows that specialize in transformative narratives bear a name: talent competitions. They use the weekly elimination round to expand the scale of the contest and give it an 'epic' feel. The winner is a hero whose life has irremediably changed. They are looking forward to their prize and new-found popularity and always profess to have gained experience, learnt new skills, made new friends, and been on a journey of discovery. Crucially, they are neither superheroes from the Marvel universe nor goddesses from Norse mythology but *ordinary people* who have summoned their courage, accepted a challenge, went through an ordeal, exposed their flaws to the world and rose through the ranks to succeed (Chalaby, 2016: 150-65).

Today, a feedback loop has formed and some game shows import narrative devices from reality programmes. Among the first was *The Weakest Link*, which adopted a reality-based elimination system (team voting). More recently, *Squid Game: The Challenge* (produced by Studio Lambert for Netflix), may be the first truly hybrid show, mixing storytelling practices from both genres. There are plenty of other shows that are very close to the demarcation between the two genres. As scholars have long argued, boundaries between genres are fuzzy and fluid (e.g., Mittell, 2001: 10; Creeber, 2015: 1). It does not mean that a line does not exist somewhere and that the two genres are not distinct.

Game shows and reality series are an invitation to viewers to share at home the tribulations of ordinary contestants going through an ordeal. The two genres also share narrative structures and storytelling practices, but reality programming has evolved into

a distinct genre with its own 'repertoire of elements' (Lacey, 2000: 133). Reality TV places more emphasis on the process of transformation and character development; the perspective is more subject-centric than in game shows, which tend to focus on the competition. Reality series' weekly elimination processes and lavish production budgets have expanded the scale and scope of the journey. As contestants battle for fame and fortune and strategize against each other, the atmosphere can be more tense than in game shows. The iconography also differs. Reality series are filmed on location, while game shows tend to be shot in a TV studio. Of course, some reality competitions such as *Survivor* or *Love Island* are shot on sets that demand extraordinary amounts of preparation, but they are not typical TV studios with a stage facing an audience. For those talent competitions with a stage (e.g., *Britain's Got Talent*), they make a point of placing the presenters backstage, including interviews with contestants and their entourage, and short films portraying their backstories.

Commercially, the TV industry draws a clear distinction between the two genres, which are labelled and marketed distinctly by TV production companies. Media owners commissioning either of these genres would have different goals, budgets and audiences in mind. As for audiences, they may have no interest in the finer points of genre theory but, to paraphrase Jason Mittell, they will know a game show when they see one (Mittell, 2001: 10-11).

Conclusion: Thinking beyond texts

Game shows are undervalued by the academic literature and their influence has been underestimated. They matter because of the craft they require and the influence they have had. This research has demonstrated that many story-building elements of reality

programmes originate from game shows. Both genres are unscripted, use engines to define the gameplay, and feature ordinary people who accept a challenge and embark on a journey. They also have hosts, celebrities and ritualistic moments. There are similarities in the ways these genres are commercialized and circulate around the globe. They create situations – as opposed to accessing them – and use contests to structure the narrative. The aim is not to start an origins dispute or undermine the specificity and originality of reality television. It is a hybrid genre which has been fashioned by multiple influences, and while reality series share attributes with game shows, they remain distinctive.

While game show scholarship is developing it remains too isolated from mainstream television studies. Game shows' role and contribution to broadcasting schedules and the TV production sector is in need of further analysis. Their participants and audiences deserve more attention. More comparative research is warranted, a strand of analysis pioneered by Anne Cooper-Chen in the 1990s and abandoned since (Cooper-Chen, 1994).

It remains to explain why game shows do not figure more pre-eminently in the media scholarship and have largely been cut off from the history of TV entertainment. The reasons are not solely ideological. Fiske and Hartley took issue with British literary criticism (and its offspring media and communication studies) that attempts to read television texts as if they were literary. Such attempts are 'doomed to failure' because television modes are both oral and literate (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 30), and a distinction is made between 'oral (working-class) modes' and 'literate (bourgeois) ones' (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 116). It is not difficult to imagine that game shows predominantly belong to the former rather than the latter category, explaining the

disdain to which they have long been held.

The 'textualist assumption' that characterizes genre theory creates another problem (Mittell, 2001: 5): the discursive practices that shape texts and form discourses tend to be expurgated from the analysis. It is by going around the object of the text that this research was able to uncover the connections between two genres: interviewing TV producers and *interrogating their practices*, this research has shown commonalities between those that shape game shows and reality programmes. Reality TV emerged when TV producers began to mix discursive practices from multiple genres in order to create something new. Including these practices in textual analysis reveals the historicity of discourses and gives us a better understanding of the evolution of television entertainment.

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List of personal interviews

(Company names and job titles at time of interview)

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[1] On this debate see also Hills, 2005; Holmes, 2005, 2006; Miller, 2015.

[2] For instance, Simon Cowell's *Red or Black?* (ITV1) was a flop. *Deal or No Deal* (Channel 4), figures among the exceptions.

[3] There is no difference between quiz and game shows in terms of storytelling, but the literature draws a useful distinction (Hoerschelmann, 2006: 17-37; Holmes, 2008).

[4] Among others, the 'Pilkington' report famously argued that the 'appeal to greed and fear' was a 'poor' game show mechanic as needing 'the support of extraneous appeals' (The Committee on Broadcasting, 1962: 58).

[5] Whannel noted that the universe of British game shows is hideously white, both in terms of contestants and culture (Whannel 1992: 195). Whilst it appears that diversity has become a priority for casting coordinators, further research is needed to appraise the extent of the decolonisation of game shows.

[6] The first question on the questionnaire is whether contestants have applied to other game shows, and if they tick 'yes' they are out (Adler and Eastwood, interview 2015).