The History of Game Shows: Crash Course Games #25

Crash Course: Games
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Hi I'm Andre Meadows and this is Crash Course Games. If you've ever stayed home sick on a weekday and channel surfed, you're probably familiar with today's topic: game shows. While it might seem like there's not much substance to the genre that brought us such shows as Cash Cab and Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader, they've actually been an important part of United States culture since the 1920s.

Now game shows are slightly different from the other games we've discussed in this series. You're probably more likely to play Poker in your lifetime than be a contestant on Jeopardy. But that doesn't mean that they don't impact our lives. In fact, according to research, watching a game show might not be that much different than actually playing one.

[Theme Music]

Game shows started on an ancient device known as the radio. Back then, they were known as quiz shows. And their predecessors were activities like puzzles, spelling bees, and contests. In the 1920s, some radio shows started to incorporate question and answer segments, though they didn't become truly popular until 1935 on NBC's Vox Pop. The show brought in regular people to answer questions for prizes. Not only was this the first quiz show, it's considered one of the first shows to use audience participation.

By the end of the decade, quiz shows were on all the major radio networks, and it wasn't just an American phenomenon. In 1937, the Inter-regional Spelling Competition premiered on BBC Radio. England also had the first TV game show, 1938's Spelling Bee.

Two major game show varieties evolved. Quiz shows were a pretty simple question-and-answer format. A popular example was the radio show Winner Take All, which premiered in 1946. In the game, a host asked a question to two contestants, then whoever buzzed in first could answer. This is a mechanic we see in many game shows up to this day.

Then, there were panel shows featuring celebrity panelists. So, instead of an ordinary contestant, these people might be experts or comedians. The first-ever show of this genre was 1938's Information Please. Audience members submitted questions for the panelists to answer. People who sent in questions that got used would win money. And if the questions stumped the panel, they won even more. Modern examples of panel shows include Match Game and Hollywood Squares.

I should note here that quiz shows also evolved into some other categories including giveaway shows (which were less knowledge-based) and stunt programs (in which contestants attempted a certain stunt). In the 1930s, social scientist Herta Herzog set out to learn why people tuned into these types of shows. She interviewed eight women and three men about the radio program Professor Quiz.

And, she found some similarities between the quiz show listeners. They preferred to listen to a contestant who was most like themselves a.k.a. the "average" person. And they tended to be competitive; when a contestant made a mistake, it often caused a boost in the listener's self-esteem.

This is an interesting distinction – even though audience members aren't actively playing in a game show, they still experience the competitive urges that accompany many other types of games that we've discussed in this series. We'll delve into some more science a little later, but for now: BACK TO HISTORY.

Above all, these shows were entertainment, and the ones with more comedic elements tended to do better as the genre developed. In 1946, journalist Maurice Zolotow referenced this phenomenon in an article for the Saturday Evening Post. He wrote, "Today a quiz program is mainly designed to exhibit slices of life, to present a cross section of strange, wonderful, bizarre and queer specimens of humanity. Frequently the dumber a contestant is, the funnier he sounds on the air." Sounds a little bit like the Real Housewives and Bachelorette contestants, doesn't it? Which isn't a coincidence – we'll get into that later.

Zolotow wasn't totally wrong. Eventually, stunt and giveaway shows started gaining on the original quiz show format. Audiences wanted something flashy – like people winning $1,000 by sheer random luck on the radio show Pot o' Gold. And what the audience wants matters because these shows have always been supported by advertisers.

So it's probably obvious based on how many examples I've just given you, but these shows were hugely popular – they even changed the lifestyles of some Americans. For example, Pot o' Gold called people randomly on Tuesday nights. Just answering the phone got you the $1,000. If not, you received $100 as a consolation prize.

There were noticeable reductions in phone calls made on Tuesday because people didn't want to tie up their phone lines in case they had won. There was also a drop in movie theatre attendance because people wanted to stay home, just in case. It got to the point where some theatre owners started offering their own consolation prizes. If Pot o' Gold happened to call a person while they were at the movies, the owner promised to give them the $1,000.

In the 1940s, quiz shows popped up on American television where they became the thing to watch. Some earned up to a 50% rating share in the early days, meaning that half of U. S. televisions were tuned in.

But these quiz shows encountered some setbacks, most notably in the 1950s when they went through a huge scandal. A few quiz shows were at its center involving rigged contests including The $64,000 Question and Dotto. But, we're going to focus on a program called Twenty-One.

As I mentioned earlier, these shows were important to advertisers, who wanted good ratings, and for Twenty-One, they were falling. Producers knew that good numbers came when the shows were exciting and the audience's favorite contestants won. In this case, that contestant was a 30-year-old man named Charles Van Doren.

Before appearing on the show in the late 1950s, he was a relatively well-known English professor at Columbia. So you can probably guess what happened: the producers staged the show. They gave Van Doren the answers and they told his opponent, Herb Stempel, to lose on purpose.

Stempel later recalled that they gave him, "this old, ill-fitting suit and this Marine-type haircut was to make me appear as what you would call today, a nerd, a square." He was made to look less attractive than his opponent – true audience manipulation.

The producers didn't script just one show either. Van Doren won episode after episode, earning a total of $128,000 on a streak going from November 28th, 1956 through March 11th, 1957. Eventually he "lost," but the ordeal earned him a three-year contract with NBC. Soon after, Stempel (and contestants on other fixed shows) came forward with the truth, igniting a huge scandal. President Dwight D. Eisenhower called it, "a terrible thing to do to the American public." It might not sound so shocking to you, since we're all pretty accustomed to not-real reality television, but before

this moment, the majority of Americans didn't have the same level of skepticism when it came to entertainment. They took radio and television at face value.

In 1960, an amendment was added to the Communications Act of 1934, outlawing prearranged outcomes "with intent to deceive the listening or viewing public." Shows could no longer legally "supply to any contestant in a purportedly bona fide contest of intellectual knowledge or intellectual skill any special and secret assistance." These strict regulations led the networks to create standards and practices departments. And by the 1960s most quiz shows were moved from prime time television to daytime and rebranded.

That's part of the reason why you're more likely to hear the term "game show" than "quiz show" now. Sure, traditional question-and-answer quiz show formats remained, but there was also the introduction of many "game shows" which require more specific skills and rules.

Olaf Hoerschelmann, author of Rules of the Game: Quiz Shows and American Culture, views that as a huge shift – the shows went from being highbrow to being perceived as "entertainment forms with low prestige." They also became flashier. The new goal was to redirect attention from daytime household tasks to the television, so music and sound effects became mainstays. [Andre imitates famous game show sound effects, ding, eeeh, womp womp]

Tons of shows that you can still watch today began during this era. Jeopardy! premiered in 1964 on NBC. The Price Is Right began in 1956 on NBC before moving to ABC, then CBS. And also dating shows like The Dating Game emerged in the mid-1960s.

Jumping forward to the 1990s, another innovation came to the format with increased audience participation in the form of call-in 900-numbers. And we can't talk about shows that incorporated phones without talking about Who Wants to Be A Millionaire? and American Idol. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? was originally a British game show, which ran from 1998 through 2014. By 2003, 70 countries had franchised it. It was an equally stressful show in every country, as we know from the movie Slumdog Millionaire. The U.S. version first aired on ABC in August 1999, hosted by Regis Philbin. It was the most watched series from 1999-2000, getting up to 30 million weekly viewers.

In four years, it earned ABC an estimated $300 million in profits. Game shows were BACK, and this represented a larger shift in American television in general: people wanted big prizes and reality. In 1999, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? gave out a million dollar prize. Previously, the most money given out on an American game show was $312,700 on Tic-Tac-Dough in 1980.

During the same era, more shows with a similar competition format and huge prizes arrived in the U.S., but these were branded as reality shows. Examples include American Idol, (another show originated from Britain), which aired in 2002 on Fox. It was the most watched series from 2003-2011 consecutively.

And then there was the hit show Survivor. It aired on CBS in 2000, and it was inspired by a Swedish show called Expedition Robinson. So, what's the difference between a game show and a "reality show?" Well, it's up for debate. Reality shows have their origins in game shows, so many consider them part of the genre. The games I listed are often known as "reality competition shows" or "reality game shows." Typically, when there's a competition involved, they're viewed as offshoots from game shows. But something more documentary-style Keeping Up with the Kardashians, aren't. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

All right, so now that we've covered game show history, we need to talk about its overall impact. Unlike some of the other forms of gaming we've talked about in this series, there are a couple different types of relationships a person can have with a game show. There are the in-studio players and the audience.

Let's start with in-studio players, otherwise known as the contestants. Something that sets game shows apart from the other games we've discussed is that there's a camera focused on the player, so there's added stress to the situation. And the stakes are also extreme. Often times, contestants are playing for big money and fabulous prizes. You can take a risk in a video game, you just restart. But you take a risk in a game show, you could lose a potential million dollars.

In 2008, the American Economic Review published a study addressing how people handle those stakes. The authors focused on the risk-taking behaviors of contestants on Deal Or No Deal. If you've never seen it, a contestant picks one briefcase out of around 26 options. Each has an amount of money in it (from one cent to a million dollars in the American version, but it varies from country to country).

Then, the player chooses briefcases to open revealing what ISN'T in theirs. Periodically, they receive offers to buy their briefcase; then they have to make a choice. They have to decide whether to sell it, Deal, or keep playing in hopes of earning more money, No Deal.

The researchers found that quote, "Risk aversion decreases after earlier expectations have been shattered by unfavorable outcomes or surpassed by favorable outcomes." Basically, if a contestant opens the highest value briefcases first OR the lowest value ones, they're going to be more prone to taking risks. There's an "important role of previous outcomes." Though it's worth noting that there's variety from contestant to contestant. If they all acted the same, it would be a pretty boring show. We'll get into this a bit more when we talk about gambling.

A similar study was conducted in 1995 on Jeopardy! contestants and concluded that those players tend to have minimal risk aversion, also known as "risk-neutrality." We don't know why these players are different than Deal or No Deal ones. There might be a difference in contestant knowledge – Jeopardy contestants are probably aware of their own intellect. And it's a game you can practice for. No amount of practice is going to ensure that you pick the million dollar suitcase in Deal or No Deal. It might also just be a matter of what type of person is attracted to what game show. Perhaps Jeopardy contestants are more steady in their willingness to take risks and Deal or No Deal ones are less consistent.

Of course you don't have to be on a game show to benefit from one. In 2011, researchers tested the knowledge of fifth-year medical students with one group learning through a lecture and another through a Jeopardy-style game. The researchers found that information retention was much higher in the group that learned the material in Jeopardy as opposed to the lecture.

Now let's talk about the audience watching the game shows. I mentioned one study on the audience earlier which concluded that listeners of a quiz show experienced a competitive rush. From the genre's early beginnings, producers have attempted to create as much drama, competition, and spontaneity as possible. But other than that, why do we like game shows so much?

Well, according to research by Alan Rubin viewers also rank game shows high in terms of "entertainment, convenience, companionship, and relaxation." In another study conducted by Keith Roe and his colleagues, they narrowed down the main factors that draw people to watch game shows.

The main factors include that they involve “ordinary people” and contain “big” prizes that can be won by demonstrating “everyday knowledge.” Basically, people like game shows that show it’s possible to win a ton of money or a new car or a dream vacation by just being themselves. So that’s been a pretty whirlwind trip through game shows – from their radio origins in the 1920s to reality shows in the modern day. From answering a question, solving the puzzle, guessing the password, or getting BIG BUCKS BIG BUCKS NO WHAMMYS, game shows have impacted audiences for decades.

We’ve talked before on the series about how games are unique in their universal accessibility. They’ve been enjoyed by people throughout history and all over the world. And in the U.S., entertainment and media are similarly accessible to the majority of the population – they’ve always permeated throughout our culture. Honestly, there’s almost nothing more universal than media here. So, while game shows might seem like a small facet of the gaming genre as a whole, you can view them as a part of something much bigger than themselves. And as contestants and viewers alike know, this genre commands a similar combination of entertainment, competition, and passion. Thanks for watching, and we’ll see you next... blank

Stan Muller: Crash Course Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and it's made with the help of all these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our patrons in general, and we'd like to specifically thank our High Chancellor of Knowledge, Morgan Lizop, and our Vice Principal, Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.