

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM:
A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE QUIZ SHOW

by

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If one were prompted to list as many American cultural touchstones as they could in order of historical relevance, the quiz show genre would likely appear somewhere between NASCAR and *The Martha Stewart Show*. In other words, nowhere close to utter irrelevance but far from a defining element of the American experience. Yet, there is much more to quiz shows than one might initially assume. The history of their development is surprisingly complex and makes for a unique context in which to explore the culture of the United States. Like all entertainment mediums, quiz shows have been shaped over the years by the American media environment and the ever-changing interests of viewers. These variables both reflect the cultural development of the United States as a whole and reveal a good deal about the values and beliefs of middle-class Americans represented over the near-century of the quiz show's existence. The cultural legacy of the quiz show is far more than a series of trivia questions: the genre has left us a crystallization of the society of its viewers and producers. When analyzing quiz shows with this in mind, historical-sociological study can shed a light upon some of the country's core neoliberal values—namely, those centered around merit-based economic elevation.

Of the innumerable cultural artifacts that comprise the genre in question, *Jeopardy!* is one of the most curious. Over its existence—which spans from 1964 to the present day—the United States has gone through a number of different cultural movements and societal trends and yet *Jeopardy!*, the quintessential quiz show and the face of the genre, has remained largely the same in terms of tone, presentation, and subject matter. It has also been wildly successful over that lengthy time period, sitting near the top of ratings charts since the 1990s. How can this be? How can a quiz show created in the 1960s continue to garner an audience for over fifty years without making any significant changes to match shifting viewer preferences and expectations? If its consistently high ratings are anything to go by, *Jeopardy!* must be more than a historical relic

observed for the sake of curiosity. What, then, is its appeal to multigenerational American audiences, that seem so vastly different in cultural perspective?

This study will address these questions and many more, and within the answers can be found further insights into the success and cultural relevance of quiz shows as a genre. The prolonged success of *Jeopardy!* is an object lesson in how quiz shows carved an enduring niche in the American television market by arriving just in time for key cultural shifts that have, to this point in history, transcended generations. These societal changes—namely the rise of the middle class and the subsequent boom of consumerism—worked alongside the ideal of the American dream to form a perfect environment for the genre to emerge, develop, and eventually influence American culture in its own right.

Some Brief Semantics

The quiz show occupies a unique niche in the television landscape with its mix of mostly-real human drama and often objective tests of knowledge. As such, it can be difficult to define within the framework of television formats. Part reality TV, part “edutainment,” in some cases even part commercial—it’s safe to say that the definition of “quiz show” is a tough nut to crack. In a world in which the most readily available dictionary definition of *quiz show* is “an entertainment program (as on radio or television) in which contestants answer questions,” one must delve into the theory of television for a more comprehensive understanding of the term.¹

Albert Moran, an academic film critic, historian, and professor, argues in his study of format translations, *Copycat Television*, that the format of a television program can be defined by

¹ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “Quiz Show,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/quiz%20show>.

the elements essential to its genre.² If, as Moran states, “a television format is that set of invariable elements in a program out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced,” it should be possible to break the quiz show down to its most essential parts and in so doing devise a suitable definition.³

For the sake of establishing a clear scope for this study, I define a quiz show as a program, recorded live, that:

- Tasks a contestant or group of contestants with answering a question or series of questions, presented by a host;
- Has a clear winner who is rewarded with a prize at the end of the show;
- Inversely, always presents the contestant(s) with a potential loss in the form of gambling, betting, luck, or opportunity cost.

These are the three main features that make quiz shows a clear genre, separate from the thematically-broader game show and a far cry from reality TV. Under this definition, the genre also includes what I call “social quiz shows”—shows like *Family Feud* and the litany of spouse-based “dating shows” that prompt contestants with questions about other people. Though these questions are much less objective than the standard fare of the more traditional quiz show, they still fit the model and notably emerged alongside the mainline quiz show.

This definition is also important because it creates a clear timeframe for this history.

Various quiz games can be found in newspaper archives. The commercial radio boom following World War I saw a number of broadcasters experiment with audience engagement through

² “Moran, Albert, 1942-,” *National Library of Australia*, accessed October 21, 2021, <https://librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au/search/display?dbid=auth&id=36161523>.

³ Albert Moran, *Copycat Television: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998), 13.

interviews and some casual trivia broadcasts. None of these, however, met all three criteria.⁴ It was not until 1936 that the first true quiz show aired on CBS Radio. *Professor Quiz* tasked audience members with answering listener-submitted trivia questions, offering a prize of 25 silver dollars to the contestant who got the most correct answers.⁵ This proved to be a popular format due to the opportunity for direct engagement with a live show and the perceived educational value such shows held. The format was quickly replicated, and these audience draws remain present to this day.

*Truth or AAAAHHH!!*⁶

Though many of these replicas failed to last, the genre was far from its creative peak. Radio shows like *Quiz Craze* and *Truth or Consequences* began to shape the quiz show into something much more recognizable, especially upon making the leap to television. *Truth or Consequences* in particular warrants closer examination, as it signaled the emergence of a now-common draw for reality television viewers—*schadenfreude*. *Schadenfreude* is a portmanteau of two German words, *schaden* (to harm), and *freude* (joy), and is naturally defined as “malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others.”⁷ Though the definition may sound harsh, *schadenfreude* is central to many a show’s identity and is rarely given a second thought. The thrill of witnessing someone else’s miseries, failures, and embarrassments is inherent to reality TV shows like *Kitchen Nightmares* and *America’s Funniest Home Videos*; by design, *schadenfreude* represents a large part of the appeal of many competition-oriented shows, from *The X Factor* to *Family*

⁴ Thomas A. DeLong, *Quiz Craze: America’s Infatuation with Game Shows* (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1991), 5-11.

⁵ Thomas DeLong, *Quiz Craze*, 20-21.

⁶ See *Looney Tunes’* 1950 quiz show parody episode, *The Ducksters*.

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Schadenfreude, n.,” accessed October 26, 2021, <https://www-oed-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Entry/172271?redirectedFrom=schadenfreude#eid>.

Feud.⁸ Naturally, this industry norm has been the object of much scrutiny due to concerns about the public's collective moral fiber and mental health.⁹

Very similar concerns were raised in the 1940s regarding the radio quiz show *Truth or Consequences*, in which contestants were tasked with answering questions correctly or facing “consequences,” usually in the form of absurd skits.¹⁰ As is still the case today, questions were raised as to why this kind of content appealed to listeners, as well as what could lead an individual to take part in a production that would serve to humiliate them. In response to criticisms, the show's founder and host Ralph Edwards published an editorial in the *New York Times* entitled “To the Defense of T. or C.” in 1942. In this article, he defended the contents of the show, positing that “people clamor to appear on this program... because it is a challenge to their courage; because it affords them an opportunity to express themselves in a grand manner...” He also argued that the audience was drawn through the exaggerated on-air descriptions of “humorous ‘situation’ comedy—placing somebody in a potentially difficult situation and watching his ludicrous efforts to untangle himself.”¹¹ *Truth or Consequences* ran on-and-off until 1988 after becoming the first quiz show to make the leap to broadcast television.

⁸ See Amber Eliza Watts, “Laughing at the world: *Schadenfreude*, social identity, and American media culture,” PhD diss., (Northwestern University, 2008), ProQuest.

⁹ As seen in the following recent studies: Wilco W. van Dijk, et al., ““So You Wanna Be a Pop Star?": Schadenfreude Following Another's Misfortune on TV,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 2 (2012): 168-174; Hitomi Watanabe, “Effects of Self-Evaluation Threat on Schadenfreude Toward Strangers in a Reality TV Show,” *Psychological Reports* 118, no. 3 (2016): 778-792.

¹⁰ The show was also famous for some truly ludicrous publicity stunts, ranging from sending a listener a treasure map for a \$1,000 prize buried in a small town in Massachusetts (the residents of Holyoke, MA found it and dug it up before the hapless winner was able to reach the town) and promising to air the program's 10th anniversary episode from the first municipality that renamed itself after the show (Truth or Consequences, New Mexico remains a minor tourist destination to this day.)

¹¹ Ralph Edwards, “To the Defense of T. or C.,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1942, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/106266772/C5F7C0207D6D4EC0PQ/1?accountid=14556>.

An assessment of the morality of this particular cultural phenomenon is outside the scope of this thesis, but it stands that the forces that drive individuals to one kind of entertainment over another are far more complex and psychological than one might initially suspect. This truth is especially important when analyzing a budding genre like the quiz show in the 1940s. The genre was still being actively shaped by its audience's preferences to a much larger extent than it would when fully developed. When an entertainment genre is still getting its footing in the market, it is naturally much more vulnerable to dips in audience and sales, which in turn force it to choose between adapting to its audience's tastes, whatever they may be, trying to appeal to a new audience, or doing neither and dying off.

With this in mind, one would assume that the quiz show underwent significant format changes over the decades that followed the end of World War II. In America, each decade between the 1950s and 1990s represents a distinct cultural instance with its own prevailing societal trends and tastes. With these cultural shifts came shifts in the types of entertainment audiences consumed—and were in turn presented more of to meet demand. In part, the quiz show did follow this mold, moderately reshaping itself to meet the booming economy of the 1950s. After that, however, it seemingly parted ways with the most visible conventions of television adaptation.

A Genre in Jeopardy

In the mid-to-late 1950s, big-money quiz shows dominated the television market. Shows like *The \$64,000 Question* and *Twenty-One* offered then-ludicrous payouts to their lucky winners, and viewers marveled at instant economic elevation in action. Further, the *New York Times* observed the show's "power to hold the mirror up to life as it is revealed spontaneously before a viewer's eyes" and to engage the audience with genuine, normal people as opposed to a

“rather specialized group of individuals who likely as not are celebrities in TV”.¹² Ironically enough, not only did many of the winners of these shows become bona fide celebrities in their own rights, it was all a charade. The big-money quiz shows were, by and large, rigged. In an effort to keep audiences interested, producers gave marketable contestants the answers beforehand and essentially turned their “genuine, normal” contestants into character actors.¹³

These facts, revealed by a series of whistleblowers, sent the industry into freefall as grassroots society and even the US government questioned the legitimacy and morality of quiz shows as a genre. Congress took the cheating seriously enough to criminalize rigging a quiz show in 1960.¹⁴ Networks began damage control, with CBS cancelling all shows linked to the scandal and NBC removing the entire genre from primetime blocks for a year. Why they did not cut the genre entirely from syndication after the 1959 Congressional hearings on the matter is simple: according to quiz show historian Olaf Hoerschelmann, through it all the genre “retained much of its economic attractiveness, namely its simple production values, low production costs, especially low talent costs, and a solid popularity with the audience.”¹⁵ Hoerschelmann argues that despite the significant blemish on the genre’s integrity, it still retained a strong would-be audience and had too lucrative a financial upside for networks to cast off.

This is the environment in which *Jeopardy!* emerged. The most prominent quiz shows on the market were no more, and television networks were desperate to recapture now-latent audiences without drawing Congressional scrutiny. In an attempt to meet demand without

¹² Jack Gould, “Man in the Street: The Public Often Can Outshine TV Stars,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1955, <https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/113425946/335343C19937465EPQ/1?accountid=14556>.

¹³ Erin Blakemore, “The Rigged Quiz Shows That Gave Birth to ‘Jeopardy!’” *History.com*, The Arena Group, April 18, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/quiz-show-scandal-fraud-jeopardy>.

¹⁴ Communications Act Amendments, 1960, 86 U.S.C. § 752, 1960.

¹⁵ Olaf Hoerschelmann, *Rules of the Game: Quiz Shows and American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 88.

incurring legal liability, most networks rebranded their remaining quiz shows as “game shows,” shifted focus to daytime shows with modest prizes, and began experimenting with shows with no relation to quizzes such as *Let’s Make a Deal*, *Password*, and *The Dating Game*. These shows were successful, but there was now a significant quiz show-shaped void in the market.

Enter Merv Griffin, a successful singer, actor, and talk show host with an interest in creating a popular quiz show. One day, Griffin was bemoaning the lack of viability of quiz shows due to the scandals when his then-wife Julann suggested creating a quiz show in which the contestants are given the answers and have to guess the questions.¹⁶ This, in theory, would allow the show to retain the same feel but avoid some of the suspicion that had come to plague the genre. From this idea, *Jeopardy!* was born. It first aired on NBC in 1964, hosted by Art Fleming, and would stay on the air in its original form until 1975. After brief revivals in 1978 and 1979, it burst back onto the scene in 1984 with endearing new host Alex Trebek, at which point the show arguably began its true ascension to television royalty.

What’s Old is New

The format and feel of *Jeopardy!*, Hoerschelmann explains, is a combination of the old big-money quiz shows (though significant payouts were not immediately present) and new, then-modern ideas.¹⁷ It brought television back to “a serious atmosphere, fairly elaborate sets, and returning contestants”, features notably absent in the majority of the shows of the post-scandal era.¹⁸ It merged the classic quiz show’s subjects of science and history with sports and

¹⁶ This story was corroborated by Merv Griffin himself in a 1964 *Independent Star-News* article (“Merv Griffin: Question and Answer Man”) but as it is not readily available I cite a secondary account by a noted *Jeopardy!* expert and champion: Ken Jennings, “How Merv Griffin Came Up With That Weird Question/Answer Format for *Jeopardy!*,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 44, no. 11 (2014): 52-53, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/How-Merv-Griffin-Came-Up-With-That-Weird-Question-Answer-Format-for-Jeopardy-180949815/>

¹⁷ Olaf Hoerschelmann, *Rules of the Game*, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

entertainment, essentially combining accessible common knowledge with what Hoerschelmann terms “forms of cultural distinction.”¹⁹ In other words, it created a pool of topics so broad that every American, regardless of background, would have at least some familiarity with something presented in the average episode. The show also provided the contestants with enough clues that answering correctly did not require deep knowledge of the subject, significantly enhancing its egalitarian appeal and potential educational value. Additionally, despite early payouts being quite low even for the time, *Jeopardy!* embraced gambling on a level not present in most shows of its era, enhancing the risk-and-reward element of the quiz show genre. *Jeopardy!* is thus by design extremely accessible, with something for almost everyone.

Vintage *Jeopardy!* has remained largely intact over a half-century of existence and one ten-year hiatus, retaining this strong format. Turn on an episode today and it will have the same professional tone and quality and variety of stimulating questions as it did in the 1970s, as well as a nearly unchanged format. This makes modern *Jeopardy!* something of a time capsule of days long gone, a fascinating glimpse into television’s past synthesized with what was, in hindsight, a very forward-thinking program.

However, cultural entities produced in one era always carry with them hallmarks of their specific cultural contexts. In theory, no amount of broad appeal should seamlessly transport *Jeopardy!* from 1964 (mimicking 1950) to the 2020s without a hitch. The entertainment industry is enamored with nostalgia and revivals, but in most cases these entail a degree of “modernization,” from state-of-the-art special effects to new takes on well-known stories. Between its undeniable campiness and the academic theming in an era of short attention spans

¹⁹ Olaf Hoerschelmann, *Rules of the Game*, 92.

and rapid movement, this once more raises the question: how can it be that a quiz show that first aired in such a singular industry environment in the mid-1960s is thriving in an infinitely different industry environment in the early 2020s? Furthermore, what does this state of affairs say about the quiz show genre as a whole and broader American culture?

To answer these questions, one must explore the modern era of *Jeopardy!*, beginning with its revival in 1984. After seeing a good deal of success followed by multiple cancellations, the revival with Trebek at the helm quickly became one of the most-watched shows on television.²⁰ In an era of action, typified by top shows like *The A-Team*, *Magnum, P.I.*, *Miami Vice*, and *Dukes of Hazzard*, a quiz show with a professional, erudite tone unremoved from the 1950s was at the center of attention. This remained the case entering the 1990s, where *Jeopardy!* and its glitzier, more modern cousin *Wheel of Fortune*, continued to dominate the scene.²¹ Near the turn of the century, concerns were raised over whether these shows with predominantly older audiences were set for a decline: though *Wheel* and *Jeopardy!* commanded a 43 and a 35 share, respectively, among audiences 55 or older, they both held shares of 15 or below among men and women between 18 and 34, per Nielsen ratings.²² These same concerns were raised by *Newsweek* in 2011 and by a slew of publications by 2021.²³ The point being, there is clearly something

²⁰ Industry magazine *Broadcasting* already had *Jeopardy!* at the top of the charts in 1986, along with *Wheel of Fortune* and *The Cosby Show*: “Syndicated Sweeps Winners: ‘Wheel,’ ‘Jeopardy!’ and ‘Cosby,’” *Broadcasting (Archive: 1957-1993)* (Washington, United States: New Bay Media LLC, December 5, 1988).

²¹ Steve McClellan, “‘Wheel,’ ‘Jeopardy’ Still Games to Beat,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 127, no. 1 (January 6, 1997): 56.

²² Steve McClellan, “The Changing Demos of Game Shows,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 126, no. 3 (January 15, 1996): 70.

²³ Daniel Stone, “Is Alex Trebek in Jeopardy?” *Newsweek.com*, February 13, 2011, <https://www.newsweek.com/alex-trebek-jeopardy-68733>; Myles McNutt, “Before *Jeopardy!* Can Choose Its Next Host, It Needs to Decide Who Its Audience Is,” *Slate.com*, August 20, 2021, <https://slate.com/culture/2021/08/jeopardy-mike-richards-levar-burton-new-host.html#:~:text=A%20key%20source%20of%20tension,median%20viewer%20age%20was%2070.>)

about *Jeopardy!* and its fellow long-running quiz shows that appeals to multiple generations, even though its primary audience is always an older demographic.

Setting aside its unique ratio of longevity to tangible content change, *Jeopardy!* is quite similar to those other quiz shows, especially in terms of core themes. Other long-running shows like *Wheel of Fortune* and *Family Feud* may have undergone many more changes to their presentation, format, and tone than *Jeopardy!* has, but they still center around gambling one's wits or knowledge in exchange for material gain. This commonality is likely one of the elements that keeps this genre timeless in spite of its generally older audience. As mentioned before, the 1980s were an entertainment era of over-the-top action and flair. These themes can be more broadly labeled "excess," one of the strongest socioeconomic forces at work in the American media market at the time. Alongside the action shows mentioned above, many of the other popular series on television centered around middle-class suburban families—*The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* chief among them. These sitcoms also embraced excess, though in a more subtle manner. They presented solid and connected family units where no one ever really wants for anything longer than a single episode. Other social and political themes specific to each show aside, they both present relatable people living comfortably off of their earned wealth. Simply put, the quiz show and the sitcom were both formed and shaped by the interests of the middle class, the largest spending group in the country. In so doing, they were better able to achieve higher ratings, due to the size of the potential audience, and better advertising deals, due to that audience's expendable income.

In a Class of Its Own

In *With Amusement for All*, LeRoy Ashby discusses the emergence of the middle class, which can be traced all the way back to the Industrial Revolution but truly became a prominent

economic factor around the end of the 19th century.²⁴ Ashby describes the way generally rising wages and standard of living allowed people who would otherwise have been working a to devote a great amount of time to leisure.²⁵ With more expendable time came demand for more entertainment opportunities, and from this demand came phonograph parlors, a professional sports boom, and motion pictures.²⁶ When the radio became a universal means of recreation, the quiz show emerged as a source of entertainment. As such, the genre owes its existence to the preferences of the middle class, who came to dominate most media trends as the largest potential audience. When television followed in radio's footsteps, the most popular programs transitioned to the new medium, bringing their audiences with them.

Above all else, the history of modern leisure time exemplifies how the mass consumerism of post-WWII America came to dictate the path of many entertainment genres. With the prosperity of the 1950s came a new ability by the average American to spend on completely unnecessary products, out of convenience or even out of want and want alone—spend to excess, as one might say. The massive payouts and blatant excess of big-money quiz shows appeal directly to the consumerist spirit, both as a celebration of the audience's freedom to spend and as a vicarious simulation of earned wealth for the less-fortunate viewer. These themes persist in various ways to this day, frequently appearing in a wide array of mediums.

As previously noted, the themes of big-money quiz shows are crystalized within *Jeopardy!*, which now holds a similar niche in an equally—if not more so—consumerist America. In spite of the age of its themes and presentation, *Jeopardy!* remained at the center of

²⁴ LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

²⁵ Ashby, *With Amusement for All*, 155-157.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

the television market through the 1990s to the 2000s to the 2010s to now. Fellow Merv Griffin brainchild, *Wheel of Fortune*, underwent many changes between its pilot episode, the initial airing of the show in the 1970s, and its nightly premier in 1983.²⁷ The classic theme song has been replaced, side contests have come and gone, and the wheel itself has been refitted.²⁸ However, *Wheel* has remained at the top of television charts for just as long as *Jeopardy!* has, and it shows no signs of losing momentum anytime soon. If one considers *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune* a pair of control and test subjects, they further prove that there is something more to the appeal of the quiz show that is intrinsic to its design: something too inherent to be scrubbed by format changes but also too compelling to be passed over as generational interests shift.

One trait shared by these shows that has remained a consistent structural component over the years is gambling. The titular wheel in *Wheel of Fortune* is one of the most recognizable icons of the gambling industry, and it serves a similar purpose to the roulette wheels it mimics. In *Jeopardy!*, the most obvious case of gambling is Final *Jeopardy!* At the end of each episode, which has rewarded quick reflexes combined with quick thinking, the show calls upon its contestants to literally gamble on themselves for a final question. They can wager up to their total earnings in the episode, double or nothing, and this has led to some truly surprising results. This twist of the format requires contestants to think differently from how they did in the rest of the episode, as they must evaluate not only how likely their answer is to be correct but also the

²⁷ For information on *Wheel of Fortune*'s very different pilot episode entitled *Shopper's Bazaar*, see Seth Abramovitch, "46 Years Ago, *Wheel of Fortune* Took Its First Spin," *Hollywood Reporter* 426 (January 6, 2021): 64. <https://www-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/2488041032/fulltextPDF/46AF908B77334F6EPQ/1?accountid=14556>.

²⁸ One of several examples of a format change: James Poniewozik, "*Wheel of Fortune* Kills Free Spin. Is Nothing Sacred?" *Time.com* (September 9, 2009). <https://entertainment.time.com/2009/09/09/wheel-of-fortune-kills-free-spin-is-nothing-sacred/>.

odds that their opponents might surpass them with their bets. This, along with the presence of the Daily Double, adds some truly random flair to an otherwise balanced test of knowledge.

It should be no surprise that gambling is a very popular institution on television. Poker tournaments are frequently broadcast on national channels. Sports betting is becoming normalized politically and socially. In a much broader sense, random chance is a staple in most entertainment mediums that deal with competition: random number generation in video games; dice rolls and card draws in board games; and even coin flips to determine starting possession in the National Football League. It might seem unintuitive that artificial randomness would be a significant draw in entertainment centered around competition, producers have recognized that games of skill can be made more appealing by adding the twist of a lottery element. Even the purest games of skill inherently present converging scenarios—unique strategies, unforced mistakes, and the reactions they provoke—that are amplified by an element of chance. Without a level of unpredictability, it is much harder to keep an audience engaged.

Gambling on Yourself, Featuring the American Dream

Thus, at least one piece of the overarching appeal of the quiz show has been uncovered—gambling and chance have been entertainment staples for millennia and will likely be so for the remainder of the human race's existence. However, the topic of gambling in quiz shows is complicated by some of its other themes. Its use of direct wagers (as opposed to the by-design random chance described above) can certainly add a level of unpredictability, but other pillars of the quiz show's appeal seem to conflict with unstable outcomes.

Another significant aspect of the quiz show is the persistent ideal of the American dream. Since this term carries the baggage of a century of use and reinterpretation, a definition is in

order. In the first recorded usage of the phrase *American dream*, James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* defines it thusly:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.²⁹

The spirit of this definition can be traced back to the humanist ideals of John Locke that in turn shaped one of the most quotable clauses of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.³⁰

While it can be aptly stated that these values have not been appropriately applied to every citizen of the United States of America throughout its existence, it is inarguable that these principles remain at the core of the nation's identity in many ways. These include the manners in which the nation presents itself, which extend to its representation in the media. The quiz show is one such representation.

Adams's definition aligns nearly perfectly with the basic concepts of the quiz show. Quiz shows like *Jeopardy!* are presented as cinematic worlds in which normal, everyday Americans are given the opportunity to make a fortune off of nothing but their personal merits and a few calculated risks. Frank Spangenberg, a witty New York City Transit police officer, became the

²⁹ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1932), 404.

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence," July 4, 1776, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib000159/>.

first contestant to surpass \$100,000 in *Jeopardy!* winnings in 1990.³¹ Friendly, quirky bartender Austin Rogers won \$411,000 in 2017 and famously returned to his day job.³² Smiling supply chain professional Julia Collins won \$429,100 in 2014. These people and many more like them are a testament to the narrative of *Jeopardy!* and quiz shows as a genre, a narrative that emphasizes the unremarkable professions of its remarkably brilliant contestants. Every episode, after all, has an aside where Alex Trebek solicits short, silly anecdotes from the contestants, allowing them to display their personalities and further relate to the audience. Through this emphasis on normal Americans, quiz shows present themselves as microcosms of the ideal American meritocracy. Within the bounds of the television, the quiz show states, it does not matter where the contestants came from or what their station in life is—all that matters is one's aptitude.

On the subject of aptitude, the “super winner” is a fascinating look at the quintessentially American cultural zeitgeist. These contestants, who attain fame through their prolific earnings on quiz shows, are most common in *Jeopardy!* due to its lack of a tangible payout ceiling (as opposed to the target dollar amount of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* or the puzzle-solving objective of *Wheel of Fortune*.) Perhaps “common” is not the proper word for the super winner, as their notoriety comes from a place of relatively unique achievement. The use of dollar amounts as a form of scoring structure, naturally, emphasizes the payouts earned by the shows' winners. As they return after each successive victory, they inch ever closer to the various scoring milestones set by those who came before them. Modern media culture is obsessed with numeric

³¹ *Jeopardy!* season 6, episode 96, “Episode #6.96,” directed by Dick Schneider, aired January 15, 1990, on CBS, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/jeopardy-1-15-1990>.

³² Cory Stieg, “This ‘Jeopardy’ champion kept his bartending job — but still used his \$400,000 winnings for one big splurge,” *CNBC.com*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/07/jeopardy-champ-austin-rogers-won-400k-and-kept-his-bartending-job.html>.

expressions of achievement—statistical firsts in professional sports, the number of awards a film receives, and the career earnings of celebrity entrepreneurs are all constant topics of interest for the press and the consumer. The earnings of *Jeopardy!* contestants can be most closely compared to the last of these three examples, and this is epitomized through the story of quiz shows’ most famous contestant: Ken Jennings.

Though Jennings was neither the first *Jeopardy!* contestant to strike it rich nor the first to achieve national attention, he did both to such an extent that after nearly twenty years he remains a prominent television celebrity and the holder of numerous *Jeopardy!* records. His meteoric rise began on June 2, 2004, when he narrowly edged out New York fundraiser Julia Lazarus.³³ What would follow was a nearly five-month streak of 73 more victories over which the software engineer-turned-writer amassed \$2,520,700 in winnings (before taxes, of course.)³⁴ Both of these statistics were and are *Jeopardy!* world records and are among the greatest quiz show feats of all time.

As impressive as his run on *Jeopardy!* was, what makes this truly remarkable is the rush of celebrity that followed. He appeared on a number of prominent daily talk shows and was all over the news, becoming a veritable household name. The clamor over his streak—and earnings—led *Jeopardy!* to soar to the top spot on the ratings board for weeks.³⁵ Television executives like Randy Rigby of KJZZ-TV in Salt Lake City argued that the “Ken Jennings

³³ He almost lost in Final *Jeopardy!* but was deemed correct for answering “Who is Jones?” using only the surname of former track star Marion Jones. Source: *Jeopardy!* season 20, episode 193, “Episode #20.193,” directed by Kevin McCarthy, aired June 4, 2004, on CBS, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/jeopardy-june-2-2004-rb>.

³⁴ *Jeopardy!* “Ken Jennings: ‘Jeopardy! Changed Everything | J!Effect,” YouTube video, 3:24, December 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hl37lRmD7us>.

³⁵ James Hibberd, “Repeats Deflate ‘Jeopardy!’ Contestant’s Winning Streak Sent Show into Ratings Orbit,” *Television Week* 23, no. 33 (August 16, 2004,) <https://web-s-ebshost-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=3ad278d1-c311-42d3-a730-5a334133bbb4%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=14401087&db=aph>.

effect” had a great impact on the show’s prolonged success going forward, stating that he’d “seen a lot of interest in individuals who have not been traditional followers of ‘Jeopardy!’ [who] have taken an interest in Ken.”³⁶ This was not a flash in the pan, as it were. Ken Jennings’ quiz show success left a lasting impact on the industry and himself. It would be easy to chalk this up to the financial gains involved, but there is something deeper to this. Jennings and Alex Trebek formed a legitimately friendly relationship, something that was relatively unprecedented due to strict separation between the host and contestants before and after filming each episode.³⁷ He made a number of returns to the show in competitions of the “all time greats,” including the “Greatest of All Time” series in which he competed with James Holzhauer and Brad Rutter, two other super winners. These ended up dominating the television market and becoming some of the highest-rated *Jeopardy!* episodes of all time.³⁸ What made people watch Ken Jennings so fervently? Furthermore, what is the significance of his strong ties to *Jeopardy!* resulting from his historic run?

In part, his popularity can be tied to the concept of parasocial relationships. Humans are social by nature and form attachments with individuals they frequently come into contact with. Ken Jennings was a very charismatic and likable contestant, and with how frequently he appeared over those five months, it’s natural that people would become invested in his success. On top of that, the massive earnings he gained from his quick reactions and knowledge are exactly what makes the quiz show appealing in the first place. This level of success is

³⁶ Christopher Lisotta, “Ratings Streak in Jeopardy?” *Television Week* 23, no. 37, (September 13, 2004,) <https://web-s-ebscohost-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=8d99e6c6-a130-4d10-b450-297e6cab1dec%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#AN=14671056&db=aph>.

³⁷ Stephanie Nolasco, “‘Jeopardy’ GOAT Ken Jennings talks friendship with Alex Trebek, reveals favorite films to watch for quarantine,” FOX News, April 16, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/jeopardy-goat-ken-jennings-alex-trebek-best-movies-for-quarantine>.

³⁸ Toni Fitzgerald, “‘JEOPARDY! GOAT’ Ratings Are Pretty Great Themselves,” *Forbes*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tonifitzgerald/2020/01/15/jeopardy-goat-ratings-are-pretty-great-themselves/>.

enthraling, not only because of its magnitude but also in the way that it reaffirms the American ideal of social elevation.

Jennings' growing business connection to *Jeopardy!* represents another aspect of the American dream. His dominance of his "field" was so pronounced that he became one of its faces, eventually being named a long-term host of the show. Frequently, when he appears in a *Jeopardy!* product, his winnings and status as the "Greatest of All Time" are flaunted. In his short bio on the *Jeopardy!* website, over half of the words are dedicated to his "unprecedented 74-game win streak worth \$2.52 million" and how "he bested Brad Rutter and James Holzhauer in the ABC special event 'Jeopardy! The Greatest of All Time.'"³⁹ In the public perception, he is not unlike prominent entrepreneurs Steve Jobs or Mark Cuban. Each is celebrated as a real-life demonstration of the American dream at work in the modern era. For instance, in a 2018 CNBC article titled "Mark Cuban's life story is the real American dream," his "hustler mentality" and practice of "always having an iron to the fire" are credited for his aggressive business ventures that raised him from the son of working-class parents to the owner of the Dallas Mavericks.⁴⁰ This biography is followed with a reminder that *Shark Tank*, a show headlined by Cuban, "airs weeknights starting at 7P ET." In these instances, financial success through the American dream is not only an accomplishment to celebrate but also an advertising platform for a neoliberal society with a vested interest in individual success. The case of Ken Jennings shows that *Jeopardy!* contestants are not merely competing in a quiz show—they are taking part in and contributing to the broader American economy, as well as realizing the American dream.

³⁹ Jeopardy! "Ken Jennings," *Jeopardy!*, <https://www.jeopardy.com/about/cast/ken-jennings>.

⁴⁰ Brianna Jacobson, "Mark Cuban's life story is the real American dream," *CNBC*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/23/mark-cubans-life-story-is-the-real-american-dream.html>.

Likewise, the success of people like Ken Jennings would not be laudable if it were not deemed to have been attained through his own merit. Just as certain business magnates are sometimes criticized for using inherited wealth as a launching point, a quiz show contestant with aid from an outside source would not carry the same significance to the American ethos. As UC Berkley professor Daniel Melia states in his chapter of *Jeopardy! and Philosophy*, “the display of such ‘fair’ competitions reinforces the American faith in classless meritocracy. We like to see an open contest with open rules for all.”⁴¹ Though the depth and breadth of knowledge required for true success on *Jeopardy!* is quite extensive, the categories primarily derive from popular or otherwise useful subjects that, while not universal, can be easily researched in a culture built upon the free circulation of information. Unlike other quiz shows, which often have gimmicks that can instantly lead to surprise victories or shocking defeats, success on *Jeopardy!* is mainly built upon knowledge, quick thinking, and reaction time.

This is important not only for the sake of competitive balance but also for promoting the idea of integrity, which is central to Adams’s American dream thesis. His definition assumes fairness and honesty, with no under-the-table dealings. This ensures the merit-based success he values so highly. Comparing *Jeopardy!* to the big-money quiz shows it followed, the importance of integrity to television audiences becomes equally clear. Though *Jeopardy!* recaptures the tone of the big-money quiz show, it was explicitly designed to inhibit cheating and avoid any notion that anyone could be getting an unfair advantage.⁴² Through this differentiation, *Jeopardy!* can be seen as a cleaner, purer expression of the ideals espoused by the big-money quiz shows.

⁴¹ Daniel Melia, “*Jeopardy!* and American Exceptionalism,” in *Jeopardy! and Philosophy: What is Knowledge in the Form of a Question?*, ed. Shaun Young (Chicago: Open Court, 2012), 6.

⁴² For example, as Clare McNear describes in her history/insider’s guide to *Jeopardy!*, *Answers in the Form of Questions*, contestants’ access to host Alex Trebek—one of the very few members of the production who knew all the questions—was limited to brief introductions and a few selfies.

With competitive balance in mind, the presence of gambling in quiz shows' formats would seem to defy the meritocratic aspect of James Truslow Adams' definition of the American dream. This notion is not entirely incorrect—in the quote cited before, he does not account for luck or other forms of random chance. However, adding a bit of luck to the equation arguably captures the American dream more accurately than Adams ever did. It should not be controversial to state that in life, not everyone is born with the same strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. The playing field, as it were, is not level—some people are inevitably placed in more of a position to succeed than others by factors completely outside their control. Life is also full of sudden twists and turns which may advantage or disadvantage an individual through no fault or merit of their own. The ways gambling and luck are implemented in quiz shows mirror this unpredictability, furthering the similarities between the genre's general format and the age-old American ideal.

There is an alternate purpose to gambling in quiz shows: broad television appeal. In Thomas DeLong's *Quiz Craze*, he describes how betting was first implemented in *Take It or Leave It*, a 1940 radio show, as a "natural suspense builder."⁴³ The come-from-behind victories that beguile audiences are also, however, frequently cited as a component of the American dream. There are countless true stories of people who rose from unfavorable situations to riches and fame, stories that can be viewed in a similar light to that of a *Jeopardy!* contestant who jumped from last place to first with an aggressive wager in *Final Jeopardy!*

Also like the real-life American dream, these stories are not infallibly replicable. For every contestant who pulled ahead in *Final Jeopardy!*, there are the 148 contestants who were

⁴³ Thomas DeLong, *Quiz Craze*, 74-76.

trampled by Ken Jennings, just as for every self-made millionaire there are countless aspiring businessmen and women who have no hope of measuring up to competitors born into immense wealth. This means that, in essence, though the parallel between quiz show achievement and ideal American achievement is quite strong, the manner in which it is presented and thus perceived is flawed. Hoerschelmann rightly points out that egalitarianism was “an important focal point of the popular media coverage of quiz shows before the [big-money] scandals.”⁴⁴ *Jeopardy!*, being a torchbearer for this era of entertainment, carries this theme of equity forth in its media identity—for example, an article in *The Verge* recently reflected upon its sense of achievability and egalitarianism.⁴⁵ With that in consideration, what is the reason for this discrepancy between presentation and reality? Is it by design, or simply the natural order of things when a group of individuals are given competitive tasks? To answer these questions, one must venture into the question of audience: who watches *Jeopardy!* (and its genre peers), why, and why don’t others?

“Audience, we need your help.”

As previously established, recreation is shaped by the audience it garners. Different groups with different backgrounds, beliefs, and values naturally find different things interesting, stimulating, or relaxing. Knowing this, if a company wants its product to appeal to a certain group of people, it will design the product to reflect that group’s values. If it wishes to broaden its consumer base, it may lessen any specific flavor the product may have. A product can also

⁴⁴ Olaf Hoerschelmann, *Rules of the Game*, 81.

⁴⁵ Joshua Rivera, “Jeopardy! The Greatest of All Time is the GOAT of low-stakes television,” *The Verge*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/1/14/21065863/jeopardy-the-greatest-of-all-time-alex-trebek>.

inadvertently gain favor with certain demographics due to coincidence, though the extent to which this happens varies wildly from case to case.

The audience of the quiz show has already been established to be primarily made up of middle-class Americans. From its development at the turn of the 19th century to now, the middle class has represented an exceptionally desirable and broad consumer base. Until very recently, it was also the largest economic group in the United States. Due to the middle class's direct role in the development of the quiz show, it is natural that the middle class represents the traditional quiz show's primary audience. Due to the lucrative nature of capturing a middle-class audience, it is likewise natural that quiz shows, along with every other entertainment medium, make strides to attain and retain that audience. Though there is no way to definitively prove the assertion that the middle-class American is drawn to quiz shows specifically because of their portrayal of consumerism and the American dream ideal without a thorough national survey, a strong argument backed by solid sociological theory can be made.⁴⁶

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) essentially argues that mass media's audience is active in choosing what media it consumes and that this choice is informed by the needs that media fulfills. UGT can be traced back to the 1940s, when sociologists attempted to apply psychology to the consumption of radio content.⁴⁷ UGT's modernization is credited to the work of Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in 1974, in which they expand upon the theory by adding clauses that, for instance, argue that media industries compete with themselves

⁴⁶ Additionally, even if such a survey existed, it would only reflect audiences in the modern day and not throughout the quiz show's existence.

⁴⁷ See Paul Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page; An Introduction to the Study of Radio and Its Role in the Communications of Ideas*, (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce 1940).

and other entertainment outlets for consumer attention.⁴⁸ Overall, their work applies UGT to television audiences and more accurately captures the intricacies of consumer choice. They postulate that, among other things including destressing and the acquisition of information, the “affirmation and reinforcement” of values is a need for which consumers may seek out entertainment.⁴⁹

Although the sophistication of uses and gratifications theory has been called into question over the years, its methodology has undergone many improvements as well. As Thomas Ruggiero describes in his article “Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century,” sociologists dedicated to the study of UGT have refined its model and definitions repeatedly, and the theory remains reliable regardless of its remaining impediments to research.⁵⁰ Today, UGT is frequently applied in studies of social media use.⁵¹ Regardless, the basic concepts behind it are sound—different people seek out different forms of entertainment for different reasons. One of these reasons is to reinforce consumers’ values. Consumerism and the American dream are two values that are central to the existence of the middle class—the former being one of the universally-recognized byproducts of the class’s emergence, and the latter being an essential part of the class’s ethos and the key to its development. Without the socioeconomic elevation enabled by American capitalism, there would be no American middle class. This intrinsic link between

⁴⁸ Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, “Uses and Gratifications Research,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1973): 510-511.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 517.

⁵⁰ Thomas Ruggiero, “Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century,” *Mass Communication & Society* 3, no. 1 (2000) <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=b8993e5d-63a4-441c-9faa-a0a5a2cded9f%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=3061529&db=ufh>.

⁵¹ For example: Dolores Gallego, Salvador Bueno, Jan Noyes, “Second Life adoption in education: A motivational model based on Uses and Gratifications theory,” *Computers and Education* 100 (2016) <https://www-sciencedirect-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/science/article/pii/S0360131516301105?via%3Dihub>; Shampy Kamboj, “Applying Uses and Gratifications Theory to Understand Customer Participation in Social Media Brand Communities: Perspective of Media Technology,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* 32, no. 1 (2020) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2534604433?accountid=14556&parentSessionId=0e1AZfyy1BUXhcvq%2FA%2FzrTWExIoxOWq3Sqs7NjRDdRM%3D&pq-origsite=360link>.

class and system establishes a level of relatability between the two, and it need not be scientifically proven that audiences flock to products and brands that they find relatable or otherwise recognizable. Quiz shows like *Jeopardy!* reinforce the idea of merit-based economic elevation through both their common inherent structures and individual features. Therefore, there is strong cause to state that the socioeconomic factors at play in quiz shows make up a significant part of their appeal to their sizable middle-class audience.

Theme Song Reprise and End Credits

The reinforcement of American dream ideals is the cultural legacy of the quiz show. On top of their value as sheer entertainment and vehicles for the creation of minor celebrity, they are a cultural institution that continually impress their history onto modern society. They imprint upon their audiences the culturally-transcendent sentiments of the American dream and consumerism. Furthermore, they teach us about how the early influences on an entertainment medium can continue to shine through even once it becomes relatively self-perpetuating. In this way, society shapes the entertainment it consumes and is in turn influenced by that same entertainment.

These conclusions, however, are far from the apex of the cultural history of the quiz show. The American middle class represents but a portion of the genre's audience base, and though that has been the central perspective of this study, one would be remiss in not acknowledging potential future areas of inquiry. For one, quiz shows (and the rest of American television) have a complicated history with women and people of color.⁵² Recently, this has been

⁵² One famous example from the early days of the quiz show: Dr. Joyce Brothers, an influential television psychologist and winner of *The \$64,000 Question*, alleged that the producers attempted to force her off of the show with obscure boxing questions because she didn't wear makeup. See Lewis Lord, "Trying to Stump Dr. Joyce Brothers," *U.S. News & World Report* 127, no. 22 (1999): 76,

a very popular subject in connection to the ever-helpful genre case study that is *Jeopardy!* Regarding the search for a new host after the passing of Alex Trebek in November 2020, many questions were raised about the diversity (or lack thereof) of the selected co-hosts Ken Jennings and Mayim Bialik.⁵³ Concerning questions and trends throughout the genre represent a notable literature gap in this specific area of study, as does the prevalence of quiz shows outside the United States of America. Furthermore, a more statistical approach could be taken in a future study with access to detailed ratings data, both demographically and regionally.

There is no way to know what the future holds for the quiz show. Though the genre's major players have not been noticeably harmed by the consumer exodus to streaming platforms, the ways in which syndicated video media is produced and disseminated appear to be on the precipice of some significant changes. Will the genre continue to thin and eventually fade away? Will its charm and safe relatability prevail? Those are million-dollar questions. The only sure answer is, as long as they are produced and viewed, American quiz shows will always provide their audiences with education, entertainment, and cultural reinforcement.

<http://www2.lib.ku.edu/login?URL=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=2528927&site=ehost-live>.

⁵³ Though it should be noted that this is not the first time *Jeopardy!* has come under fire for perceived non-inclusion, as seen in Chuck Taylor, "Jeopardy Host Defends Show's Record On Race," *The Seattle Times* (November 2, 1995) <https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=19951102&slug=2150198>

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