HOW TO DEVISE A

GAME SHOW

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By David J. Bodycombe

With a Foreword by
Michel Rodrigue, Distraction Formats

FOREWORD

by Michel Rodrigue
President and CEO, Distraction Formats

Television formats have existed since the very earliest days of television but it is only in the last few years, with the global success of shows like Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?, Survivor, Big Brother and others, that an international "market" for TV formats has really taken off. It's already a multi-million dollar business, but it is still relatively young.

I set up Distraction Formats five years ago as an independent format distribution company and today it is recognised as a leading international formats "brand". From the start of operations, we have worked hard to nurture the broader, international business – and our philosophy has been based around three key elements:

- Commercialism

- Security

- Education

On the commercial point, the turnover of the international formats business has yet to be measured – we're hoping for some reliable figures soon - but there's no doubt it is a burgeoning sector and rewards for the owners of the "hot" formats can be very great. In terms of security, we have always advocated that formats be promoted as "secure" products and I have supported the setting up of FRAPA (the Format Recognition and Protection Association) to develop awareness of protection issues.

On the education front, a healthy conference, festival and trade publishing environment has already developed around formats. And it is for its rich educational value that I am wholly endorsing this, David Bodycombe's new book.

I have known David for a number of years, during which he has often impressed me with the quality of his thinking and his presentation of format-related material. David has been devising games for over 12 years. From board games to radio and TV shows, web initiatives and all points in-between, he has amassed exceptional multi-platform experience in aspects of games and puzzle creation. It's safe to say he is one of greatest authorities on the subject in the world.

I knew this, the first book of its type, would be good – but actually it's excellent, both as a guide for newcomers to the formats game, and as a work of reference for those already in the business. Read, digest – and create!

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Georges Luks at the Golden Rose Festival, plus my friend and colleague, John Gough, for the help and exposure they have given to format devisors in recent years.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of broadcasting, the addictive nature of games has brought long-term success for many light entertainment shows. However, to my knowledge there has not been a detailed guide analysing what makes game shows tick.

This Guide does exactly that. A key aim has been to make the text as accessible as possible by provide comprehensive coverage of the subject matter. Therefore, I have considered the two main audiences throughout – (i) members of the public hoping to devise and sell their own format, and (ii) TV companies who wish to use it as a way of training internal development staff. Both audiences have different requirements, and as such different parts of the Guide will be more relevant than others.

As I am a British author and UK formats are somewhat in vogue at the moment, there is a bias towards British programmes where examples have been necessary to illustrate points in the text. However, I have attempted to include well-known international programmes too.

Despite being a major media success story, comparatively little has been written about game shows. As such, there are may be some areas that I have missed which deserve inclusion. Feedback and suggestions for additional material for future editions are welcomed – please email these to formats@labyrinthgames.com. We hope you find this Guide illuminating and I look forward to seeing your next format hit the airwaves.

David J. Bodycombe
London, June 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David J. Bodycombe is one of the UK's most active games devisors, acting as advisor and author in many different media. He has devised challenges for TV shows including *The Mole* (Channel 5), *Sub Zero* (BBC TWO) and five series of *The Crystal Maze* (Channel 4). On BBC Radio 4 he appears on the problem solving show *Puzzle Panel*, and is also the researcher and question setter for the treasure hunt game *X Marks the Spot*.

David has authored numerous highly acclaimed puzzle books, and writes 1000 puzzles a year for columns in periodicals such as the *Daily Express*, the *Big Issue* and *Metro*. He is also active in the interactive field, including work for *Pyramid* (a major BBC ONE documentary), *Mind Games* (BBC FOUR) and several websites. He also compiled the first ever crossword on interactive television!

At time of writing, David is working on numerous projects including writing clues for the new version of *Treasure Hunt* (BBC TWO), devising challenges for *Starfinder* (a new ITV children's show), and piloting his own game show with S4C (Channel 4 Wales).

He has won World Creative Thinking Championship twice and, as an occasional game show contestant, won £160 of Jeremy Beadle's money and a Palm Pilot that didn't work.

Author's website: http://www.labyrinthgames.com/

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DISCLAIMER

Any financial figures mentioned herein are to give the reader a rough order of magnitude of what to expect, but ultimately in the business world everything is negotiable. Similarly, any legal points mentioned are merely to raise awareness of the type of issues often involved in the formats business, rather than providing an authoritative account. Regulations may have changed since publication and operate differently in other countries. Always take proper legal advice for your individual circumstances where necessary.

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Game shows are handled under a TV department called 'light entertainment' so what is entertaining about them? Different programmes use a selection of the following techniques.

1.   Hosts

Even a fairly straightforward programme can have its chances of success transformed if a big star hosts it. It's no wonder that some shows are billed as *Jim Davidson's Generation Game* or *Bruce's Price is Right*.

There are different styles of host, and matching up the right host with the right vehicle for their talents is a delicate decision.[1] For example:

- **The quiz show host** – Needs to be strict and good at pronouncing difficult words, often at high speed. Attitude can vary from genial to businesslike.

- **The family game show host** – A warm personality is everything here. Stock-in-trade jokes, impressions, improvisation, catchphrases and self-humiliation are cranked up to maximum effect. The game itself may take a back seat for parts of the show.

- **The panel game host** – Generally has a schoolmasterly attitude, trying to keep order so that the game moves along. They will also require a sense of comic timing to deliver the scripted gags (see the section on Comedy below) as well as chipping in with their own off-the-cuff contributions.

- **The role-playing host** – Hosts that lead teams through fantasy-style locations may play a role with an ambivalent attitude. They could support a team when their morale is low, but try to put spokes in their wheel when they are winning everything in sight.

- **Good cop, bad cop** – One host guns for the contestants while the other tries to thwart them. This can lead to a childish, pantomime style.

The larger the pulling power of the host, the larger their popularity and hence their salary! Bear in mind that the top stars receive quite a number of approaches and so you cannot guarantee that the person you want to participate will be available or affordable. Hence, it is dangerous to try to devise a game show that revolves around

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[1] On rare occasions, more than one host can be used for different roles on the same show in order to use the best combination of available talent. For example, one host could introduce the show and contestants while another asks the actual questions.

the popularity, mannerisms, catchphrases etc. of any particular person. There's no guarantee they'll agree to host your show.[2] The best thing a devisor can do is to bear in mind the style of presenter you want without tying yourself down to any particular name.

Also be aware that "the talent" (as they are known in the trade) often sign golden handcuffs deals that prevent them from hosting programmes for rival channels. It can be useful to keep abreast of entertainment news sources that carry semi-reliable details of these contracts. It can be slightly embarrassing if you suggest a show to one network if all your suggested presenters are exclusive to their archrival.

2.   *Celebrity guests*

a) **Professional celebrities**

In its broadest sense, a celebrity could be defined as "someone that people like to spend time with". Celebrity guests on a programme can be the same each episode, completely different every time, or a mixture (e.g. regular team captains with new guests). The last of these options has the benefit of setting up long-running jokes between the regulars while introducing new possibilities for gags with the special guests.

Using celebrities as team-mates with members of the public is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it means the celebrity can fill in the dead air by bantering with the host while the contestant is getting on with the job of playing the game properly. One the other hand, it can make the contestant look dull next to a media-savvy celebrity.

Be aware, however, that some styles of challenges are not suitable for some celebrities. The stereotypical celebrity likes situations where they can show off and they know at least 80% of what's going to happen (allowing them to have some quips in mind). They don't like situations where they have to appear intelligent, think quickly or understand a complex game. Pre-scripted jokes should be tailored to each guest's usual style of humour.

Celebrities work well on panel games (many old US celebrity panel games actually started out with civilian contestants) but the jury is still out on celebrity versions of civilian quiz shows. In games with significant prizes, celebrities play on behalf of charities. Should the celebrity lose, a very large negative entertainment feeling is introduced into what should be a feel-good show. This can be offset by offering a significant consolation prize, but then most of the jeopardy has disappeared.

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[2] A devisor contacting a celebrity's agent to sound out their support for a project is a double-edged sword. A big name attached to a project could help unless the broadcaster wants to use someone different.

Believe it or not, it is possible to run out of celebrities. The number of people who are suitable to play a certain game AND who want to appear on the show AND are available at the times you want them might be very small indeed.

b) The public as celebrities

While the audience may like watching celebrities, it's also possible that they like watching ordinary people who become celebrities through the programme they are appearing on.

During the first craze for TV quiz shows in the 1950s, returning champions became celebrities in their own right. The ability of the audience to get to know someone over a number of programmes, together with the increasing amounts they were accruing in prize money, meant for compelling viewing and excellent PR in the press. The technique of using carry-over champions seems to be out of vogue at the moment, and it's not without its risks. One contestant on the Channel 5 quiz *100%* won 75 consecutive shows and the producers were forced to change their rules since it was having an effect on the ratings! On *Jet Set*, the losing finalist gets another chance to play again the following week, which can lead to grudge matches with the reigning champion.

Monica Rose was originally a contestant on Hughie Green's *Double Your Money*, but such was her public popularity that she later became a hostess on the show. More recently, some contestants on reality game shows have started to attract some degree of celebrity (or infamy) in their own right.

More recently, participants in reality shows have become overnight stars (and, in most cases, overnight nobodies afterwards). Other "semi-professional" quiz contestants can develop a cult following when they appear on many different shows.

3. Supplementary hosts

Traditionally, any on-screen staff supporting the host would take the form of one or more **hostesses**. In many shows this is still the case, and it's interesting to theorise why. Undoubtedly there must be some element of sex appeal. Both men and women prefer seeing women on screen so, since most game show hosts are male,[3] using hostesses is a good way of introducing women into a programme.

Stooges are semi-regular comic characters that are brought on to interact with the host. The stooge is in on the joke and the skits are scripted beforehand. Sometimes off-screen studio staff or authority

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[3] Presumably this came about through a combination of: (i) the game show audience having more women than men, (ii) men being seen as more authoritative traditionally, and (iii) most comedians being male.

figures (e.g. an adjudicator or voice-over announcer) are used by the host as another opportunity for banter.

Finally, **mascots** are non-human stooges – inanimate objects, robots, cartoon characters or computer animations. The US show *Press Your Luck* (recently revived as *Whammy!*) was hugely popular for a time due to its Whammies – cartoon characters that appeared on-screen to "steal" a contestant's money when a contestant pressed a button at the wrong time. In *3-2-1*, a robot called Dusty Bin denoted the show's booby prize (a trash can). Several European shows still use mascots as another element of visual branding: *Le Big Dil* (Big Deal) in France uses a real-time computer-generated blue alien which the host talks to throughout the show.

4.   Contestants

If a game show does not have a strong play-along element for the audience at home, then it must have strong contestants that we are interested to watch playing the game effectively on "our behalf". We discuss ways in which the audience's interest in the contestants can be increased in the **Jeopardy** section below.

Different sorts of entertainment can be gained from watching a contestant undergo different sorts of emotions, such as:

- **Smugness** – e.g. getting a question right[4]

- **Disappointment** – losing the game

- **Greed** – playing for a stated, valuable reward

- **Surprise** – winning an unexpected reward

- **Shock** – something frightening happening suddenly

- **Relief** – avoiding a jeopardy

- **Anger** – arguing with a team-mate

- **Disgust** – at your own performance or that of a team-mate

- **Gross out** – having to do something deeply unpleasant

- **Fear** – having to do something seemingly dangerous

- **Laughter** – laughing at themselves or the host's jokes

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[4] A curious phenomenon about quizzes is that, as a broad-brush observation, wealthier people have had a better education and therefore can get even richer by winning quizzes. It might be worth thinking of alternative testing systems that have a more equitable methodology in order to capture a "everyone has a chance to win" feel to your show.

- **Anxiety** – not knowing which tactical choice to make

- **Panic** – when time's running out

- **Hate** – when voting off a competitor you intensely dislike

- **Love and Lust** – as used in dating shows

A clever trick is to get several lots of reactions from the same stimulus. When a particular event happens, the sequence of shots that follows could be:[5]

- Seeing and hearing the contestant's reaction

- Hearing the audience reaction shortly afterwards

- Seeing and hearing the host's reaction

- Seeing the reaction of a contestant supporter (spouse, child, parent, friend etc.)

Often the reactions from the different parties can be very different – someone on *Millionaire* might be confident and want to go for the £1million question while their spouse behind them is anxious, silently mouthing that they've got the wrong answer.

5.   *Comedy*

Clearly, comedy is an excellent way of providing entertainment. In game shows, it can come in a number of forms.

a) Scripted comedy

This is probably the most honest form of comedy used in game shows. We know that a scriptwriter has written a light-hearted skit and the contestants and/or the host are going to act them out in some way. The introductions on many shows involving extrovert contestants (e.g. *Generation Game*) follow this pattern.

Scripted entertainment also appears in "grouting" – those pieces to camera that the host reads from autocue to warm-up the audience at the beginning of the show and to link the various sections together.

b) "Improvised" comedy

Note the quotation marks in the title. Many game shows that involve the participants making off-the-cuff remarks are mainly "on rails"

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[5] Since some of these things happen at the same time, the director will cheat by cutting together the videotape so that the reactions appear to happen in quick succession. This enables the maximum amount of emotion to be shown and prevents the viewer from thinking that they've missed anything.

formats. For example, on comedy panel games the host is given copious questions and research notes that offer potential opportunities for comedy to happen. It may well be the case that the panellists are shown the questions briefly beforehand to give them some time to think of something funny to say. In some cases, they may even work with the scriptwriters to come up with brilliant responses. These days, the public don't care very much about this so long as the show is funny and the beforehand preparation is not too blatant.[6]

This said, there will be moments where the participants genuinely come up with amazingly funny comebacks, and it's normally those moments that people remember. Scripting ensures that the rest of the show doesn't appear too dull compared to the magic moments. Beforehand preparation also puts the panellists more at ease – even the best comedians would find it difficult to immediately respond creatively to the questions being fired at them.

c) "Unexpected" moments

Again, note the quotation marks in the title. Many accidents in game shows are more planned than you might think.

The main entertainment value in *Family Feud* comes when a contestant gives an unusual or risqué answer to a question. While this seems to be unexpected to the casual observer, in fact the questions are often couched to plan moments like this. For example, what sort of answers were the producers hoping for when they asked for "something you do in the bathroom", "something you wouldn't try even once" or "a game you play in bed"?

Shows such as the *Golden Shot* and *Blankety Blank* made light of their self-admittedly poor production values, but many of the "accidents" that occurred were in fact scripted. When genuinely accidental moments do occur, hosts with good improvisational talents can make excellent use of them.

6. *Ordinary people doing extraordinary things*

For a contestant, being on a game show is a little like being a kid again. They are encouraged to act in a more extrovert manner than they would normally do during their 9-to-5 job. Furthermore, the set of a game show is like being in a playground with very expensive toys.

The power of the television camera and the high budgets offered to some shows mean that for a few brief minutes Nigel Stevens – a fruit packer from Stockport – can become a contender fighting the

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[6] In the credits, the scriptwriters are normally credited as Researchers or Programme Associates in order to hide the fact that so much of the material is scripted.

Gladiators, or sing like Barry White on *Stars in their Eyes*, or overcome his fear of heights on *Fort Boyard*.

What's entertaining to the audience is the transformation of the ordinary person at the beginning into an athlete/entertainer/hero by the end of the show.

7.   Aspirational location

Television is a visual medium and as such it's very useful if you have a setting that is nice to look at. You can either do this using a specially built interior set (*Crystal Maze*), using an existing location as if it were a set (*Fort Boyard*) or by using the natural landscape (*Survivor*).

For a location to be aspirational it has to make the audience think, "I wish I was there". However, a location can be both aspirational for the audience but hell for the contestants. *Survivor* and *Bare Necessities* are good examples of this. While a tropical island would be an ideal location for a holiday for many of us, the contestants themselves are placed under a lot of pressure because of the circumstances. This means that the director can capture the scenic shots of the island as well as the reaction shots of the contestants wondering how to skin an octopus. This provides the ideal balance – watching a grim location (e.g. a jail) makes for miserable viewing, but equally watching the contestants having a completely lovely time provides no reason to perform and hence no tension.

8.   Play-along value

One of the key benefits of word games and quiz shows is the possibility for the viewer to play along with the game alongside the contestants. Other programmes can introduce an element of a play-along game even though the viewer can't actually get involved with the individual rounds themselves. One example is *The Mole*. While there's very little play-along value with each game, since they are mainly physical stunts, the audience can still try to guess the identity of the Mole from the various clues woven into the programme.

A problem with some quiz shows is that the contestants are sometimes so expert at the game that they answer quicker than the viewers can think. There are ways of remedying this, but it usually affects the fairness of the game play. For example, in many US quizzes the contestants' buzzers are only activated when the host has read out the entire question. If two or more contestants know the answer before the question has finished, it is more like a quick-on-the-draw contest than a true test of knowledge. Similarly, in the early rounds of a typical *Catchphrase* episode, contestants are not allowed to buzz in until a bell has sounded – this time lapse gives viewers a sporting chance.

With highbrow quizzes, one might assume that the audience will be a clique. While this is true to an extent, in practice the average viewer is happy to keep watching if they can answer the occasional question. This could be assisted by including some easier questions in the pack every so often to maintain interest.

Systems such as Two Way TV (see www.twowaytv.com) will allow viewers to play along with pre-recorded programmes in the near future. However, the ability to play along with live shows is much more limiting, as we shall see later.

a) Make the audience feel clever

One of the classic golden rules of game shows is "make the audience feel cleverer than the contestants". This is sometimes known as the Wheel of Fortune principle. In *Wheel of Fortune*, it is to the contestant's advantage to keep on spinning because they can gain more points this way. However, this can mean that there are barely any letters left to guess in the phrase. At this point, the viewer is leaping out of their chair thinking/saying/shouting "It's the LEANING TOWER OF PISA, idiot!" In fact, the contestant probably knows this too, but they have to keep quiet and keep spinning to take full advantage of the situation.

One other programme that made good use of this technique was *The Crystal Maze*. When the contestant entered the game room, we (as viewers) would be spoon-fed shots of the crystal in a locked box, a key at the end of a maze, a set of arrows on the floor, and a sign. This is the director telling us the story in pictures – i.e. the contestant has to read the sign, follow the arrows around the maze, pick up the key, come back again, unlock the box and get the crystal. From a contestant's point of view they don't have any idea what to do, the room is very big with a few things in it, and they have five team-mates screaming five different suggestions to them from outside while a 2-minute countdown timer is ticking down. We feel clever because we've seen exactly what needs to be done, but the contestant feels under pressure and freezes while they suss out the situation.

A good trick is to give the viewers more information or more time than the studio contestants. In the picture rounds for *University Challenge*, the director cuts to the picture shot several seconds before the contestants see it on their monitors in the studio to allow the viewers a sporting chance to get the answer first.

A final example is *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. Inventor David Briggs attributes part of the success of the show due to "shoutability" – the phenomenon of shouting the answer at the unsure on-screen contestant.[7] Both the viewer and the contestant

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[7] In group situations, people shout out answers at the screen to show how clever they are to the others, so in effect the viewers can have their own home competition.

probably know the answer, but only the contestant is risking many thousands of pounds on the right answer.