

# **Pay No attention to the Man Behind the Curtain: The Rejection of Artifice and the Culture of Choice**

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## ***Abstract***

*The “post-modern condition” is exemplified by a growing distaste for rigid structure, strict rules, and predictability, and results in an increasing demand for more fluid, ambiguous, and amorphous experiences. Two new pop-cultural genres have emerged that exhibit this shift most clearly; reality TV and the new wave of “user-controlled” video games that continue to flood the market. As it relates to sociological and psychological considerations, the existing literature on both video games and reality TV is limited. This paper explores the relationship between these new forms of less-scripted media and present societal conditions, and connects their emergence and dominance to larger socio-cultural forces such as alienation and anomie.*

American society has slowly undergone a major cultural shift. Evidence of this shift can be found within various forms of media and entertainment, as well as within the arts, fashion, and décor choices of today’s consumers. There is a growing demand for less-rigid structure, more ambiguous rules, and less predictability in almost every facet of our lives. Many consumers are no longer satisfied with only a passive consumption experience, and instead seek out more participatory and engagement outlets.

Over the past decade, two genres have emerged that exhibit this shift: reality TV and video games that afford the player greater control of narrative development. Whereas television shows and video games of the past generally followed a simple “set” storyline with a single main character, many titles now offer the consumer more control over the development of his or her own experience. While Lowenthal (1961) has argued that the repackaging of cultural objects as an improved upon or altogether unique product is simply an effort to make the products more attractive for market consumption, pure reflection theory would suggest that this emerging genre in some way reflects a broader societal demand for less scripted, more user-controlled entertainment experience; more specifically, reflection theory would propose that a new wave of unique, less-scripted entertainment is a response to a cultural shift that beckons or requires such objects.

This paper examines the emergence of a number of different genres that reflect a larger societal shift to the “culture of choice”. Specifically, we focus on video games and reality television. As it relates to media consumption, there is very little sociological literature on both video games and reality TV. The aim of the present paper is to explore the relationship between the emergence of these styles of less-scripted media and current societal conditions, and to suggest why marketing managers should be cognizant of this trend.

## Videogames

Over the last several years, video games have emerged as one of the dominant forms of media consumption. As of 2012, video games sustained a \$20 billion a year industry in the United States (ESA, 2012). Video games sales recently outpaced the combined sales of DVD and Blu-ray movies, and “blockbuster” video games now rival blockbuster movies for opening weekend sales (Reuters, 2009). Fully half of all American households have a designated video game console (Entertainment Software Association, 2012). Recent consumer research reveals a surprising trend: video game playing is no longer exclusively the domain of adolescents; a large number of players are adults (Wood, et al, 2004). In 2012, the average age for gamers in the U.S. was thirty, and 68% of players were eighteen and over (Entertainment Software Association, 2012). Video games are also no longer solely the domain of males; an estimated 45% of gamers are women (Entertainment Software Association, 2012).

Whereas games of the past have generally followed a linear model (that is, a single “set” storyline and one main character), many games now offer various choices in how to develop, design, and progress the character through a non-linear setting. Within these stories, the character is directed by the choices made by the human controller, thus determining which path the character ultimately takes. Johnson (2005) describes this as “leading the plot vs. following the plot.” *Morrowind* (2002) appears to be the first game of this type to emerge. The game found immediate popularity, and quickly achieved cult status.

*Morrowind* is a completely interactive, realistic, and detached world where you are in complete control of your character’s actions. Your race, your class, where you go, who you meet, and what you do is completely up to you. No one is holding your hand and telling you not to do this and not to do that. If you want to steal some expensive shoes or clothes, associate yourself with a bad crowd, or procrastinate and have a walk through the forest then by all means do. The game sets no limits to what you can do and focuses primarily on role-playing.

Kolsky, 2002.

*Morrowind* struck a chord within the gaming community by harnessing never before explored concepts in video games; freedom, choice, control, and detailed customizability. Consumers were drawn to the prospect of directing their own story, and a new genre was born.

The adventure/fantasy game genre was not the only realm to undergo a facelift in the name of more freedom of choice and control: Will Wright’s *The Sims* (2000) actually predated any of the recent alterations to the fantasy/adventure game genre. The original *Sims* (2000) sold 40 million copies (including expansion packs), ranking as the number one computer game of all time. The sequels, *The Sims 2* (September 2004) and *The Sims 3* (June 2009) sold 1 million and 1.4 million copies in their respective first weeks on the market. The mass appeal of *The Sims* franchise has been credited to its “virtual dollhouse aspect.” The game structure allows for “creative design, storytelling, social experimentation, and more” (Becker, 2004: 1). Johnson (2005) observes that, within this genre, “it’s the interactivity that hooks [the player], the engagement of building your own narrative”. The lack of rigid scripting is similar to that of comic books, where the reader fills in the gaps of what happens between each panel of the illustrated story. For this reason, *The Sims* experience is left open:

The Sims speak gibberish, and dream and converse by using icons rather than words. Unlike other failed attempts to realistically simulate human life and language, Wright came up with an elegant solution that not only works but also encourages the players to project their thoughts on the cute little computer people.

Frasca, 2001: 2

With the original *Sims*, gamers had the option of a “snapshot” feature for creating family photo albums. But gamers did not use this feature to simply take pictures of their Sims, but instead to string together images in a narrative structure, much like a comic book. *The Sims 2* upgraded this feature from what had previously been merely a “family album” to “story mode.” The story mode of *The Sims 2* allows the gamer to string together pictures (or even videos) of their Sims, and to add captions to each one - a self-guided, unfolding narrative in the truest sense. *The Sims* is primarily about “the player telling the story, not the computer” (Becker, 2004). The entire Sims franchise (from the original SimCity (1989) to the most recent Sims 3 (2009)) is famous for “not forcing the player along a preordained narrative line” (Johnson, 2005: 37). Consumers have full control over their own entertainment experience. Poole (2004) summarizes this key distinction: “in the movie theatre, the world is projected *at you*; in a videogame, you are projected into the world” (86).

Survey research reflects a growing preference for a less-scripted gaming experience. Wood, et al (2004) conducted a survey of 382 gamers to examine what structural characteristics of video games are deemed most important to a player. Two-thirds of the respondents indicated that “character development over time” was important (including physical attributes such as strength, dexterity, and aspects of personality), as well as “the ability to customize physical attributes of the character” (such as clothing, facial features, body type). Also of high importance were “elements of surprise (76% of respondents) and the ability to “explore new areas” (75%). Respondents reported “they did not like games that were in a linear format, and they preferred games where there could be several different ending options” (Wood, et al, 2004: 7).

While it would be easy to write-off the emergence of this video game genre as merely a result of advances in technology and a marketing push to capture consumers, many of the same themes that make these games attractive are also found in reality TV, where technology has not recently leapt in a similar manner.

### Reality TV

What you see for a few fleeting seconds is something you almost never see in primetime entertainment: a display of genuine emotion on someone’s face. The thrill is the *thrill of something real and unplanned* bursting out in the most staged and sterile of places.

Johnson, 2005: 97

While the hype and attention of given to reality television over the past decade seems to suggest that it is an altogether new phenomenon, this is hardly the case. *An American Family*, a documentary that followed a family for seven months, aired in 1973, pulling in 10 million viewers (Rowen, 2000). *Candid Camera* has been on and off television since 1948. *Cops*, *America’s Most Wanted*, and *America’s Funniest Home Videos* debuted in the late eighties and early nineties. While all of these programs captured and maintained significant audience attention, they pale in comparison to shows born of the recent boom.

The Dutch original of *Big Brother* captured 53% of the national audience in the Netherlands, with an astounding 73% tuning in for the season finale (Wong, 2001). In the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, MTV’s *Real World* and *Road Rules* quickly developed cult status among the 12-34 year old demographic.<sup>1</sup> *Survivor*, a consistently popular reality TV show, pulled in 51.7 million viewers for its season one finale (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). Today, “reality shows” have become so common that we don’t even refer to them as “reality” shows anymore; instead, when making a distinction, we differentiate by identifying the “scripted” dramas (or, NON-reality shows, fiction).

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.thefutoncritic.com/cgi/gofuton.cgi?action=showwatch&id=road\\_rules](http://www.thefutoncritic.com/cgi/gofuton.cgi?action=showwatch&id=road_rules)

Critics predicted that the popularity of unscripted reality shows would wear off after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, as viewers were to surely avoid anything sad or dramatic, that seems to much of a reality. Campbell (2001) argued that after 9/11 “the equivalent of tomato soup for viewers [would be] the predictable haplessness” of primetime sitcoms. This was clearly not the case, as the three years following September 11<sup>th</sup> were marked by an exponential increase reality TV programming. Recently, however, reality TV ratings have as a whole dropped (though this may have more to do to their overabundance, they now heavily compete with each other), with many new reality shows debuting with abysmal ratings. But the attraction of what may be called the “conventional” reality shows (*Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, *The Real World*, *American Idol*, *The Amazing Race*) holds strong. Unscripted entertainment continues to demonstrate significant staying power.

Cheung (2004) suggests that reality TV is the “rejection of the artifice that audiences are accustomed to seeing”. Nabi, et al (2003), found support for this argument in their study, which links the popularity of reality TV to its “unscripted” nature. Many people have become tired of “the recycled jokes and uninspired premises of sitcoms and drama shows”<sup>2</sup>; most reality shows, on the other hand, “yield creative premises that play out in unpredictable ways.” In the postmodern sense, reality shows are “polythematic, open texts that allow for different readings” (Bouchard, 2004).

The primary attraction of many of the reality-based competition shows is found in the ability of viewers to affect the outcome of the shows themselves. *American Idol* is billed as “the show you control”; viewers have a hand in the process of selecting a superstar, creating a sense of collective rejection of the prepackaged, cookie-cutter, mass-marketed corporate music star. Countless other shows following this model are also based on at-home audience participation; the votes determine who stays and who is eliminated. *Big Brother*, a voyeur reality show that normally has no viewer input, implemented a twist known as “America’s Player”, where viewers selected one contestant and voted on tasks for him/her to perform each week. *The Big Brother* series also allows viewers to purchase subscriptions to the 24/7 cameras, allowing them to see what happens “behind the scenes”, outside of the televised, edited, primetime television spots.

### Exploratory Study

To further explore the outlined concepts, two preliminary inquiries were conducted. The first consisted of open-ended interviews, stemming from a “street corner/mall intercept style” design survey. The second was a brief survey given to undergraduate students at a large, southern university.

### Open-ended Interviews

A survey was conducted with 25 interviews with local gamers. Questions were open-ended and brief, asking respondents what types of games they played and why. Of those who preferred the games outlined in this project (about half of those interviewed, the remainder preferred sports games), a list of recurring reasons/themes emerged;

- More control
- Choice
- Developing storyline
- You can “create yourself” (customizability)
- Less boundaries, rules
- Other games (outside of the genre) are:
  - Predictable
  - Monotonous

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ringstuff.com/inf/entertainment/Reality\\_TV.html](http://www.ringstuff.com/inf/entertainment/Reality_TV.html)

- Boring, Dull
- Simple
- “Scripted”

The majority of those interviewed said they like these games because of the element of control and customizability, as well as the decreased presence of boundaries and rules. There was also a common distaste for games outside of the genre for being predictable, boring, and dull.

### Survey

An exploratory survey was conducted with students at a large southern university. The questions read as follows:

1. Do you watch reality TV shows?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. Describe what makes them appealing or unappealing.
2. Do you play computer games?
  - a. If so, what kinds do you play?
  - b. What makes these kinds appealing? What do they have to offer that others don't?

A brief content analysis allowed for the identification of several recurring themes:

### Reality TV

- “Real people”, you can relate to them
- Interaction, see into other people's lives
- “something different from sitcoms; almost all sitcoms seem the same.”
- Identification with characters as “real people;” “it's like you can see yourself through these people on TV.
- A *decrease* in preference for reality shows because they were “becoming *more* scripted;” it has become “the same formula for every reality show.” “The genre has become stale, repetitive, and bland.”(this supports Collins' 2004 observation that “*for the first time in years, viewers are buzzing about new scripted dramas*”).

### Interactive Games

- “you can use your imagination on a broader level. There are less restrictions, I don't like boundaries.”
- “I like the feeling of being able to do what you can't normally do.”
- “I can create myself (as a character) and pretend I am playing.”

Results from the content analysis reveal an emerging preference for what Johnson (2005) refers to as “leading the plot vs. following the plot.” Respondents indicated a desire for a more interactive, engaging experience, and there was a definitive rejection of predictable, overly scripted entertainment. Poole (2004) observes this shift as one from “lean back” media to “sit forward” media, where you don't “zone out, you play along”; consumers prefer telling their own story, building their own narrative.

### The Postmodern Turn

The development of these new entertainment genres did not occur in isolation, nor is the continued preference for them merely a passing cultural taste; they are reflective of a larger cultural shift. Postmodern theorists have continually expressed concern that the “advent of a mass society would lead to a loss of identity and hence to widespread anxiety or stress” (Burke, 1991: 836). Traditional society was held together by a deep consensus of common values and beliefs; such a social environment was structured according to deepened sense of community. The shift to “modernity” caused traditional social bonds of kinship and community to give way to a society composed of loose group bonds and formal, but weak, impersonal ties. Instead of finding ourselves embedded in deep communities of meaningful, supportive social ties, our current social environment is instead characterized by feelings of disconnection, disenchantment, and estrangement from both self and society. Jean Baudrillard theorized that the anxiety generated by this societal shift spawns a cultural obsession with images, representations, and simulations. This preoccupation with representation eventually saturates reality “to such an extent that experience can only take place at a remove” (Ward, 2004: 64). Our response to this sense of panic and anxiety results in our “producing events, activities, images, and objects which assure us of their (and our) reality. In an attempt to compensate for the fading of the real, we make a fetish of the supposedly authentic” (Ward, 2004: 74). Baudrillard identified a number of elements that served this function; of particular relevance are private-life going public in talk shows, true-life stories, tabloid exposes, autobiographies, interactive TV, courtroom TV, “reality” TV (Ward, 2004).

There is an undercurrent of disquiet about our contact with reality and with one another in today’s interconnected, hyperlinked world. Those connections may all be staged, as suggested in *The Truman Show*. Individuals seek reassurance that there are unscripted, authentic moments in life. Somewhat paradoxically, they turn to television and other media for proof.

Wong, 2001: 492

Bouchard (2004) suggests that reality-based television “reflects the underlying anxiety people in the Western World feel and the lack of meaning they feel their lives hold” (3). For many viewers, reality television “replaces the neighbors and friends who have fallen victim to the anonymity of modern urban life” (Bruneau, 2004: 1).

There is a tremendous vacuum in our lives, and existential crisis where so many people live very boring lives that don’t have a touch of reality – that’s why we desperately seek that touch of reality, be it reality TV, collectibles, or people getting plastic surgery to look like celebrities.

Dr. Peter Swirski (as quoted in *The Escape to Reality TV*)

In our search for authenticity (the “real”), we, as consumers, initially turn to the traditional cultural objects of consumption, but we find the same, tired, predictable experiences. The end result can only be the creation of less scripted, more interpretive cultural objects that empower (or appear to empower) the consumer. Postmodern cultural objects are therefore “open to the plurality of experiences and understandings that different groups can invest in images” (Ward, 2003). While modernist ideals are marked by univalence (constructed objects have a single meaning), postmodern ideals are marked by multivalence (constructed objects are deliberately open to many different interpretations); “instead of imposing a single meaning, formula, or presence on anyone, postmodernist [objects] are more freestyle and allow for the pleasures of

finding associations and making connections” (Ward, 2003: 22).<sup>3</sup> The postmodern condition, therefore, allows for a “myriad of access points, and infinitude of interpretive responses” (Ward, 2003). This is the emergence of the “culture of choice”.

### **Implications**

There is currently very limited research on both video games and reality TV, and at this time, none to speak of on their relationship to changing societal and cultural conditions. The goal of this study is to open the door for further, more detailed research into these relationships, and to generate discussion of how larger cultural forces influence our consumption preferences and shape our perceptions of “authenticity”.

Marketing has transitioned through the production-oriented era around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through the sales-oriented era to a more modern-marketing-oriented era. By focusing on the customers and satisfying their needs, businesses have been able to flourish in the tough and complex buyers’ market that we see today. This marketing and consumer focus has led to increased customer satisfaction leading to increased customer retention as well as repurchase intentions, all of which are leading to higher profits for the businesses. Even further along the marketing type continuum we find the value-based marketing era. Going beyond just attempting to uncover consumer wants and needs, value-based marketing gives consumers opportunities to join in the production and creation of the products and services they desire. Including customers in production should further increase satisfaction with these goods and services, as the customer played an active role in their creation and is thus invested in the outcome. A product example could be as simple as M+M’s candy letting consumers order custom messages printed on the shell of the candies, or potato chip and soft drink companies allowing customers to sample and vote for their favorite flavor to be added to the existing line up of products offered. The sports world has also taken notice. In August 2013 the PGA let fans choose the pin position for the par 3 15<sup>th</sup> hole in the final round of the PGA Championship (Yahoo). This should make the customers feel not only a consumer of the game but also a participant. It will be interesting to see if such a strategy will increase viewership and sponsorship on that particular hole and event as a whole.

The examples given in this paper, from video games, reality TV programs, sporting events and goods and services, indicate a shift from the rigid structure of old, to a new interactive and engaged consumer experience that could lead to deeper interactions with customers, higher customer satisfaction levels, and hopefully an increase in businesses profitability as well.

### **Future Research**

The aim of this paper was to uncover the relationship between changing societal conditions, such as the emergence of the “culture of choice” and the postmodern condition, and the emergence of more interactive, unscripted media. But this “rejection of the artifice that audiences are accustomed to seeing” reaches beyond the realm of media and entertainment; there is a pervasive “rejection of artifice” throughout our entire culture, as we continually “seek reassurance that there are unscripted, authentic moments in life” (Wong, 2001).

### **Scripted Shows Follow the “Reality” Model**

The recent cultural shift has altered the format of traditional (scripted) television shows as well. In an ironic twist, many *scripted* television shows have begun to mimic the production techniques of reality shows. Viewers desire entertainment with a more authentic, unpolished feel. Early adopters of this style include *The Office*, *24*, and *Rescue Me*. More recently, the success of NBC’s *Parenthood* and ABC’s *Modern Family* can be attributed to their documentary-style production.

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<sup>3</sup> Postmodern architecture, for instance, is marked by a departure from the rules and conventions of modernism.

### News Consumption

Recent changes in how many of us choose to “consume” our news also reflect the culture of choice; the rising popularity of blogging and personal web pages prompted CNN to institute the popular “iReport”, in which ordinary people report the news as it is happening. In recent national elections, ordinary citizens posted questions for political candidates in “YouTube” debates; candidates viewed questions via YouTube video posts and responded live on television, in real-time. This no doubt added a more authentic element to a process that is traditionally marked by rehearsed, meaningless responses to scripted questions (not to mention alienating political jargon-language).

### Mixed Martial Arts

The popularity of mixed martial arts (MMA) is an indicator of the culture of choice as well. Boxing and Professional Wrestling are losing their audiences to the world of MMA, as viewers tune in for a “more realistic” sport with fewer rules and a less scripted experience. Conventional mediums are by comparison boring and predictable; wrestling is “too scripted”, boxing is too one dimensional (you can only use your fists) and therefore monotonous. The attraction of mixed martial arts is found in its lack of rules, realism, and *authentic* nature. *Professional wrestling*, which is one of the most scripted, and often most predictable, forms of entertainment, has embraced interactivity and viewer involvement as well. World Wrestling Entertainment now holds an annual pay-per-view where the audience votes from home via the Internet as to who they want in certain matches, and under what conditions and stipulations. Viewers were empowered with choice; the structure of the experience of this event was dictated by the will of the fans.

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