

PACIFIC PLAY: TELEVISION GAME SHOWS IN JAPAN AND THE UNITED STATES

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Enough has been said to ask for far more serious regard of play, and not of information, as the primary concern of any communication theory (Stephenson, 1967, p. 206).

I. INTRODUCTION

In Japan and the United States, to paraphrase Shakespeare, playing the game's the thing. Two Pacific rim cities—Tokyo and Los Angeles—produce so many game/quiz shows that they flood domestic screens and radiate throughout the world. United States shows are produced—by license or by “creative imitation”—in at least 20 countries, including Japan, while Japanese shows have been adapted in Taiwan and other Asian nations.

While Pacific, game/quiz shows (called in Japan simply “quiz shows”) are also pacific. As a former “Jeopardy” contestant pointed out on ABC-TV’s “Nightline” (March 6, 1987), they “don’t cause cancer and don’t circumvent Congress.” Except for players who have to walk up 72 flights of stairs in the “Trans-America Ultra Quiz” or get whip-creamed in “Double Dare,” game shows are harmlessly non-violent and non-controversial, which makes them “advertiser friendly” (Walley and Magiera, 1990).

In Japan and the United States, two of the most television-oriented cultures in the world, television exists mainly to entertain (Browne, 1983, p. 193). Japanese have 33.5 million in use. In America, 98 percent of homes have at least one TV set.

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The deceptively simple game genre can provide a window for comparing entertainment television content. A TV game show is defined in this study as a program featuring civilian contestants who compete for prizes or cash by solving problems, answering questions or performing tasks following prescribed rules. The contestants may include celebrities, but these celebrities are “playing themselves” while participating in the game rather than performing. The prizes may range from astronomical sums of cash to little more than token mementoes, even for contestants who perform superhuman feats.

Game shows can assume many forms. They can be interactive (viewers can play along) or passive (viewers simply watch the contestants “perform”); they can emphasize mental capacities or physical skills; they can test esoteric, “bookish” knowledge or “popular culture”/ common sense; they can involve intense time pressure or proceed more leisurely; they can be based purely on skill or purely on luck; they can humiliate losers or let them off easily; they can award glorious, costly prizes or token awards amounting to pride and honor; they can appeal to children, young adults or the older generation; they can focus on a topic or run the gamut of many subject areas; they can be erudite or tawdry, spotlighting a dazzlingly high IQ or newlyweds’ “whoopie” lives; they can be sedate or unleashed, such as Germany’s X-rated strip game, “Tutti Fruti.”

In both Japan and the United States, game shows in their various guises have great appeal. Why do viewers like them? On a “Nightline” program in 1987, Merv Griffin, creator of “Wheel of Fortune,” said game shows give audiences relief from the depressing nightly news. Psychiatrist Carole Lieberman says game shows “allow people to return to the playfulness of childhood” (Waters 1987, p. 64).

Speculation aside, because most Japanese and U.S. game shows appear on commercial networks, the survival of a particular show validates its popularity. In the United States, in fall 1983, a game show (“Family Feud”) ranked for the first time at the top of the Nielsen ratings for syndicated programs (called *Cassandras*), nudging out situation comedies, which had previously held the top spot. Ratings for November 1986 showed six game shows in the top 20 syndicated programs:

1. “Wheel of Fortune”
2. “Jeopardy!”
4. “New Newlywed Game”
14. “Hollywood Squares”
17. “Big Spin”
18. “Card Sharks”

TABLE 1. KANTO AREA NIELSEN RATINGS (FEBURUARY 20-26, 1984)

Program	Rating
1 .Oshin (NHK home drama)	62.5%
2 .Mito Komon (TBS <u>samurai</u> drama)	38.1%
* 3 .Quiz Derby (TBS quiz)	37.5%
4 .News Wide (NHK 7:00 a.m. weekday news)	35.4%
* 5 .Of Course, the World (Fuji-TV quiz)	35.0%
* 6 .Amusing Quiz Seminar (NHK quiz)	34.8%
7 .1984 International Women's Relay Marathon (NTV)	34.3%
8 .Kinchin's Open Variety Show (TV Asahi variety)	33.1%
9 .The Best Ten (TBS music hit parade)	30.2%
10 .Kindon (Fuji-TV comedy/ variety)	29.7%
11 .Sazaesan (Fuji-TV cartoon)	29.1%
* 12 .“How Much?” Around the World (TBS quiz)	28.5%
13 .Japanese Folktale Cartoons (TBS cartoon)	28.0%
* 14 .Word Association Game (NHK game)	27.8%
* 15 .Pittashikankan (TBS quiz)	26.4%
16 .Laughter Score (NTV comic storytelling)	26.3%
17 .Fuji Family Wide Show (Fuji-TV murder case special)	25.4%
18 .Toyama Kinsan (TV Asahi <u>samurai</u> drama)	25.1%
19 .It's All Right to Laugh Special (Fuji-TV comedy wide show)	25.0%
20 .Murder Is My Business PartIV (TV Asahi <u>samurai</u> drama)	25.0%

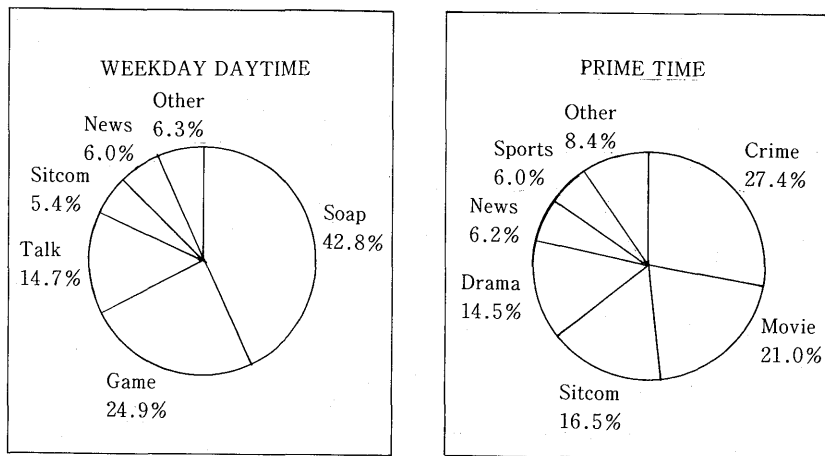
Source: “Data Station,” Za Terebijion 3 (March 10-16, 1984), 106

* Quiz

Five years later, for the week ending Feb. 17, 1991, games had slipped somewhat, but “Wheel of Fortune” still held the top syndication slot, and “Jeopardy !” still held the second spot. In Japan, statistics point to a similar vibrancy. Table I shows that in 1984, six of the top 20 shows in Japan were game shows. By December 1992, only two were in the top 20 : “Of Course! the World” (No.5) and “Takeshi and Itsumi's TV School” (No.19) .

Game shows have endured from the beginning of television's history in both nations. In the United States, however, after the quiz show scandals of the 1950s, such programs were relegated to network daytime and syndication arenas. (See Figure 1.) In Japan, they remain in prime time. In both countries, but especially Japan, the genre is now healthier, more entrenched and more varied than ever.

FIGURE 1. GAME SHOWS ON U.S. TELEVISION COMPARED TO OTHER PROGRAM GENRES



Frequency distribution by program type for selected time periods, 1983-1987.(Information from HDTV Archive.)

II. RELATED STUDIES

Japan and the United States cannot hope for mutual understanding without coming to terms with each other's popular culture. Yet despite the hundreds of hours of entertainment on both Japanese and U.S. small screens, little work has been done in comparing entertainment television, much less game shows.

Comparative Research

Edelstein (1982, p. 14) defines comparative research as "a study that compares two or more nations with respect to some common activity." According to Schramm (Edelstein, 1982, p. 7), such research is "a promising field of study within the larger field of international communication." Schramm (Edelstein, 1982, p. 11) even predicts that "in the decades to come it [comparative research] may actually prove one of the best investments for all of us."

For insights into comparative research, which may lead in time to theories, we can turn to cultural anthropologists, even though they usually study primitive rather than mass-mediated cultures. Understanding another culture, says Geertz (1973, p. 21) involves getting "from a collection of miniatures...to wall-sized culturescapes of the nation, the epoch." Geertz (1973, pp. 22-23) elaborates:

The great natural variation of cultural forms is, of course, not only anthropology's great (and wasting) resource, but the ground of its deepest theoretical dilemma: how is such

variation to be squared with the biological unity of the human species?

Similarly, but speaking of modern societies, Kato (1975, p. 6) points out that

the popular culture of each society is unique. The technology of communication is, generally speaking, universal; but the contents and functions of communication are culture-bound.

Mass Media and Entertainment

Few theories in mass media research pertain to entertainment content. According to Fischer (Fischer & Melnik, 1979, p. 2):

The preference schools or departments of journalism showed for the vast field of political communication is understandable... [due to] the setting up of establishments primarily concerned with propaganda, a subject with which they could also legitimize their existence.

Consequently, according to Melnik (Fischer & Melnik, 1979, p. 150) entertainment is "an area of mass communication research in which there is an enormous deficit... Such neglect was (and still is) perhaps due to the stigma attached to such products."

An exception to the deficit was Stephenson's *Play Theory of Mass Communication* (1967). Stephenson (1967, p. 40) draws from the book *Homo Ludens* by J. Huizinga (1950) the idea that culture "depends on play." Rather than being a waste of time, play "teaches loyalty, competitiveness, and patience" (Stephenson 1967, p. 46).

Applying these ideas to mass communication, Stephenson says that some content deals with work (informational and educational programs), while some deals with play. To date, information theory has been "all about work and not about fun." Since "play is of primary importance" in communication, the study of entertainment—"all the popular and humanistic arts—is of first importance in every theoretical aspect" (Stephenson 1967, p. 198). A role of mass communication should be to "maximize the communication-pleasure in the world... I would like to see more play, rather than less" (p. 205).

Stephenson's ideas foreshadow uses and gratifications theories. Katz, Gurevitch and Haas reported in 1973 (p. 169) the pleasure gratification that television provides.

Popular Culture Theorists

Predating Stephenson, in 1957 David Manning White and Bernard Rosenberg's *Mass Culture* appeared, compiled because "no traditional source books were available" (White & Rosenberg, 1957, p. v). Another seminal work, Mendelsohn's *Mass Entertainment*, appeared in 1966. Both books have a wider net than mass media alone.

The popular culture movements in the United States and Japan have a long and strong relation. In 1965, Ray Browne organized a popular culture conference at Purdue University, followed in 1970 by his founding of the Popular Culture Association. The same year, the Popular Press at Bowling Green (OH) State University published its first book (Browne 1989, p. 17).

In 1980, the USIA sent Browne on a speaking tour of Asia, where in Japan he found academics "quite open in their feeling that the study of popular culture would be stimulating" (Browne, 1989, p. 71). About 25 persons, spearheaded by Kazuo Yoshida of Kyoto Sangyo University, established the Popular Culture Association of Japan.

A growing number of works in English tells of the rich popular culture tradition in Japan. One of the earliest (Kato, 1975) was published by the East-West Center's Communication Institute in Hawaii. This author does not have access to Japan-focused or comparative studies that may be published in Japanese.

Purpose of the Study

Drawing on previous research, this paper will look at differences and similarities in one neglected area of study: TV entertainment content. In comparing Japan and the United States, it will include descriptive data on scheduling and qualitative assessments.

III. METHOD

The months of October 1988 and October 1992 were studied in depth. For Japan, the two-and three-hour quiz specials that dot the fall schedule were omitted.

For the United States, one affiliate was chosen to represent each network, from the Columbus, Ohio, area. Cable networks (Nickelodeon, the Nashville Network and Music TV) and independent channels (11 and 30), all of which carried game shows, were also analyzed.

IV. RESULTS

Table 2 shows that during the month of October, 1988, a viewer in southeastern Ohio could see 41 game shows when subscribing to the basic cable service. Table 3 shows that in Japan, a viewer could see 18 different shows. Omitting cable services and considering only weekdays 8 a. m.-midnight, one could see 15 different shows in southeastern Ohio and 10 in Tokyo, Japan, in 1988.

TABLE 2. GAME SHOWS ON U. S. TELEVISION, OCTOBER 1988

	ABC	CBS	NBC	CABLE	IND.
<u>Sat.</u>					
11:30— noon				Double Dare/ Nikelodeon	
7 pm— 7:30	Wheel of Fortune*				
7:30— 8	Jeopardy*				
<u>Sun.</u>		N O N E			
<u>Mon.</u>					
<u>Fri.</u>					
8 am— 8:30					Fun House/ Ch. 11
9— 9:30				Fandango/ Nashville#	
9:30— 10		Sweethearts	Scrabble		
10— 10:30		Family Feud	Sale of the Century		
10:30— 11		Card Sharks	Concentration		
11— 11:30		Price Is Right	Wheel of Fortune*		
11:30— noon			Win, Lose or Draw*		
noon— 12:30			Super Password	Remote Control/ MTV Let's Make A Deal/ USA	Love Connection/ Ch. 11#
12:30— 1 pm				Play the Percent- ages/USA	Lingo/ Ch. 30 Dating Game/ Ch. 11
1— 1:30				Hot Potato/ USA	Relatively Speaking/ Ch. 11
1:30— 2				Chain Reaction/ USA	
2— 2:30				Bumper Stumpers/ USA	
2:30— 3				Jackpot/ USA	
3— 3:30				Press Your Luck/ USA	
3:30— 4				Tic, Tac, Dough/ USA	
4— 4:30			Double Dare+	High Rollers/ USA	
4:30— 5	Win, Lose or Draw*		Finders Keepers*		
6:30— 7					Gong Show/ Ch. 30
7— 7:30	Wheel of Fortune*	Wheel of Fortune*			
7:30— 8	Jeopardy*	Jeopardy*	Family Feud*	NFL Trivia Game/ ESPN Double Dare/ Nikelodeon	
11:30— midnight					Newlywed Game/ Ch. 11

* network version

+ syndicated version

repeats on same channel later on same day (repeats not shown)

TABLE 3. GAME SHOWS ON JAPANESE TELEVISION, OCTOBER 1988*

Time/Day	Network					
	MONDAY-FRIDAY	ASAHI	FUJI	NIPPON	TBS	TOKYO
10 am	NHK-G					
10:30		Y1Million Quiz Hunter ⁺				
SATURDAY						
7 pm			Mr. Tokoro's Oddities			
					Quiz Derby	
8 pm						
9 pm					Discovering the World's Mysteries	
10 pm						
SUNDAY						
noon			'88 Star Contest Family Countdown			
1 pm		Attack 25 (1:15-1:45) ⁺				
7 pm				Brilliant Password		
8 pm						
9 pm						
10 pm			TV Play-backs			
11 pm						
MONDAY						
10 pm				Star Laugh Explosion Q & A		
11 pm						
TUESDAY						
7 pm					Ask 100 People Quiz ⁺	
8 pm					Waku Waku Animal Land	
9 pm			Let's Go! The World			
10 pm						
WEDNESDAY						
7 pm	Association Game (repeats Th.)					
8 pm				World Professionals Quiz		
9 pm					Round-the World Gourmet Quiz	
10 pm						
THURSDAY						
7 pm			Young vs. Old Quiz		How Much Quiz	
8 pm					Changing Locales Quiz	
9 pm						

*specials omitted

⁺civilian, not celebrity, players

TABLE 4. GAME SHOWS ON U. S. TELEVISION, OCTOBER 1992

	ABC	CBS	NBC	CABLE	PBS
<u>Sat.</u>					
9 :30 - am				Fun & Games/ Learning Channel	
5 pm - 5:30				Family Dbl Dare/ Nikelodeon	
5 :30 - 6				Arcade/ Nik	
7 pm - 7 :30		Wheel of Fortune *			
7 :30 - 8		Cash Explosion			
<u>Sun.</u>					
5 :30 - 6 pm				Arcade/ Nik	
<u>Mon.</u>					
<u>Fri.</u>					
11 - 11:30		Price Is Right			
1 pm - 1 :30				Supermarket Sweep/ Life #	
1 :30 - 2				Shop'til You Drop/ Life	
3 :30 - 4				Top Card/ Nashville	
4 - 4:30				\$25,000 Pyramid/ USA	
4 :30 - 5				Press Your Luck/ USA	
5 - 5:30				Arcade/ Nik	
5:30 - 6				Where in World Carmen Sandiego?	
6 -6:30				What Would You Do?	Square 1 TV
7 - 7:30		Jeopardy! *			
7:30 - 8		Wheel of Fortune *			
Midnite				Studs/ WTTE	
THE FOLLOWING SHOWS RUN DAILY M- F ON NETWORK AFFILIATES OUTSIDE COLUMBUS (AVAILABLE ON CABLE):					
10 am				Family Feud Challenge	
11:30				Classic Concentration	
7:30pm				You Bet Your Life Family Feud	
1 am				Perfect Score	
1:30am				The Personals	

*network version

*syndicated version

#repeats on same channel later on same day (repeats not listed)

Note: all shows on the USA Network are repeats from past years

TABLE 5. GAME SHOWS ON JAPANESE TELEVISION, OCTOBER 1992*

Time/Day	Network					
MONDAY- FRIDAY	NHK-G	ASAHI	FUJI	NIPPON	TBS	TOKYO
7 pm					The	
8 pm					Move	
SATURDAY						
5 pm					Shingo Yamashiro's Info Quiz Genius Quiz ⁺	
6 pm						
7 pm	Surzy Q Number Game		Takeshi Itsumi's TV School	Resemb- lance of Others	Quiz Derby	
8 pm				Magical Brain Powers		
9 pm					Discovering the World's Mysteries	
10 pm						Tamori's Music World
11 pm			Matchmaking Red Whale Tribe			
SUNDAY						
2 pm		Attack 25 ⁺ (2:15-2:45)				
7 pm	That's ⁺ Perfect	Hinto de Pinto		Teach Me! Galileo	Amateur Video Quiz	
8 pm						
10 pm			Cult Q ⁺			
11 pm						
MONDAY	n	o	n	e		
TUESDAY						
7 pm		Seeking Men's & Women's Hearts		What's the Question ?		
9 pm			Of Course! The World			
10 pm						
WEDNESDAY						
7 pm				Interview Quiz		
8 pm				World Professionals Quiz		
9 pm						Gourmet Quiz
10 pm						
THURSDAY						
7 pm			Young vs. Old Quiz	Trans America Ultra Quiz ⁺	Look Out For Doubt	
8 pm						TV Champion ⁺
9 pm					Info Variety	
FRIDAY						
8 pm						Changing Locales Quiz
9 pm			Family Present Quiz			
10 pm						

*specials omitted

⁺Civilian, not celebrity players

But by 1992, the U. S. numbers dropped to just 22 (Table 4) , while Japan's rose to 30 (Table 5)— astounding for a country with half the U. S. population. Japan is without a doubt the quiz capital of the world.

In 1992, eight of Japan's 1988 shows were still running: "Quiz Derby," "Discovering the World's Mysteries" (TBS); "Attack 25" (Asahi); "Of Course! the World" and "Young vs. Old Quiz" (Fuji); "Round- the- World Gourmet Quiz" and "Changing Locales Quiz" (TV Tokyo) ; and "World Professionals Quiz" (Nippon) . Moreover, the "Trans- America Ultra Quiz" (Nippon) , a regular/ special not shown on the 1988 table, has continued from 1977.

In the United States, five shows survived throughout the 1988- 1992 period. Indeed, each debuted before 1988, making their longevity even more impressive. They are: "Price Is Right" network 1956- 64, 1972- ; "Jeopardy" 1964- 75; 1978- 79; syndicated, 1984- ; "Family Feud" network, 1976- 85; 1988- (and syndicated) ; "Wheel of Fortune" network, 1975- ; syndicated, 1983- ; and "Double Dare 1986-, Nickelodeon children's cable channel.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Other than the fact that both countries' viewers love game shows, differences between Japan and the United States abound. But they do share some similarities.

Similarities

Production values and pacing. The slowness and dullness of quiz programs in some countries stands in sharp contrast to the liveliness of both Japanese and U.S. game shows.

Longevity. Many shows disappear, but the tenacity of certain formats in both nations is surprising. For example, of the six Japanese game shows listed on Table 1 for 1984, four were still running in fall 1988, and two of those lasted until 1992. In the United States, formats as much as 30 years old are still airing (although they may not have run continuously); "The Price Is Right" dates from 1956, for example.

Interactivity. In both countries, the audience at home could play along with most shows (although with shows like "Jeopardy" the home viewer has to think fast) . By contrast, many Latin American shows involve contestants doing physical feats, which preclude viewers from "participating" by guessing answers.

Differences

Studio mode/ travel mode. Also according to Kato (1989, p. 306) , mass tourism de-

veloped in the mid-1700s, with the result that the “Japanese group tour of today is world famous, sometimes even notorious.” No U.S. game show takes travel as its theme, but a number do in Japan. In 1984, “Of Course, the World” and “How Much? Around the World” were the nation’s fifth and twelfth most popular shows. In October 1988, one could view “Of Course, the World’s Festivals,” a special, and “Of Course, the World” (Fuji); “How Much? Around the World 20th Century Fall Special” (TBS); and “World Gourmet Quiz” and “Changing Locales Quiz” (Tokyo). In October 1992, all but “How Much?” were still running. These shows typically have on-location scenes from Jamaica, Pakistan, Singapore or Japanese sites, into which a question is woven. The answer is then shown by the on-location host or hostess.

For thinking big, no travel show can beat the “Trans America Ultra Quiz,” which debuted in 1977 and has reached as many as 40 million viewers. Thousands of contestants gather in a stadium to be winnowed down to a few finalists, who are flown to the United States, along with the host, producers and stage sets.

Assembly-line production. The travel quizzes point up other differences. U.S. game shows are studio-bound, varying little except for new contestants and questions. U.S. game shows generate high profits because of their low budgets, whereas many Japanese quizzes spare no expense. Only the daily “Y 1 million Quiz Hunter” (1988) fits the assembly-line mode, a technique necessary for turning out five shows each day (“strips”) with no reruns. In one week, U.S. producers can turn out as many as 50 shows.

Strips vs. specials. Ever since the quiz show scandals of the 1950s, U.S. game shows have been relegated to non-prime time slots. Not only do all Japanese shows except one reside outside of the daytime ghetto, but the networks outdo themselves in producing specials. For example, the 3.5-hour “Great Gathering Quiz,” taped at a well-known hotel, brought in personalities from four other game shows. The ambitious production effort makes even U.S. prime time shows of the 1950s seem pedestrian by contrast.

Celebrities vs. civilians. Most Japanese game shows (except for the travel formats) feature celebrities, while the 1988 U.S. shows with celebrities (“Super Password” and “Win, Lose or Draw”) team them with civilian contestants. The producer of “Of Course! the World” told the author that “the interchange between the host and panelists becomes a show in itself. Ordinary people’s conversation is not as interesting as that of pro entertainers.” U.S. shows must spend time (but very little money) in the civilian contestant selection/ interview process.

Information vs. mode of play. The information content rather than the mode of play

characterizes Japan's quizzes. For example, when the question appears in the travelogue shows after five minutes of following the hostess through Caribbean street scenes ("These objects were used for this purpose"), the viewer shifts focus only slightly from "information delivered" to "information to ponder" ("What was this object used for?"). In the U.S., the evolving nature of the game itself captures viewers' attention. Think of "Wheel of Fortune" and how the phrase gradually gets revealed—and the role of the wheel in injecting the element of luck. Here the mode of play is more important than the information content.

Broadcasting vs. narrowcasting. Network shows in both countries aim at general audiences. However, some U.S. cable networks tailor game shows to their special-interest audiences: sports for ESPN ("NFL Trivia Game"), rock music for MTV ("Remote Control") and country music for the Nashville Network ("Fandango"). Japan does not yet have a viable cable system.

Hosts vs. teams. Most U.S. shows have a single male host, who is assisted by females and sometimes males. Japan is much more progressive in featuring women as cohosts. Many Japanese shows have a roster of people in charge, including, for the travel shows, a travelling host and a home host.

Racial diversity vs. homogeneity. The issue of minority representation on U.S. television does not escape game shows. Dating/ marriage shows do not feature mixed-race couples. Blacks are fairly well represented as contestants on game shows, but Hispanics are not (Cooper 1988). Japanese shows do not have to deal with minority representation to the same degree.

Lack of formal transfer. The leading U.S. firm in the licensing of game shows overseas, Fremantle International, has set up about 50 U.S. shows to be locally produced in 13 countries—but not in Japan. Japan's "100 People Polled Quiz" is based on "Family Feud", while "Password" resembles the "Association Game" (NHK), but the NHK show has its teams separated by sex. By 1992, the two countries had no shows in common.

For some reason, even though Japan and the U.S. export many game shows, they do not export them to each other. The U.S. has been the source of the most successful cultural TV exchange in history: The "Wheel of Fortune" boom, which started in 1985. Then in 1987 *Newsweek* put "Wheel of Fortune" 's Vanna White, the show's assistant, on its cover (Feb. 9, 1987) and "Nightline," a news analysis program something like NHK's "Midnight Journal," devoted an entire program to U.S. TV game shows (March 6, 1987). Now more foreign than U.S. domestic viewers watch the show—ab-

out 100 million each week, total. The show's format has been successfully transferred to about 30 countries, but not to Japan.

Maybe word-based shows cannot transfer. Could a hiragana game be based on "Wheel of Fortune"? People have told the author that a "Wheel of Fortune" format would not work in Japan. Besides, Japanese do not like to see someone win a big prize like a car without working hard to get it. It seems that game/ quiz shows will in the future likely remain pacific and Pacific, but not trans- Pacific.

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