Your Specialist Subject

Children's TV Quiz Shows and the CMF QuizNite

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Ever since humans could communicate, we've been quizzing. Like storytelling, brain teasers have been around at least since people first put stylus to clay tablet. The oldest one on record is more than 4,000 years old, from Mesopotamia, and goes like this:

'There is a house. One enters it blind and comes out seeing. What is it?'

The answer is… well, see if you can work it out.

In the modern age, ever since there's been TV, there have been quiz shows. Plenty of them. It's a tried and trusted genre, relatively easy and cost-efficient to make, and fills slots from daytime to primetime to online. The ultimate prize, of course, is coming up with a show that can sell as a worldwide format.

They appeal to audiences of all ages for several reasons, not least because of their inclusivity – until the advent of the reality genre, quiz shows were the main possibility a viewer had of appearing on TV themselves. And while not everybody who watches a show gets to star in it, they can identify with those that do. Interactivity is a key component too. The emotional reward for recalling a correct answer is the big payoff, which doubles when you get something right that a contestant or co-viewer doesn't. Then there's the drama; like spectator sports, there's a story of success or failure to unfold, a side to support, in every contest.

The first iteration of a quiz show on British television was *Spelling Bee* in 1938, which broadcast live from Alexandra Palace for a short run just two years after BBC television launched. Meanwhile, over on ITV, *Take Your Pick*, a game show with quiz elements, aired the day after the channel launched in 1955. Interestingly, both started out as radio shows before being adapted for TV.

Over the decades, as TV has evolved, so too have quiz formats. Fast forward to the 21st century, and big prize quiz shows mean big audiences in primetime slots. In the children's space, quiz shows have been consistently popular too. And while they may not have the same kind of monetary reward, they tick all the other boxes of inclusivity, interactivity, mental reward and

drama. They're also good vehicles for educational content and celebrating school communities.

> **"Creative reinvention and adaptivity is something children's media makers have been doing successfully for a long time."**

A glance over the history of the development of the children's quiz format is more than just a nostalgia trip. It's a useful snapshot of how creative reinvention and adaptivity is not purely a modern necessity – it's something children's media makers have been doing successfully for a long time.

The evolution of children's quiz shows

Top of the Form was an inter-secondary school quiz that started out as a BBC radio show in 1948, then made the leap to TV in 1962. The radio show ran until 1986, and the TV version until 1975. It was an outside broadcast format that aired from schools around the country.

Screen Test invited kids to test their powers of observation by answering questions about film clips. It ran for 14 years, from 1970, and had three different presenters: Michael Rodd, Brian Trueman and Mark Curry. In today's short-focused YouTube age, a quiz show about video clips may just have potential for a revival.

Beat the Teacher (1984–88) spiced up the schools quiz format by pitting a pupil from one school against a teacher from another, battling to take control of a noughts and crosses board. There was an added interactive element as the studio audience, comprising supporters from each school, voted on multiple choice questions; the school with the most correct answers won the point.

The Movie Game (1988–95) pushed the interactive element further, combining film trivia and observation, with contestants advancing along a life-size game board, and performing movie skits with the props and costumes they collected along the way.

Junior versions are popular in the board game world, and some children's versions of primetime quiz shows have been successful over the decades too, including five series of *Junior Mastermind* in the 2000s.

Kerwhizz (2008–11) was a futuristic live-action/CGI hybrid preschool show. Animated characters took part in the quiz, cheered on by a studio audience. Questions were picture-based multiple choice, and success in the quiz gave the characters a 'pod-mod' boost in the end-of-show *Wacky Races*-esque race.

Then from 2016 to 2020 came five series of Susan Calman's *Top Class*, an inter-schools team quiz with a national curriculum based slant, neatly returning the format almost full circle back to the *Top of The Form* concept from half a century earlier.

So, if the question is how can we creatively reinvent our output to keep up with rapidly changing viewing and technology trends, the answer might just be to take inspiration from the progression of quiz shows through the ages: being open to evolving formats and audience needs, but retaining your core appeal of what made you a success in the first place.

After all, everybody still loves getting a question right, whether it's on a clay tablet or a digital one.

(The answer to the Mesopotamian riddle is 'a school', by the way.)

The CMF QuizNite

All of that brings us nicely on to the CMF QuizNite, a hugely popular annual event held each autumn in London that celebrates the joys of quizzing with friends and helps raise vital funds for the foundation. Hosted by Tiernan Douieb (see page 80), with questions set by me, the difficulty level ranges from serious to silly, and everything in between.

Now entering its fourth year, there's always a Specialist Subject round about the CMF *Yearbook*. So if you read this book, and you happen to be coming along in the autumn, you might just find yourself having a little advantage over your friendly rivals on the neighbouring table. Sign up to the CMF newsletter for news of this year's events: https://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/.