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Rewind, repeat: TV’s fame machine is oh-so retro

More than a decade ago, I wrote something on the 1996 film *Twister* and a host of other action films. I thought it was deep and profound: the new blockbuster films were trying to emulate the experience of playing interactive games combined with the thrill of amusement park rides.

My deep thought was that the film industry was reinventing itself for the digital era – a large screen immersive sense that imaginatively was more enriching than a videogame. In other words, a very old media form such as film was “modernising itself” to maintain its relevance with a new interactive audience.

In contrast, in looking at contemporary television I am struck at how retro it has become.

In its appeal to relevance, television produces countless versions of talent shows. Under the broad banner of reality TV, what we see night after night after night are programs that pit people against people for some award and prize that is ultimately delayed for week after week.
So filling the 16 years of television post-Twister, if you will, are shows such as American/Australian/fill-in nationality/Idol, So You Think you can Dance, Dancing with the Stars, The It Factor, Australia’s/Britain’s/fill-in-the-nation’s/Got Talent, Australia’s/fill-in-the-nation’s Next Supermodel, The Voice, and so on.

Flicking the switch back to vaudeville

The programs are made with glitz and colour and large amounts of what could be called glamour, but ultimately they are similar to what I used to watch in Canada as a boy: a local television talent show, Big Al’s Talent Showcase, that in its later years morphed into Big Top Talent. The show was hosted by Oopsy the Clown and – to use an expression that betrays its 20th-century historical origins – it was really hokey.

The original host Big Al appeared to be moderately drunk most of the time. He was a lecherous interviewer of the very young performers from local dance and performing arts studios (who were using the television time to spruik their business).

Those kinds of programs – whether national such as the Australian Young Talent Time or local – were very much part of early television. And many analyses of early television identified how television drew on its “liveness” to compete with cinema and produced programs that connected to performance.

Thus early television was often like radio before it and very reliant on vaudeville and cabaret: whether one was drawn to the powerfully popular Ed Sullivan Show in the US or In Melbourne Tonight in Australia, these were essentially variety programs and really are the
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Hey Hey It’s Saturday, with its Red Faces segment, embodied pretty well all that variety and TV talent contests combined – and even unabashedly acknowledged its kitsch and hokey quality.

The new studio system of fame

Nonetheless, there is something intriguing in this regeneration of entertainment by television.

What television has effectively done over the last 15 years is something we haven’t seen since classic Hollywood: they have created a studio system of fame. These talent/quiz shows and their cousins, the reality game shows, are actively producing a stable of stars.

As with Hollywood’s studio system, these are stars that are very much under the thumb and control of their corporate bosses. The Hollywood studio system as a star-making machine with appropriate contracts parallels the kinds of contracts performers on the Idol series have had to sign about their future performances and productions.

As Australian scholar Charles Fairchild has written in The Attention Economy, the contract clauses mean these made-stars are very much controlled by the production companies of the talent shows.

Such talent shows are highly orchestrated techniques of
presenting actual stars and celebrities via judges.

This may be a banal point, but it points to the way the program relies on these current or past stars to legitimate the star-making machinery of the talent show itself. Association, invited guest performers, adjudication and proximity are ways Australian programs enhance the images of the performers or contestants somehow. By association, the entire apparatus works as a fame-making machine.

Ricky Martin as a judge on The Voice allows the wider circulation of stories upon stories for magazines and online sources that re-implicate the program and its proto-stars into objects for further stories and media narratives: they make networks such as Seven, Nine and Ten relevant in the contemporary moment.

In a host of ways, these television formats underline a wider celebritisation of entertainment.

What has to be remembered about these talent shows is that most of the content comes in the form of "renditions".

We’ve heard almost all of the songs before by the original artists: the talent shows’ performers are providing interpretations of these songs. They rely on the pull of the original songs and hope that that connection migrates through an interesting interpretation or use of the voice to the current performer.

We can call this rendition television because it is conservative and retrograde in its heavy reliance on old content. Rendition television is also quite colonial: we legitimate our local stars by how they reproduce what has been generally culturally produced at the centres of entertainment production in the United States and England predominantly.

In a sense, programs such as Young Talent Time, Australian Idol or The Voice Australianise or localise international content. In fact, given that many of these programs are international franchises as formats, rendition television expresses the very essence of global and local, but it positions the local as ultimately secondary.

Talent shows hearken back to the 19th-century and early 20th-century practice of gathering around the piano in the parlour with the latest best-selling sheet-music. In both time-frames popular songs help us recreate our own local and private versions of popular culture.
Play it again

It is fascinating, to me, how repetitive these programs are.

Structures repeat for weeks upon weeks. Contestants are eliminated and formats and judging shift slightly as well to what becomes the next task or assignment for the next night’s show. These are the daily and weekly changes in talent-show programs.

This style of entertainment makes me think back to how film through Twister retooled to connect to the contemporary immersive sense of new media. With these talent shows, we have the televisualisation of the pleasure of repetition that online and videogame players enjoy. There may be slightly new levels, but there is a certain pleasure in the repetition with only slight changes.

Perhaps the contemporary talent show is appealing to these newer media forms as well even as it provides the comforts of the past in its entertainment and industrial form.

The author would like to thank Matt Allen for the kernel of the idea that video games and reality television share an aesthetic quality in their repetition, quests, and levels.