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## Netflix megahit becomes an irresistible reality show

Dan Einav, *Financial Times*, 21 November 2023

In *Squid Game: The Challenge*, dystopian fiction becomes improbable reality. A cash-prize contest inspired by Netflix's 2021 Korean anti-capitalist megahit, in which desperate souls competed in a lethal tournament for money, it may be the most cynical and ethically dubious show of the year. It is also one of the most viscerally entertaining.

Those among the 142 million households who streamed the original series will be familiar with the set-up: 456 participants are gradually eliminated while playing exaggerated versions of childhood games (grandma's footsteps, battleships and hopscotch) until one survivor takes home the jackpot. While the various rounds, masked overseers and giant dormitory have all been faithfully recreated, the stakes are markedly lower than in the luridly violent original. Presumably deterred by the red tape involved in actually executing contestants, the spin-off settles for splattering the losers with dye before sending them home.

These fake deaths are amusingly incongruous with how deadly serious everyone is otherwise. "She might not make it," frets one contestant. "To see him eliminated right in front of my eyes is devastating," laments another of a "fallen" friend. This kind of reaction may seem overblown in the absence of life-threatening jeopardy, but the \$4.56 million jackpot is clearly life-changing. And the more you hear the contestants' personal reasons for taking part, the more you understand the outpouring of emotion when they get through, are knocked out — or are responsible for the early exit of another.

Aside from a few pantomime villains the majority are real people, seemingly feeling real stress, catharsis, guilt and pride in very unreal circumstances. Though dominated by Americans, the line-up has been chosen to provide a varied cross-section of race, age, sexuality, professional expertise and personality types. They range from an edgy Mormon to a swaggering mathematician; a former athlete to a punkish pro-gamer; a single mother to a sixty-something and her adult son.

But more fascinating than how any one person fares is the way in which unexpected communities take shape and enmities develop. And more captivating than the actual *Squid Game* are the mind games that occur in between. Random bonus tests, unforeseen traps and peer-voted eliminations rapidly change individual fortunes and destabilise group dynamics.

The fact that the participants are continuously suspended in a queasy atmosphere of anticipation and dread is what makes the show simultaneously so uneasy and so irresistible.

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