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Why Do People Enjoy Live Television?

The answer is more subtle than you might realize

Why do you like seeing a live sport event rather than a replay? Why do you like a live political talk-show rather than an edited interview? The answer may appear to be simple: it is the surprise factor. But then: Why do you like this kind of surprises? The appeal of indeterminacy is so strong, that live events are usually suspended during commercial breaks so viewers may watch the action as it unfolds. This is also the reason why comedy shows are filmed with a live audience and why the audience's reactions are also recorded. They give an impression of spontaneity and surprise. "Indeterminate consumption experiences (such as watching sports competitions live on television) unfold in ways that are not decided before the event occurs," explains Joachim Vosgerau of Carnegie Mellon University. Indeterminacy is the unplanned part of the show - it's the "Live" part of "Saturday Night Live," said Vosgerau. "This seemingly subtle characteristic can help explain how people interpret many of their consumption experiences. Indeterminacy knowledge can alter people's experience utility in a variety of everyday consumption domains such as television, performing arts, vacations and gaming in ways researchers in marketing and psychology have yet to explore." So, why do we like this television indeterminacy so much? One suggestion might be that this is in fact a type of game we're playing. Many people blame television for turning the viewer into a passive receiver, but they may be wrong. The person in the armchair watching a football game or the favorite soap-opera might not be so passive after all. Unsuspected things may happen in his or her brain. It is long argued that games play a very important part in our life, especially for the children (but not only) as accessible means of learning. A child plays, but without knowing it, he or she also learns stuff. This aspect of gaming is also found in the animal kingdom: for example lion kittens play with each other and this helps them develop skills and reflexes needed later in life. What probably most characterizes our world today is its unpredictability. In the past, life was much more predictable and settled. People moved less, knew less people, and did fewer things. This unpredictability is not always comfortable. On the contrary, it may account for our increasingly neurotic nature. Thus, it may be that the reason why we enjoy live television, live sports events, live concerts, unpredictable computer games and so on, it is that all these enable us in one way or another to prop up our ability to face the increasing unpredictability of the real world. Each time you're seeing a politician making a sport analogy you will know what just happened. This may also explain why adults today are more likely to enjoy playing "childish games" than they were 50 years or a century ago. It may also account for the reason why classical means of entertainment such as books (or eventually maybe even movies) gradually lose their mass appeal.