

Episode 27: Deadly Games and Dubious Victories

And we're back! Welcome. We've had some time off and the world has moved quickly... life-wise and in the pop cultural sense. It feels like every single possible prestige TV show has had a new season drop. Every second friend has asked me whether or not I have watched *Succession*. I have not. I started trying to, and then I was like "Wow, this seems like it will be good, but also that every single character will be varying shades of terrible and I don't know if I can handle that right now". So instead, I watched *Squid Game*. Perhaps you have also watched *Squid Game*. Or at the very least, encountered some sort of *Squid Game* discourse. 132 million people watched at least 2 minutes of the show in its first 2 days on Netflix. So, it broke records, sparked conversations about the various nuances of translation, illuminated some of the history of South Korean labour strikes for international audiences and inspired a bunch of Halloween costumes. Just so many Halloween costumes.

I really liked it. But as always – I have thoughts. Specifically, about the 'people love murder for fun and recreation' genre. Look... I looked to see if anyone had formally named the genre. No one had. I'm going with this for now. Sue me.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about *Squid Game*.

Now, before I get going with this episode – I cannot talk about the thing I want to talk about and also keep this episode completely spoiler free. I'm going to try my best to not fully give the whole thing away, but if you're the type of person who likes to know nothing about something going in, maybe skip this one. If you're not one of those people, and you're still coming into this blind, I realise that introduction doesn't make a tonne of sense unless you're fully across *Squid Game* as a concept. So, if you're one of the 4 people with a Netflix subscription who hasn't managed to watch it – the show is set in contemporary South Korea. People crippled by financial debt are approached by an organisation with an offer to play a mysterious game and have an opportunity to win an enormous cash prize. What initially appears to be a series of simple children's games turns sinister when it turns out punishment for losing the game is a swift and violent death.

The show has, perhaps unsurprisingly, drawn comparisons to properties with similar concepts. There's been a lot of discourse about originality – whether the comparisons are fair, whether they're unfair, whether it's fair to scream plagiarism or not – and to be honest with you, I'm not super-interested in that. I'm firmly of the belief that there is nothing new under the sun, and when you're

looking at broad conceptual strokes like genre or plot devices, you cannot be totally, unwaveringly original.

What I do find interesting is the enduring popularity of the premise. The first thing I said when I watched Squid Game was "Human beings love to revisit Battle Royale every six to eight years." 'Deadly games' aren't a new concept on film – it's a classic set-up that contrasts something fun and carefree with life-or-death stakes. I think we like it because it illuminates maybe our most basic fear about our own lives – that they don't matter and that they can be snuffed out on a whim or by chance. But Squid Game is more than just 'deadly games' premise – these games are orchestrated for a purpose: entertainment. People love murder for fun and recreation. Maybe by the end of this episode I will have found a better way to articulate this concept. Stick with me to find out, I guess.

Anyway, the concept of a terrifying contest in which murder becomes entertainment is astoundingly enduring, as evidenced by the 9000 'gotcha' think pieces comparing Squid Game to other pieces of media. So, I thought we could spend this episode thinking about why a concept like 'murder for fun' might be so enduring. When are these pieces reaching the height of their popularity, and why do we keep circling back on them? Let's get into it shall we?

So, I think it's probably good to start off with what I mean specifically when I'm talking about people loving murder for fun and recreation, because as I was doing some reading on this, I got pretty deep into the hole of horror tropes. I've

thought about it and I've managed to boil this subgenre down into three key characteristics. The most obvious thing is a game of some sort – it might be actual games (like games of chance, for example) or it might just be 'last one standing after the murder spree', but there's got to be a set of rules, the consequences have to be death and there has to be someone orchestrating it. The second is a group of initially unwilling participants – they might have been tricked, it might just be the rules of the society, they might even end up participating and enjoying it by the end. But when the game starts, they don't want to be there and they're trying their best to get out of the nightmare unscathed. And the final key component is that there is an audience that extends beyond people orchestrating the game – it might be the whole world watching or maybe it's just the rich and powerful (the rich famously love a little crime when they can get away with it), but someone beyond the evil mastermind has to be watching. Often this display will have a secret purpose, like keeping the masses in check, but it might also just be for entertainment.

A lot of films touch on these various elements as part of their worldbuilding. For example, The Purge films almost always have a scene where a bunch of rich people are making the poor battle it out in some arena of their own devise. Or they will have a moment where it turns out that someone has carefully designed a murder house that they're using to watch people dying. I think the key difference here is that the game element of this is entirely invented by the people on the ground. The rules of a Purge society indicate that all crimes including

murder are legal for a window of time. If everyone chilled the fuck out, you'd have the kind of crimes that I would commit on purge night, like fancy cheese heists from the deli I couldn't afford, or taking very expensive, elaborately embroidered coats from bougie boutiques. I've not got time to murder – furniture made out of actual timber is expensive, and I'm out here with my moving van ready to get me some new bookshelves. No one said, "You've got to make a little fun murder game for yourself."

The Saw franchise is another example the people refer to when talking about this concept. I'm not going to acknowledge the later films in the franchise because they're bad and they really lose track of what made the original low-budget production so great, but essentially, the franchise focuses on a serial killer (Jigsaw) who constructs elaborate punishments in the form of games. While the victims in the Saw films are unwilling participants who have to play in order to survive, the games themselves are not entertainment for anyone but the killer. There is a certain moral element to what Jigsaw is doing – his victims are chosen because they're morally bankrupt in some way – but it's not a lesson for society at large because nobody sees the deaths.

So, what does fit the concept then? Battle Royale is, I think the most obvious example. The story takes place in a fictional future under a totalitarian Japanese government, in which a high school class in their final year of schooling are sent to an island to battle it out against each other. They're strapped in with tracking devices and bomb collars,

given a random weapon and told to have at it. Many of the initial kills are accidents, but two genuine psychopaths emerge and as tensions mount, the class starts to turn on each other. At the centre are two lovebirds and a guy who wants to avenge his love lost in a previous iteration of the game.

Having appeared at the time when there was extensive public discussion in Japan around juvenile offenders following a series of child murders in Kobe committed by a 14-year-old boy, the novel took several years to find a home. However, it was a surprise hit (possibly spurred on by the controversy) and it was adapted into a manga and a feature film the following year. The film particularly was a runaway success, pulling the third highest box office numbers in 2001 (beaten only by Ghibli's Spirited Away and a Pokémon film), and quickly became regarded as one of director Kinji Fukasaku's best films, edging out his iconic 70s yakuza and samurai movies. It also found a cult following internationally, where it was namechecked by directors like Quentin Tarantino and Jason Reitman. I mean... no surprise that Tarantino is ripping off stylish international splatter films, but that's another conversation.

The backdrop of this success was Japan's so-called 'Lost Decade'. Now, I'm not an economist, so stick with me while I try and talk this through, but essentially, from 1986 to 1991 there was a rapid inflation of stock and real estate prices and an increasing level of access to credit, creating a bubble which eventually burst and sent the economy into a decades-long downturn. In 2013, Japan had the highest national debt of any nation on

earth. From a practical standpoint, it meant that wages stagnated, businesses laid off workers and new graduates were forced into unstable employment as companies restructured, removing the lifetime employment contracts that had been common in the post-war period. Throughout the 90s the unemployment rate would climb from 2.1% to a peak of 5.5% in 2002. The suicide rate also jumped, reaching a peak in 2003, with a significant percentage of deaths being linked to financial issues and debt by police. All this is to say that, things were pretty bleak for a lot of people, and particularly the young, who were finding themselves stepping into a world marked by the consequences of their parents' actions. Insert a snide aside about how not much has changed here.

Thinking about why *Battle Royale* was such a hit, I think you can draw a pretty straight line between a decade of piping hot economic instability and bleak social outlook, and teenagers forced to brutally carry out authoritarian violence on each other. *Battle Royale* illustrates a crumbling world destroyed by adults, that uses the bodies of children to prop up its power. Much like the real world, the impacts of the past end up having an enduring impact on the young. But rather than immediately succumb to violence, many of the teens in *Battle Royale* attempt to resist the urge to kill, despite the rules of the game forcing them to remain constantly vigilant. A group of girls bands together to escape the violence in a lighthouse; a group of boys hacks the computer system; a couple jump to their death rather than harm their classmates. The truly murderous are outliers. Succumbing to the brutality

of the game doesn't improve anyone's circumstances – as exemplified by the fact that two teens, introduced to the class as 'transfer students', turn out to have been coerced by the game's organisers into returning for the latest iteration. The film's overarching message, reiterated in voiceover and title card is "Run!" The only way to win is to not play at all. A pretty appealing idea to an audience mired in a disintegrating economic system that sentenced them to decades of insecure work and an ever-widening gap between rich and poor.

Now, if you haven't seen or heard of *Battle Royale* but you're like "wow this concept seems familiar" it likely because you've seen *The Hunger Games* or at least have heard something about it. Where *Battle Royale* technically counts as niche content for cinephiles and fans of horror, *The Hunger Games* is a certified Hollywood blockbuster. It's set in a future America that has been destroyed by some unspecified apocalyptic event, and the world is now divided into 12 districts who must volunteer two of their children as tribute to battle it out in a televised fight to the death called the *Hunger Games*, hosted in the wealthy Capitol. The districts have extremely unequal wealth distribution and when protagonist Katniss Everdeen volunteers as tribute in order to take the place of her 11-year-old sister, she finds that many of the wealthier districts have career contestants who've spent their entire lives training to murder the poor. Drawing from Roman gladiatorial concepts, there's much more focus on the game element as a spectacle designed to keep the masses in check – there are whole casts of fashion designers,

publicists and trainers on board to keep the contestants appealing to the wealthy viewers who were never at risk of being thrown in the ring in the first place.

Wanna take a stab at when it was released? If you said “smack bang in the midst of the 2008 global financial crisis”, you would be correct. Which is lucky for you, because the consequences of not answering correctly are swift but gory death. Again, I’m not an economist, so I want you to keep in mind that every time I read information on these things my brain is constantly looping “this is all fake – we had thousands of years to invent a fake system to live by and we invented a bad one”. The causes of the GFC are many and varied, but many people call out predatory loans targeting marginalised, low-income groups and the bursting of the US housing bubble as primary causes. But more importantly, the social consequences of the GFC mimic Japan’s Lost Decade. The unemployment rate jumped, foreclosure rates jumped, suicide rates jumped and fertility rates declined. Unlike the Japanese economic crisis, it wasn’t only contained to the US, but rather collapse in the US set off a global chain reaction almost disintegrated financial institutions as we know them. It’s unsurprising then that a series focused on the unequal distribution of wealth and the overthrowing of corrupt fat cats gained so much traction.

And now we’ve got Squid Game – focusing on characters drowning in enormous personal debt killing each other in a desperate attempt to claw their way to a cash prize. Many have pointed out the show’s reflection the South Korean debt crisis. As of September of 2021,

household debt in South Korea is 105% of the country’s Gross Domestic Product – meaning that amount of private debt is actually larger than the country’s economy. In 2003 the Boston Consultancy Group determined that 40% of Korean households had negative net worth and were incapable of lifting themselves out of debt given their income. Tellingly though, this premise has resonated with international audiences. The show has become a phenomenon just as a pandemic has disrupted the global supply chain and plunged millions of people into poverty. In many cases, these are people who had never recovered from the impacts of the 2008 collapse.

Given the similarities in the premise and the social circumstances surrounding their success, it’s easy to see why people would draw comparisons between the three shows. On paper and boiled down to its bones, it’s the same idea. But I think there are some really interesting differences in execution that also point to why the general premise might be so enduring. In contrast to Battle Royale, where the focus was on getting out and the futility of trying to do so, all of the rage in The Hunger Games is directed outward. They’re mad at the government, but in the most American way possible, where Katniss ends up as the accidental face of a revolution, and over the course of three books, or four films, they overthrow the corrupt ruling class to put in a new, slightly better democratically elected ruling class which will definitely not face any problems in the future. Battle Royale ends with fugitives fleeing into the sunset. There’s much more optimism in The Hunger Games – probably because it was originally designed as young adult

literature, and certainly because it is American. Hollywood hates an ambiguous ending to their heroics.

One of the key differences in *Squid Game*'s execution is that, at one point, the contestants vote to opt out of the game. Everyone goes back to their miserable lives and crushing debt. But when faced with the reality of the situation, many of them come slinking back to the game – in the real world they're effectively still shackled by a death sentence in the form of poverty and crumbling personal lives. At least by returning to the game there's a chance they might end up not just out of debt but wealthy. The irony of course, is that by the end, Player 456 is so traumatised by his experience that he is unable to bother with the life the prize money was supposed to provide him. The Front Man who runs the game is also revealed to have been a former winner, further reiterating that the trauma of bloodily clawing your way out of debt simply traps people in a different cycle, unable to return to normality. All the fury here is at the banal cruelty of the world designed to benefit the whims of the ultra-wealthy at the expense of the poor.

I think part of the reason this premise is so adaptable is that, regardless of whether it's at the hands of an authoritarian government regime or the shadowy whims of the mega-rich, there's something universally relatable about feeling trapped by the system. Much of our daily lives are already governed by forces we can't control and which were put in motion long before we were born – you've got a dead end job you'll work for as long as you can stand it because the steady casualisation of the workforce

means that you're one of the only people you know with permanent employment; your rent is suddenly spiking because there's a housing crisis spurred on by unchecked property prices, even though your quiet suburban street is bordered by an ever-growing number of empty apartment buildings; fossil fuels are killing the environment and driving your cost of living through the roof because a bunch of old men in suits accept money from oil companies to run their political campaigns, and you might die of heat exhaustion because it's too expensive to turn the air conditioning on. Add to that scenario smaller, more personal fears – fears that we might be observed as we struggle to muddle through the stupid broken system that fights us at every turn, that our suffering might be entertaining for the people in charge, and fear of what that stupid broken system might force us into if we were presented with the illusion of a way out.

We'll see this concept keep repeating, I think, for as long as things don't work and we feel helpless to change them.

Cool! That was a bleak end to something that was supposed to be about *Squid Game* but was actually mostly about collapsing economies. My thoughts on the economy are this: It's fake. We made it up. We just invented a bad thing and were like 'Oh nooooo, the thing we invented is doing a bad thing which we also invented, and it's having negative real world implications for other human beings. If only there were a way to not do this.' And like... we could. We could do something else. Because it is absolutely made up. Anyway, this is why I majored in English. If you want to explain to me



why economics is a totally real thing... don't. But if have opinions on murder games in movies, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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