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The rise of an empire : an historical discourse on the televised poker genre

Lucinda Dobinson
San Jose State University

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THE RISE OF AN EMPIRE: AN HISTORICAL DISCOURSE ON THE
TELEVISED POKER GENRE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Television, Radio, Film, and Theatre

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Lucinda Dobinson

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

Dr. Kimb Katz Massey

Dr. David Kahn

Professor Mike Adams

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Peter I. Williamson 04/25/07

ABSTRACT

THE RISE OF AN EMPIRE: AN HISTORICAL DISCOURSE ON THE TELEVISED POKER GENRE

by Lucinda Dobinson

This thesis explores the popularity of the televised poker genre. Historical and technological shifts in our culture are surveyed in conjunction with established genre theory in order to examine which external factors shape and have shaped poker shows. The game show genre and the televised sports genre are studied, as are the role of other media outlets, most notably internet poker.

Research has revealed that prevailing technology, cultural acceptance, various proliferations of media, and established genres like televised sports and game shows work together to define the televised poker genre. Furthermore, the examination of such extenuating factors may serve as a template for further exploration in television genre studies.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, the game of poker has been transformed. Revenue of almost ten billion dollars was made by internet gaming sights in 2005, up forty percent from 2004, and is expected to top twelve billion in 2006 (Rotstein par. 3). Card rooms across the country have experienced dramatic leaps in their number of patrons, reflecting statistics similar to Las Vegas card rooms' thirty-two percent revenue leap from 2002 to 2003 (Shulman par. 3).

In symbiotic step with these behemoth industries is the emergence of a new television genre. Televised poker has been enjoying popularity tantamount to major sporting events since the *World Poker Tour* made its debut in 2003 on the Travel Channel.

What was the turning point for this game that initially had minimal popular culture fan base or viewership? ESPN broadcast the *World Series of Poker* before 2003, yet audiences did not respond with the colossal ratings subsequently enjoyed by the sports network. The *World Series of Poker* consistently averages 1.4 million viewers, despite being taped months in advance of being aired. This thesis explores how televised poker has risen to such heights in popularity. An examination of poker's transformation from marginal acceptance to the *WSOP*'s brightly-lit televised 2006 championship will be aligned with genre criticism and theory. Influences of the televised sports

genre and the game show genre will be discussed and historically paralleled with the evolution of televised poker as its own genre. In addition, the role of other forms of media in televised poker's success will be examined, most notably internet and poker gaming sites,

Significance

The creation of a televised poker genre has not been thoroughly debated in scholarly journals, thus theoreticians have not directly dealt with the combination of television, poker card games, and subsequent influential television genres. An historical account of how we have arrived at this point is the crucial first step in researching such a new topic. There must be a foundation and reference point for further academic discourse on televised poker; the historical and theoretical explorations of televised poker which begin with this thesis serve to guide the way for future academic pursuits on the subject. Given the relevance, timeliness, and popularity of televised poker in this media-medicated culture, it is essential to explore what is happening in an academic context; as Todd Gitlin says,

The swarming enormity of American popular culture ought to be obvious, for never have so many communicated so much, on so many screens, through so many channels, absorbing so many hours of irreplaceable human attention, about communication. (4)

There has been an exponential rise in the number of entrants (which correlates directly to the prize pool) in the *World Series of Poker* since 2003, the

year amateur Chris Moneymaker won the main event; this broadcast has been repeated numerous times on ESPN and continues to attract viewers (Fisher pars. 1-4) . That year, the first place prize was \$2.5 million dollars and 839 players participated. In 2004, winner Greg Raymer took home \$5 million with 2,576 players competing. 2005 netted the champion (Joseph Hachem) \$7.5 million; 5,619 entrants took part that year. In 2006, champion Jamie Gold took home \$12 million with 8,773 other players vying for the same prize (wikipedia.com). The *WSOP* draws more viewers for ESPN than their staple show, *SportsCenter* (Shemelagian par. 7). There is a public interest in poker that is on par with established sporting events and professional poker is in fact considered a sport by many, sparking a heated debate between those who believe it to be a sport and those who feel it is a ridiculous notion to consider. *USA Today* interviewed athletes, poker players, and ESPN producers for a sampling of responses in their April 26, 2006 online edition:

You'd think football players in particular would scoff at the notion, but a sampling of Bears players late last season turned up a surprising number who were willing to classify the card game as a sport. After joking there's no good answer to the question, all-pro linebacker Brian Urlacher said he guesses it's a sport because it requires thinking, preparation "and sometimes you have to walk around". (Dodd par. 18)

The extent to which poker is considered sport can be derived by its bid to be an Olympic event in London in 2012, meeting the requirement that it be played in at least 75 countries and four continents (Hubbard pars. 2-5).

In step with the poker television phenomenon has been a general poker explosion within other forms of media. The proliferation of internet poker sights has been staggering, as have been the profits for investors, according to *M2 Presswire*: "The amount gambled on poker websites around the world is estimated to be more than USD 60 billion for 2005... 75% of the industry experts surveyed believe that the global annual rake/commission in the next 2-3 years will be more than USD 4 billion" (Online...New Heights par. 3).

In terms of media studies, the spectacle that has been created by producers of televised poker games punctuates a sense of drama that is tantamount to a performance piece, drawing on clever editing of tournaments, colorful behavior by the players, and unpredictable outcomes. Steve Lipscomb, founder and CEO of the *World Poker Tour* provides some perspective in a *University of Chicago Magazine* article about the alumnus:

These days *World Poker Tour* uses 16 cameras, "edits every hand like a story," and, most important, shows what cards the players are holding. The new production style, he says, allows viewers to be "everywhere. You get to see every bead of sweat that is on anyone's face. ... You're right there on them when they figure out that they have a million-dollar decision, having cards change their entire world in one heartbeat". (par. 8)

This emergence was fueled through a series of cultural and media events which heightened the popularity and acceptance of poker. Dramatizations of poker games in films such as *The Cincinnati Kid*, *Maverick*, and *Rounders* served to highlight the tension, skill, and excitement that are included in a poker game. The audience base for films is far-reaching, allowing great numbers of new fans

to surface. Popular music also alludes to poker in songs such as *The Gambler*, as do television shows in various incarnations from drama to sitcom. Poker's representation on the cultural level appears in the form of "poker night" at your neighbor's house. There is also the role of gambling havens like Las Vegas and Atlantic City, allowing games such as poker to be considered socially acceptable in the name of entertainment.

As viewers of televised poker events, we are drawn into the excitement the players create: bluffing million-dollar hands, calling a bet without looking at their cards, taunting the competition with sly or snide remarks. It is the electric atmosphere that is formed through the fusion of media's technology with the established game show and televised sports genres that makes this a worthwhile topic of inquiry. The arena of television genre studies will benefit from a critical look at the historical forces that have converged to create such a heavily-consumed television genre by revealing new means of discourse on how genres are formed.

Terminology

Genre categorization exists to help scholars and audiences alike find common ground when discussing any given work, be it NBC's *Days of our Lives* or Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Genre identification serves to delineate for all parties involved in the creation, production, and consumption of entertainment a sense

of commonality. In this research, historical and cultural aspects of genre will be taken into account in order to give a well-rounded definition of the televised poker genre. Jason Mittel puts it best: “Genres exist only through the creation, circulation, and reception of texts within cultural contexts” (7).

It is also important to understand the terminology that exists in the area of televised poker itself. There is an interlacing of genre themes, poker vernacular, and television production terms that need translating and/or definition.

Poker players and those who regularly watch it on television learn to become familiar with poker’s vast vocabulary. While a break-down of all these terms is not necessary, certain key phrases and words require explanation. For example, “the flop” in Texas Hold’em poker refers to the first three community cards exposed on the table for players to see. There are two more cards, “the turn,” or “fourth street,” and “the river,” yet to come for a player to make his or her best five-card poker hand. These terms are used widely by players.

An explanation of television production terminology covers several areas: the various camera shot types used to create poker shows and their relation to sports and game show television production and editing, the use of on-screen graphics to keep viewers abreast of the action in the game, and programming issues as they relate to patterns of parallels with sports and game show programming.

Literature Review

Jane Feuer, whose contribution to *Channels of Discourse* (1987), "Genre Study and Television," established a solid model for academics searching for compartmentalization and vocabulary in television genre. Feuer first points out the distinction that must be made between literature genres and film and television genres, stressing the importance of cultural and temporal factors that affect the evolution of the latter. Thus, the very broad and general assignments useful in literary genre discourse have little bearing on a medium in constant flux like television. "Such literary types as drama and lyric, tragedy and comedy span numerous diverse works and numerous cultures and centuries. Film and television, however, are culturally specific and temporally limited" (114). She further points out the lack of standardization of approach when defining film and television drama, citing three specific and diverse methods that have been implemented: aesthetic (permitting artistic expression, as auteurs do in film and to a limited extent in television), ritual (viewing genre as an exchange between audience and industry), and ideological (genre as an instrument of control over audiences, critics, and even industry itself).

In *The Television Genre Book* (2001), Steve Neale formulates the notion of conception of genre more succinctly:

The study of genre and television has been conditioned not just by the formats and forms of television itself but also by the history of genre as a concept, the uses to which it has been put, and the other art and media forms to which it has been applied. The

definitions and issues that have arisen as a consequence have also been heavily influenced by the fact that television has adopted and adapted formats and forms from a number of different sources since its inception. (3)

Although seemingly simple, Neale points out the complexity of defining genre, more so intricate and slippery when dealing with television. There are expectations of audience in regards to product and also there are expectations of marketers in product placement in programming, “underlining the multidimensional nature of genre itself: its numerous aspects, the numerous meanings it can have, and the numerous analytical uses to which it can be put” (3). Graeme Turner, also in *The Television Genre Book* (2001), explains why such scrutiny of television genre is relevant and why careful consideration must be taken when labeling shows: “Researchers have found that to understand the characteristics, conventions and pleasures of a particular television genre is also to understand a great deal about television as a cultural form” (5).

This leads us to Jason Mittell’s essay, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory” (2001). Mittell takes previous research and infuses it with a healthy and revealing dose of cultural theory that is at the crux of this thesis. His methodology outlines more vehemently the diversion from traditional theoretical approaches to genre that must be taken in order to arrive at a working model of a television genre. Of particular interest in this article for the purposes of this thesis is the inclusion of historical factors that shape the ever-shifting paradigms of television genre. Mittell encourages one to look further than the texts for clues that help define what genre of television we have arrived at given this point in

time: “We need to look beyond the texts as the locus for genre and instead locate genres within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts” (7). Genres are looked at as “discursive practices” which lend themselves to a definition that encompasses “various forms of communication” and also “constitute generic definitions and meanings” (8).

This bears importance on the arrival of televised poker, as it is historical information that reveals how we come to have such programming today. In looking beyond the text, as Mittell encourages, poker’s colorful past has come to televised fruition after significant events helped shape a new genre in television. Very important in the progression towards poker in a consumable form was the creation of the *World Series of Poker* in 1970, the brainchild of Las Vegas legend and Horseshoe Casino founder Benny Binion. Jonathan Grotenstein and Storms Reback’s *All In: The (Almost) Entirely True Story of the World Series of Poker* (2005) follows the journey of the tournament and scandalous events behind the scenes of the Horseshoe Casino, including the murder of Benny’s son, Ted Binion, to the 2004 *WSOP* and its transition into a three-ring media circus. They note the drastic change that took place as a result of poker player and *WSOP* veteran Henry Orenstein’s invention:

... the septuagenarian Orenstein would invent a poker table designed to allow cameras to film a player’s hole cards, helping to trigger poker’s explosion at the turn of the millennium. Today, the octogenarian Orenstein runs the company that produces the Fox Network’s successful *Poker Superstars* series of televised tournaments. (175)

There are two television genres that have heavily shaped the televised poker genre: the game show or quiz show and televised sports. America's fascination with mental challenges in the hopes of attaining a prize goes back to the early days of radio. Thomas A. DeLong's *Quiz Craze: America's Infatuation with Game Shows* (1991) chronicles the growth of the game show industry from radio contests for new washing machines to the televised broadcasts of today with huge cash prizes. David Schwartz, Steve Ryan and Fred Wostbrock have created a reliable reference point for all game shows in their book, *The Encyclopedia of TV Game Shows*.

Of particular interest for this research is *The Price is Right*, the longest running game show in television history. Its longevity amongst numerous other shows since its original air date in 1956 has engrained the thrill of competition into viewers over the years. Morris B. Holbrook is the author of *Daytime Television Gameshows and the Celebration of Merchandise: The Price is Right* (1993), a searing account of the show's history in academic albeit pejorative terms. He makes insightful observations about the nature of the game show and its evolving role in television culture, deftly weaving established theoretical discourse:

Thus, Comstock et al. explain that "a neo-Marxist view would hold that television serves the economic system by helping to maintain the status quo and by fostering values which make viewers hungry, thirsty, and inquisitive consumers": "From this perspective the game show is a training session" (308). For example, Barnouw argues "that the very themes and substance of television entertainment derive from the needs of U.S. industry" and that "the game shows

honoring lust for appliances...exemplify that hand at work" (*Tube of Plenty*, qtd. by Comstock 21). (20)

Holbrook later narrows his focus on shows that reflect commonality with

The Price is Right:

The role of "highly coveted merchandise" or "a truckload of household appliances and furnishings" has appeared in (first) radio and (later) television game shows since as least as early as 1945 (DeLong 103). However, close viewing of *The Price is Right* makes it clear that the subject of this program is the appreciation of the consumer products that it gives away as prizes. In short, this game show reduces to one unambiguous, oft-repeated, highly-ritualized formula: The Celebration of Merchandise. (56)

It is Holbrook's focus on the game show, and particularly *The Price is Right*, as ritual and cultural hegemony which can be paralleled with the study of televised poker.

Orenstein's invention allowed viewers to follow the action and suspense of the game, much like a sporting event. The derivatives of the sports genre that formed the televised poker genre serve to highlight its complexity. As Rod Brookes in *The Television Genre Book* (2001) explains, sport itself draws from different genres, namely "media events" and "promotions." Drawing upon televisual textual analyses, obvious similarities can be stated, from play-by-play commentators to a live and captivated audience.

Benjamin G. Rader's *American Sports: from the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (2004) sheds light on the progression of televised sports and the extenuating factors that have resulted in the sports broadcasts we see today. Of particular interest are the economic forces at work that are created by:

players of multiple sports, including professional football and golf, their audiences, and sports producers. From a cultural and historical standpoint, the journey of televised sports is rooted finding new means of revenue for producers and investors. For example, in regard to the state of televised sports in the twenty-first century, Rader has this to say:

The unrelenting bombardment of the sense with sound and visual data, the transformation of stadia and gyms into selling and advertising arenas, soaring ticket prices... They could and perhaps did detract from or diminish what it was about the sporting experience itself that so mesmerized fans. (278)

There are parallels to the televised poker genre, as the growing prize purses and celebrity status of players widens. Of player Daniel Negreanu, Bobby Condotta of the *Seattle Times* in June of 2005 wrote: “Now he is a one-man poker conglomerate with a multimedia career that also includes video games and a syndicated column. All that pays him enough to live comfortably even if he never wins another tournament” (par. 5). The trends of sports on television, in particular the economic benefits of widely recognized players, have thus far proven to bear significance in similarities to televised poker.

Another book by Benjamin Rader, *In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports* (1984), chronicles sports’ journey to television. Of significance here is a chapter on the history of how sports are packaged for the television audience. Rader sites the introduction of cheerleaders and mascots to televised sports as a gateway for networks to bolster support and ultimately boost revenue of team franchises: “Sports were especially tailored to appeal to

those millions of potential viewers who were not devoted followers of the games themselves; they were transformed so they could compete more successfully with other forms of entertainment” (140). In observing the televised poker genre, one sees hosts such as *World Poker Tour*’s Shana Hiatt, an attractive woman who introduces the show and is impeccably dressed and preened. This is further evidence that the bottom line is always a priority, regardless of which industry you are referring to.

Published print has also been affected, as Timothy Peters of *Publisher’s Weekly* reports: “...at least 61 titles related to the game have been or are being published in 2005, up from 46 in 2004, 37 in 2003, and 16 in 2002” (30). This exponential growth also can be applied to the amount of magazines that are circulated just in the U.S. alone. Daniel Yee of the *Associated Press* reports that “in the last year, as many as ten poker magazines have popped up in card rooms, newsstands and stores” (par. 4). Mittell’s views on cultural influence within genre paradigms become clear; the pervasive nature of all mediums coalesces to create and perpetuate the televised poker genre.

There is also reflection and incorporation of the role which films with poker themes have played in shaping its popularity. For purposes of historical and cultural methodology pertaining to this paper, a selected group of films were chosen which show importance in the development of televised poker. The selection is based on one requirement; they contain key scenes which involve dynamic poker games that require the reveal of player’s hands and palpable

suspense, much like televised poker's broadcasts. *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965) is based on a novel by Richard Jessup, directed by Norman Jewison, and stars Steve McQueen and Edward G. Robinson. Its slick and attractive portrayal of poker players and their lifestyles culminates in a showdown that has been mimicked in tournaments on television. *Rounders* (1998) is directed by John Dahl and stars Matt Damon, Edward Norton, and John Malkovich. Its significance lies in the narrative featuring Johnny Chan, an actual *World Series of Poker* winner, who not only appears in the film but is also an object of obsession for Matt Damon's character. While televised poker had not become a hit at this point, it bears relevance for its genre cross-over and indoctrination of poker acceptance.

The various magazines available about televised poker and online poker are not only a subject matter for this paper when discussing the reach of genre into multimedia outlets but also a viable source of information. *CardPlayer* magazine is one of the oldest and most established publications available about the poker world and now has an accompanying website that furnishes information on professional players, televised poker tournaments, history, and strategy tips for its readers. In their February 28, 2007 issue, Jim McManus wrote an informative article on the history of poker called "Poque (or Poqas) to Pokuh" which details the origins of the game:

That *poque* is pronounced with two syllables (in French mouths, more like one and a half) makes it even more likely as the parent of poker. After all, it wasn't a very big step...from playing and saying *poque* to the Southern pronunciation, *pokuh*. Later, when the

action had moved north of the Mason-Dixon Line, the unstressed syllable would pick up an *r*. (115)

Understanding the roots of poker adds meaning to discussions about genre origins. *CardPlayer's* interest in printing such historical information reveals a reader's respect for the game.

Method

An historical methodology will be used to convey and expand the central question; what has shaped the televised poker genre as we know it today? The system of historical analysis involves the extraction of intelligence from various historical texts on the subjects of poker, game shows, sports shows, and internet poker which lend themselves to televised poker's evolvement. In conjunction with this pure historical information, established genre theory will be applied to the thesis when that historical information reinforces a particular theory in action.

To thoroughly explore televised poker's history and consequently its influence on current culture, a wide selection of texts must be included for two reasons: 1) the historical information available on poker before 2003 outlines the evolution of the game and 2) everything after 2003 punctuates the multimedia giant that evolved from that game, producing a separate entity that marries the two.

The televised poker programs themselves are a viable source. Poker programming can be currently seen on a number of cable and network stations,

airing multiple times in any given week. They are available in VHS and DVD formats for reviewing and will be included in this thesis for the purposes of describing events, outlining a correlation with the aforementioned precursor genres of sports and game shows, and editing techniques used to lock in an audience.

Popular publications, both online and in print, are also feasible sources, considering the lack of academic discourse on the subject of televised poker. Given the tendency of websites to be unregulated by fact-checkers, extra scrutiny will be given to references stemming from online sources not originating from academic article databases. Cross-referencing poker facts and figures with reputable newspapers and magazines will be used as a tool for verification.

An intellectual tone develops through textual analyses of published genre theory and academic research in existing media studies in conjunction with poker's history. Scholarly books and journal articles from genre theory and multimedia disciplines are interlaced at this point with existing information on the history of poker (drawn from reputable books, magazines, and newspapers).

There exists tremendous media bleed-over in the game of poker. For the purposes of this thesis, online poker will be examined for the explicit purpose of furthering its impact on televised poker, paying close attention to the popularity of the two in tandem. According to a 2005 article in *Sports Illustrated Online*, "more than 1.8 million users play (online poker) each month, according to independent tracking service PokerPulse.com. They wager an average of \$200 million a day,

and the industry generates \$2.2 billion in gross revenue annually” (Habib par. 5). *USA Today Online* reports the ratings of the WSOP: “ESPN's WSOP coverage went from seven shows the first year, 2003, to 32 last year. It averaged a 1.3 rating for the 32 episodes in 2005, including a 2.0 (1.8 million households) for the grand finale in November” (Dodd par. 41). Analysis will also be extended to include publications in print on poker, as there is also a correlation here with regards to an increase in publications and the popularity of televised poker.

Feasibility

By focusing primarily on a history that spans less than three years, the worry might be that televised poker is too narrow of a subject for a thesis. However, applying older and current theories in genre and media studies to historical data offers a wide enough focus on the topic and allows new theoretical discussions to begin.

The resources available on the game of poker, poker on television, and the history of poker are abundant. This is very exciting but also daunting, as there is much irrelevance to scour over in search of appropriate material; however repetition, also a byproduct of vast amounts of material, aides in the confirmation of facts. In addition, there is a sufficient amount of applicable theoretical material available to make a coherent and informed segue from theory to history without gaps in credibility. Because poker has become such a popular

television commodity, interviews with key persons in televised poker are accessible through electronic media as well as print, allowing the fundamental information to be extracted and implemented in appropriate historical and theoretical contexts. Thus, implementing the various texts available as listed above, specifically focusing on poker's evolution in American culture and how poker's identity is affected by technological innovation and public perceptions, historical methodology is suitably applied to this thesis.

Chapter 2

GENRE AS HISTORY

The various games of poker have been around for almost two-hundred years, played everywhere from back alleys and riverboats to charity events and your neighbor's garage. It is a game that has been enjoyed for its entertainment value as well as its potential profit margin by millions of people around the world. Cities, in particular Las Vegas, have flourished as a result of gaming and subsequently poker's existence, attracting visitors in droves to this day. This rich history of poker has recently had an inevitable collision with the ubiquitous medium of television, creating a genre that has parlayed playing cards for money into a multi-million dollar industry. It has only been in the last three years that poker has found a voice in television. In the span of those three years, its popularity has skyrocketed, as evidenced by *The News and Observer's* Ned Barnett in 2005:

The World Series of Poker rerun averaged 506,000 households compared with the average of 8,878,000 households that watched the All-Star Game, but the ratings are going in different directions. The All-Star Game ratings hit a new low this year, but televised poker's ratings are soaring past everything the cable and network airs except the NFL and NASCAR. (1)

Discovering how this phenomenon is evolving entails more than a dissection of poker as a text. Instead, a decentralization of textual analysis in the study of television genre is at the center of Jason Mittell's essay, *A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory* (2001). The historical aspect of Mittell's

cultural view seeks to answer questions of televisual compartmentalization by stepping outside of the traditional methodology taken with television genres. Mittell recognizes the need to incorporate the external factors that shape the programming offered, or “how changing cultural circumstances bring about generic shifts” (5).

The “changing cultural circumstances” in this case deal with multitudinous technological advances that have come about in the last two decades in step with a cultural paradigm shift created by consumers’ ennui. This ennui is the result of our constant need for more and more media, which appears to grow exponentially as the television industry in its various manifestations fervently race to produce the next big thing (Creeber 4). Oftentimes, it is the combining of conventional, established genres with other ones that makes its way to our living rooms, although the outcome is anything but consistent. *Cop Rock*, a Steven Bochco production which aired, very briefly, in 1990 combined the gritty cop drama and Broadway musical. The bold move by Bochco proved to be an utter failure. *Cop Rock* aired for only four months. Producers decided to drop the show, which cost \$1.8 million per episode, because of poor ratings (Schubbe pars. 6-7). Conversely, the likes of *Survivor* and *American Idol* are mainstays in American culture: part competition, part documentary, and fully what we have come to know as reality television. In other words, there is only retrospect for the failures and successes of hybridity to surmise.

Mittell would argue that it is not what genre any of these shows actually encompass, but rather the historical and cultural conditions that have allowed such a phenomenon to occur. In the case of televised poker, this begins well before there was any such thing as *The World Poker Tour* or *Celebrity Poker Showdown*.

The game of poker was thought to be introduced to the U.S. by way of Louisiana's Parisian settlers and sailors in the early 19th century. It is believed to be a derivative of both the French game, *poque* and the Persian game *As Nas*. It was first played with a deck of twenty cards, but as the game was redistributed to the inhabitants of the Mississippi river route by way of gambling riverboats, it eventually became a deck of fifty-two. Civil War soldiers later in the century would popularize the stud and five-card draw variety of poker (Asbury 22-27). These games remained fiercely popular until 1970 when Texas Hold'em rapidly supplanted every card game in terms of dominance in the first *World Series of Poker* (Grosenstein et al. 36).

Attitudes towards poker in the past have been negative, being widely regarded as an illegitimate form of income and as a criminal's game of choice. Jonathan H. Greene, himself a reformed gambler (having learned the game in prison), referred to poker as "The Cheating Game" in his book, *An Exposure on the Arts and Miseries of Gambling* in 1843, noting "the methods of cheating at Poker are so very numerous, I do not think it requisite that I should give an account of the whole of them" (Asbury 35).

Poker's presence did not just manifest itself in print. As technology became available, society found a way to reflect pejorative attitudes in music as well. The act of gambling, in particular playing poker has been used generously across the music spectrum both metaphorically and as a narrative aide for many years. In Johnny Cash's "A Boy Named Sue", originally released in February of 1969, Cash sings about his quest to find the deadbeat father that abandoned him and his mother when he was three years old. After years of searching, he finds him... "There at a table, dealing stud, Sat the dirty, mangy dog that named me Sue" (23-24) The father's character is further described..."And I knew that scar on his cheek and his evil eye. He was big and bent and gray and old..." (27-28). Perhaps one of the most famous songs attributed to poker is Don Schlitz's "The Gambler", performed by Kenny Rogers and released in 1978. Not exclusively considered negative and therefore possibly representing a shift in acceptance, "The Gambler" recounts the sage advice of a gambler given to a man as they ride on a train "bound for nowhere." There is a comparison made by the gambler between playing a poker game and life:

And somewhere in the darkness the gambler, he broke even.
But in his final words I found an ace that I could keep.
You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em.
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table.
There'll be time enough for counting when the dealin's done.

Poker's representation in film is even more prevalent, starting as far back as 1919 with *Beresford and the Baboons*, where a boy is raised by baboons and taught stud poker. In 1936 a film titled *Eights and Aces* chronicles a young

man's quest for redemption and culminates in a poker game with very high stakes. He wins with eights and aces, not only the title of the film but also believed to be the hand held by Wild Bill Hickok when he was shot in the back and killed during a poker game in 1876. In *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965), based on a novel written by Richard Jessup, offered viewers the story of Eric "The Kid" Stoner, played by Steve McQueen. His ambition was to become the top poker player and usurp the title held by Edward G. Robinson's character, Lancey "The Man" Howard. The movie, not unlike others of its sort (a sub-genre, if you will) came down to a final game between The Kid and The Man.

In the film *Rounders* (1998), written by David Levien and Brian Koppelman, there is a cross-over from filmic fictional character to an actual rounder (one who makes their money solely from playing cards), namely the cameo appearance of back-to-back (1987-88) *WSOP* main event winner Johnny Chan. He is shown playing a hand against Mike, portrayed by Matt Damon, in a "live money" game (a reference to a poker game played with chips that represent their actual cash value as opposed to tournament chips which do not) in an Atlantic City casino. Mike considers Chan to be one of the greatest poker players of all time and is seen in one scene constantly replaying a videotape of Chan's defeat of Erik Seidel in the 1988 *WSOP*. The film's final scene features a high-stakes poker game with the widely-feared KGB, played by John Malkovich. In a bold move which mirrors that of Johnny Chan's last play against Erik Seidel

in the actual *WSOP* in 1988, Mike pushes his all of his chips in against KGB in the last round of betting.

What is of particular interest here, as is the case with many movies that feature a poker game as the climax, is the importance of being able to follow the action of the hands as they unfold. This ties directly into televised poker because there is a link between the reveal of player's hands and the tension/drama created. If there is one common trait without exception in televised poker shows, it is a viewer's ability to follow the action of each hand. Films with poker as a central theme such as *The Cincinnati Kid* and *Rounders* were precursors to *The World Series of Poker* and the *World Poker Tour*. shows which have enjoyed immense popularity. Jane Feuer, in her article on "Genre Study and Television" in *Channels of Discourse* (1987), makes note of Thomas Schatz's semiotic relation to film genre study: "He says that genre can be studied as a formalized sign system whose rules have been assimilated (often unconsciously) through cultural consensus" (117). The consensus here involves the integral part played by the cards themselves as narrative devices at pivotal plot points.

Coverage of *the World Series of Poker* dates back to 1973, just three years after its inception. An odds maker from Ohio, Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder, narrated the action. In the late 1970s, CBS's *Sports Spectacular* and ABC's *Wide World of Sports* aired features on the event regularly, employing Snyder as commentator. In the 1980s, specials were still filmed, but did not enjoy huge success. In the late 1980s, ESPN took over the event, but coverage was limited

to a one hour tape-delay of the main event (wikipedia.org). Given the absence of a reveal of player's hands, there was not enough interest in poker to satisfy the culture's curiosity. Disinterest was further heightened by the marked distance between the laymen's conceived sense of unobtainable wealth that went along with the \$10,000 entry fee into *The World Series of Poker*.

Two enormous prevailing factors would change this view and create a new genre phenomenon. In *The Television Genre Book* (2001), Graeme Turner signifies the importance of understanding your audience:

As is the case with film, genre operates as an important means of communicating information about the television text to prospective audiences. Through its inscription in publicity, in the listing the TV guide, in the repertoires of cultural knowledge around individual personalities and other intertextual experiences, genre helps to frame audience expectations. (5)

Henry Orenstein, a toy maker (inventor of Hasbro's Transformers) and avid poker player, understood what was needed to hold an audience's attention and thus discovered a way to join the filmic climax of poker movies with the action of televised poker. U.S. Patent 5,451,054, held by Orenstein and an invention that has single-handedly revolutionized how we view poker on television, is a series of small cameras embedded in a poker table which allows a viewing audience to see what cards a player is holding (wikipedia.org). While it happens to be that the U.K's *Late Night Poker*, which aired from 1999 to 2002, utilized elements of a hidden camera before this patent was obtained, Orenstein retains the distinction of introducing this particular device to the masses. The significance of this contrivance is the first of the two revolutions that changed the canvas of televised

poker. Prior televised poker events failed to capture the play-by-play excitement of poker.

The second monumental event that solidified the televised poker genre phenomenon was the crowning of Chris Moneymaker as the 2003 *World Series of Poker* main event winner. Although a first prize amount of \$2.5 million was impressive, it was the fact that Moneymaker, an accountant from Tennessee, was an amateur. He had qualified for the world-famous tournament by entering a \$39 online satellite tournament (these are contests where the winner moves on to a higher-stakes tournament by winning the entry fee) with eighteen players, then winning another satellite with sixty players to amass the \$10,000 entry fee necessary to participate in the main event in Las Vegas. Among many seasoned professionals (839 entrants total), Chris Moneymaker managed to win. Coincidentally, ESPN aired the 2003 *WSOP* with the newly-patented hole-cam tables for the first time and also featured action on tables preceding the final table, the first year that such a broad spectrum of coverage was offered.

Mittell's cross-pollination of history and culture are of great significance at this point:

We can begin to build a more satisfying macro-account of a genre's history from the bottom up, by collecting micro-instances of generic discourses in historically specific moments and examining the resulting large-scale patterns and trajectories. This bottom-up approach reflects how genres actually form and evolve - out of the specific cultural practices of industries and audiences, not out of macro-structures. (10)

The “cultural practices of industries” referred to here are the result of implementing the technological advances made available to producers of poker programming and re-actuating the filmic narrative of dramatic poker games in one fell swoop. As for the cultural audience component, Chris Moneymaker’s seemingly impossible defeat of poker greats like Phil Hellmuth, Sammy Farha and Johnny Chan showed millions that it could be done.

The concept of technological determinism may well be applied to the evolution of poker on television, despite its negative reception by some scholars.

In *Technological or Media Determinism* (1995), Daniel Chandler states:

According to technological determinists, particular technical developments, communications technologies or media, or, most broadly, technology in general are the sole or prime antecedent causes of changes in society, and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization. (par. 7)

The arrival of televised poker comes exactly when certain technologies are made available; Orenstein’s hole-cam and Moneymaker’s small internet investment are made possible by the technologies that had come into existence and not before then.

While Chris Moneymaker’s amazing win was piquing the interest of non-poker players and professionals alike, a former lawyer and documentary film maker named Steve Lipscomb had already begun to reap the benefits of a well-made poker television show. He would start the oft repeated practice of exploiting inexpensive cable-channel programming to produce televised poker to turn a greater profit. The *World Poker Tour* premiered on cable’s the Travel

Channel in March of 2003, shortly before the *WSOP* had their 2003 championship featuring the hole-cams, extensive coverage, and the phenomenon that was Chris Moneymaker.

Lipscomb had initially won praise for producing and directing PBS's *Battle for the Minds*, a piece that dealt with discrimination in the Southern Baptists seminary program:

After *Battler for the Minds* success, Lipscomb's junior-high friend called him needing a producer-director for an idea he had already sold to the Discovery Channel... The phone call led to *On the Inside of the World Series of Poker* and later *2001 Tournament of Champions of Poker* and *Cruisin' to a Million* for the Travel Channel. (A.L.M.)

Lipscomb made note of higher-than-normal ratings that accompanied these shows, in particular his 2001 documentary-style program *On the Inside of the World Series of Poker*. He reflects on this point in an interview with *Hollywood Five-O* in the spring of 2003, just as his *World Poker Tour* is launching: "It appeared on primetime, Discovery (channel). It started at their usual 0.9 share and ended at 1.8, so in an hour time with absolutely no promotion we doubled our numbers. That almost never happens" (par. 8). He and business partner Lyle Berman, himself a poker player and very successful in the gaming field, developed a business strategy that would take them into pre-established tournaments and reap the benefits. This is from that same interview:

"We are creating a business called the World Poker Tour that is creating the PGA of poker. We are going out to existing events and we are creating a tour that kind of already exists, much the same way that I think the successful sports of today came about. There was this great enthusiasm for a sport – now it's poker". (par. 12)

Using a sixteen-camera setup in addition to the hole-cams in the tables and hiring poker player and *WSOP* bracelet winner (a gold bracelet awarded to the first-place finishers of the various *World Series of Poker* events) Mike Sexton to host the show with actor Vince Van Patten, Steve Lipscomb had begun to implement his plan. Re-implementing the documentary style that had been successful for him in his earlier *WSOP* show for the Discovery Channel, the *World Poker Tour* went on to become the highest rated television show on the Travel Channel.

Other televised poker programming soon followed, including the also well-received *Celebrity Poker Showdown* on Bravo (this premiered in January of 2004), which pits five celebrities against each other for a purse to be donated to a charitable organization of the winner's choosing. Establishing itself as a true genre, many of the same aspects attributed to its predecessors are mimicked in *Celebrity Poker Showdown*, including the use of the hole-cam and hiring both an actor and established poker player to commentate on the action of the game. In the case of the first season, Phil Gordon and Kevin Pollak hosted. As of 2006, Phil Hellmuth and Dave Foley are hosting (wikipedia.org). Sound bites and reaction shots from players, which are commonplace in the *WPT* and the *WSOP*, are also used on *Celebrity Poker Showdown*.

The televisual poker assault continues to expand. In 2006, ESPN offered viewers a pay-per-view package for the final table of the main event of the *WSOP*. Given the strict laws pertaining to a live feed on gaming coverage in

Nevada, reveal of players' hands was not permitted. Poker professional Phil Hellmuth provided commentary, speculating as to what player's hands may be dependent upon gestures and game play. This was a gamble for ESPN, but foraying into further marketable ventures in an established money maker such as the *WSOP* hardly seems questionable. The NBC show *Saturday Night Live* has featured *Celebrity Poker Showdown* in one of their comedy sketches, making fun of then hosts Phil Gordon and Kevin Pollack, as well as comedian Carrot Top, Gene Shalit and Geraldo Rivera. In 2005, the restaurant chain Wendy's featured a commercial that had a high-stakes poker game in the same style as would be seen at the *WSOP* or the *WTP*. This exponential prevalence of poker on television in its multiple representations is what happens when, Mittell says, "texts interrelate to form a genre" (6). He further states:

Genres are not found within one isolated text; *Wheel of Fortune* is not a genre in and of itself but a member of the generic category "game show." Genres emerge only from the intertextual relations between multiple texts, resulting in a common category. (6)

Thus it stands that mockery and spoofing within the media only stands to solidify televised poker as a genre that stands on its own. When one observes a *Saturday Night Live* sketch comedy piece, it is a cultural acceptance that such a genre exists. Jostein Gripsrud in *Understanding Media Culture* (2002) talks about genres as codifiers within historical and theoretical contexts which are "determined by cultural conventions" and are "agreements among people within a culture" (115). Such wide acceptance of poker indicates further solidification of

obvious paradigm shifts that have occurred in order to allow the televised poker genre to flourish.

Chapter 3

GENRE ORIGINS

The Game Show Influence

After having thoroughly explored the historical rise of televised poker, the focus turns to what pre-existing genres have been borrowed from in order to create the phenomenon that is thriving today. There are two key genres that have heavily influenced televised poker in various ways that will be discussed in this chapter. The first is the game show, an institution in television literally from the beginning:

Commercial television officially began on July 1, 1941 as two stations signed on the air, WNBT Channel 1 and WCBW Channel 2 in New York. On the very first day of programming NBC/WNBT broadcast two game shows, "Uncle Jim's Question Bee" and "Truth or Consequences" with Ralph Edwards. These two shows were one-time special broadcasts to inaugurate the arrival of the new medium. (Schwartz et al. xiv)

Having first enjoyed tremendous popularity on the radio in the 1930's, quiz shows (later to be interchangeable with "game shows") immediately embedded themselves in the new medium of television. Given the hundreds of game shows that have been produced and consumed since then, it is reasonable to conclude that there is an alluring nature to the game show which has sustained its presence in our culture through its many incarnations. This allure can be dissected to find parallels with televised poker as well as divergence points that make the game show different from poker on television.

Firstly, what qualifies as alluring in this context must be defined, focusing on the established game show genre as a corollary compass, drawing cultural and sociological comparisons. William Boddy in *The Television Genre Book* highlights an important element (or allure, if you will) of the game show genre which directly relates to the recent rise in televised poker's recognition and status: "The various television quiz formats turn around differing calibrations of luck, knowledge and skill, and almost all offer the spectacle of ordinary people facing the life-transforming decisions in extended real time" (80). This succinct description of quiz shows and/or game shows relates directly to the 2003 *WSOP* win by Chris Moneymaker and the consequent stellar success of poker on television. Game shows often reflect people's big money dreams, making it a possibility for an everyman such as Moneymaker to gain tremendous wealth in a relatively short amount of time. In *Quiz Craze: America's Infatuation with Game Shows*, Thomas A. DeLong extrapolates this idea to include those content to habitually observe from their living rooms:

Matched vicariously with – or against – a player, a viewer experiences a measure of both complacency and impunity, victory and defeat. "So like the theoretical horseplayer, with his infallible system," journalist Milton Bracker once wrote, "the viewer gets no cash but has the soothing feeling that he could have cleaned up. At the same time – tieless, shoeless and as relaxed as he likes – he can miss the answer with impunity. He gets credit for what he knows without suffering for what he doesn't. In a double sense, he can't lose". (253)

It is this notion that an audience member may observe without consequence for being wrong that resonates with the televised poker genre.

Although players on television must make decisions under great pressure and imperfect knowledge, we as audience members are privileged with a stress-free home environment and a wealth of information about every player's hand, including the statistical probabilities of victory for each of those hands after every round provided by on-screen graphics.

Another commonality and perhaps the sociological driving force in these genres has to do with "the American competitive ethos, which emphasizes winning over participation, individual achievement over collective effort, glorification of the winner over supporting the loser, and financial success over nonmaterialistic pleasure" (Hetsroni 137). There is a value placed on winning in this global society and therefore it is no surprise that an extension of that notion has proliferated within the medium of television from the beginning. The game show genre is the apex; the televised poker genre is another manifestation which has elevated winning and materialistic gain to a new level.

It is important to note the quiz show scandals of the 1950s. There was a significant deviation from mainstream acceptance and the consequential reclamation of cultural approval took some time. In the late 1950s, producers of the shows *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question* were exposed as frauds when it was discovered that contestants were fed answers to questions: "Numerous producers fell into the trap of scripting contests to create an arena in which only the underdogs or contestants most favored by the audience would be allowed to advance or even win" (Schwartz et al. xvi). Poker has yet to be mired by such

scandal, but negative perceptions of the game had to be overcome. In this instance, quiz shows and poker share the triumph of adversity in popular culture.

There is also the idea that a prescribed set of rules are put in place and must be followed in order to attain that great wealth. This need for rules can be applied to the greater socio-cultural paradigm as well as their role in people's appetite for games, be it game shows or poker. Game shows all have a prescribed set of rules which they follow. We as audience members of either programming fare familiarize ourselves with these rules and can therefore play along with interest.

Although there are a few exceptions, the game show genre also shares a lack of scrupulous academic compartmentalization with televised poker. Boddy makes this observation:

...the narrative and character structures of the genre are arguably the most distant from those of literary-based TV genres. As nearly authorless texts, the quiz show has frustrated traditional auteurist and generic methods of analysis imported from literature and film studies. (79)

One exception with regard to the game show genre and scholarly review is Morris B. Holbrook's *Daytime Television Gameshows and the Celebration of Merchandise: The Price is Right*. While there exists a diverse multitude of game shows, *The Price Is Right* encapsulates specific instances within the genre that closely express what it is about the televised poker genre that makes it a close cousin to the game show genre. Although Holbrook's pejorative observations of game shows and quiz shows come with an explanatory bias from the author, his

seething account of greed and low-class perpetuation within the genre may be sifted through to find non-biased theory which is referred to in the next few pages.

The manner of contestant elimination in televised poker starts with the many eager and finishes with one victor in what Holbrook describes as “funnel-shaped progression” and “a multi-tiered hierarchic structure shaped something like an inverted triangle” (60). This could be said of game shows in general, although consolation prizes for poker players for finishing near the top are quite substantial (and equitably proportional to placement in the tournament); the 2006 *WSOP* runner-up, Paul Wasicka, received six million dollars, according to the December 16 issue *Bluff* magazine (54).

The Price is Right and a majority of other game shows tend to have more satisfied losers and runners-up. DeLong notes:

Instant entertainment and prizes distinguish the quiz show, say, from a routine school exam. Without these elements in solid measure, quiz or game shows would wither on the vine. A show business atmosphere apparently insures ecstatic winners, happy runners-up and even smiling losers. (255)

The behavior of poker players tends to be far more serious, as tournaments like the *WSOP* require players to pay large sums of money just to play. Game shows do not call for their players to front monetary compensation in exchange for a chance at riches. It is here that there is a departure from typical television game shows such as *The Price is Right*. Players we see in the televised poker genre make their living from poker winnings. They are not predominantly college

students or stay-at-home mothers playing solely for their own entertainment as well as ours. Also, poker professionals and amateurs alike compete on a level playing field, whereas game show contestants are selected by producers for reasons that don't always reflect skill level. Phil Wayne, a *The Price is Right* employee since the 1960s, explains: "One of the things that contributes to the success of 'Price' is that contestants don't know that they've been chosen until their names are called out over the air from the stage... When I find someone I think is suitable I use a code word, and my assistants make note of it" (DeLong 241). Selection of contestants is not completely random, as DeLong notes that "The staff looks for natural enthusiasm and extroverted attitude in their selection. But looks play a significant part too" (241).

Another deviation exists in the frequency with which you see game show contestants on television as opposed to poker players. Ken Jennings, an anomaly amongst the post quiz show scandals of the 1950s, won over two million dollars on *Jeopardy!*, but could only compete for so long before he was defeated and replaced. A *Jeopardy!* Tournament of Champions returned him very briefly to television and a chance at more money, but game show contestants do not become the institution itself; they are merely a representation of that institution. On the other hand, poker players compete regularly against each other on the tournament circuit, either through the *World Poker Tour*, the *World Series of Poker*, the *Poker Superstars Invitational* on FOX Sports, or any number of other major tournaments that exist for professionals to compete in.

We grow accustomed to the same faces, their behavior, and their success at the tables. This point could be seen to favor poker on television, as watching a familiar face soar in the midst of killer competition has proven a ratings coup with the makers of *Jeopardy!*:

According to the Nielsen TV National People Meter, *Jeopardy!*'s ratings were 22% higher during Jennings's run than they were during the same period the previous year. For several weeks of the winning streak, *Jeopardy!* Was ranked as TV's highest-rated syndicated program...By the end of *Jeopardy!*'s 20th season several weeks later, the show had surpassed *Wheel (of Fortune)* in the ratings. (wikipedia.org)

One would argue that there exists a deep divide in viewership and interest amongst established demographics when referring to game shows as opposed to poker shows. *The Price is Right*, just like many of its daytime counterparts, is targeted to women. DeLong notes: "Of the nine chosen for each show, the majority are women because daytime audiences, both at home and in the studio, tend to be largely female" (241). Holbrook expands this observation to include senior citizens:

...the target audience for the advertising on daytime soaps and game shows is assumed to consist largely of women in general (mostly housewives) and people over 50 years of age in particular (including a few elderly men in retirement)... Supporting this assumption, Comstock *et al.* report that "daytime viewing of...quiz and game shows is highest among women" and that "older women are much more likely to be interested in the daytime quiz and game programs" (115)...In other words, women, infants, and senior citizens compose over 80 percent of the audience watching daytime game shows. (84)

These observations cannot be said of televised poker viewers, as the players themselves are also reflective of viewership. According to Nielsen Media

Research, poker's television audience is 70% male. Thirty percent of the audience consists of women, and only 5% actually play live action games in casinos. This representation is reflected in program scheduling, as poker shows are most often presented in the evening/late-night schedule slots. The *World Poker Tour* premiered late night on the Travel Channel and still managed to become the "highest rated show in the history of the Travel Channel and is now seen in 60 countries worldwide" (pokerroyalty.com). Inverse to this are game shows, whose time slots remain planted in daytime television. *The Price is Right* has been a mainstay in CBS's morning programming, save a one-year stint in prime-time (with some structural adjustments) in 1985-86 in addition to the morning version. There does seem to be a shift back to evening game show programming with shows such as the now-daytime *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and the current prime-time ratings winners *Deal or No Deal* on NBC and FOX's *Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader?*. Whether poker's success has any bearing on these changes remains to be seen, although a greater demographic coup on either side of the gender pool could be occurring.

Another successful ratings genre has emerged from reality show contests (another adaptation of the game show), which allows the audience to follow certain contestants and their characters; whether contestants have adjusted their demeanors for television or are displaying actual personality traits cannot be fully known. Televised poker's contestants also become recognizable in this manner, establishing a fan base and notoriety. Behavioral adjustment is also hard to

gauge with poker players. There is a difference in this regard with the game show genre, as contestants do not generally retain longevity or familiarity with their audience. Shows like CBS's *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race* air the same contestants for an entire season. Game shows such as *Wheel of Fortune* and *Deal or No Deal* do not afford their contestants that much air time. *Jeopardy!*'s Ken Jennings is an anomaly, as most returning champions last only a few days and do not offer such intimate glimpses into player's lives (wikipedia.org).

How the Televised Sports Genre has Influenced Poker

"We are creating a business called the World Poker Tour that is creating the PGA of poker. We are going out to existing events and we are creating this tour that kind of already exists, much the same way that I think the successful sports of today came about. There was this great enthusiasm for a sport – now it's poker" – *World Poker Tour* creator Steve Lipscomb, 2003. (Hollywood Five-o)

In Britain and the United States, TV producers want viewers to see an event they will watch and then wish to watch again. The telecast will reflect producers' beliefs, examined and unexamined, about what a sports contest is and represents. If we wish, therefore, to understand a sports telecast, our first task must be to abandon our myopic concern with the medium itself, and examine the telecast within, and not apart from, its cultural context. (Chandler 187)

There is debate as to whether or not the game of poker and its presentation on television is itself a sport, igniting serious discussion amongst those in the world of poker and sports purists. For the purposes of this paper, there will be an analysis of parallels with the sports genre as well as deviations

which exist. Historical and socio-cultural links between the two genres will also be made. However, no conclusions will be drawn about the validity of either side of the issue, leaving a reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

Not unlike the game show genre, viewers of various sporting events were treated early in the inception of television to sporting programs:

Televised sports in the United States got underway late in the afternoon of May 17, 1939, when someone threw a switch in the RCA Building in downtown New York City. The picture impulses picked up by the bulky Iconoscope television camera located at Columbia University's Baker Field traveled through a transmitter in a nearby truck and up an antenna fastened to the top of a flag-pole, which then catapulted them through the sky to the eighty-fifth floor of the Empire State Building, and NBC's experimental station W2XBS was on the air. (Rader 17)

The college baseball game that was first transmitted from Columbia University failed to impress the few who bore witness to it due to poor image quality, but sports broadcasting had begun nonetheless. The cultural curiosities which brought sports to television have origins different than those of game shows, rooted firmly in allegiance to one's team, or, in the case of sports such as tennis or golf, one's favorite player. The history of sports is itself too lengthy to discuss here, but those elements which made it suitable for consumption by the public are of interest.

Under the umbrella of sports fall several sub-genres. Rod Brooks in *The Television Genre Book* (2001) has divided that list into three categories: sports television as media event, sports television as journalism, and sports television as promotion (87). By examining these categories in their sports context we may

extrapolate to include what degree of crossover applies to televised poker. To begin with, Brookes says:

...television of major sporting contests belongs to the category of *media events* (Dayan and Katz, 1992) alongside royal weddings and funerals, state occasions and live music concerts, sometimes sharing the same outside broadcasting facilities. The most important of these – the Olympics, the soccer World Cup, and the Super Bowl – play a role in encouraging a sense of national identification. (87)

Ironically enough, the observation has been made that this sense of “national identification” amplified by the advent and technological advances of television has also succeeded in destroying the essence of a sporting event experience: “Television has essentially trivialized the experience of spectator sports...It has diminished the capacity of sports...to bind communities, and to enact the rituals that contain, and exalt, society’s traditional values” (Rader 6). “When games began to be televised, the stadium walls were suddenly blown outward...the members of the stadium audience were forced to realize that they and their team were no longer taking part in a community rite. Without their permission, their rituals had been opened to any Tom, Dick, or Harry who turned on the TV set” (Chandler 184).

Televised poker engulfs this sense of “media event” and also that loss of ritual that comes with the placement of intrusive cameras where they previously had not ventured. The attendance of sporting events and poker tournaments by fans are not dissimilar, both representing a visceral experience which transcends that which television attempts to convey. Film coverage of the *WSOP* did not

start until 1973 and was limited to the technology available at the time (Grotenstein et al. 33). There exists a shift in sports and televised poker's reach to expansive audiences, dependent upon technology's evolution in tandem with the growing cultural acceptance of the two genres. As this idea of sport and poker as "event" grew, so did viewership.

The second sub-genre of sports refers to the journalistic aspect of media coverage. Brookes describes sports journalism as involving "stories concerning sports issues exclusively: disciplinary issues, contract negotiations, levels of motivation and commitment, tactics, injuries and the like" (87). Television shows such as ESPN's *SportsCenter* and FOX Sports' *The Best Damn Sports Show Ever* focus on these issues exclusively (intermittent with highlight clips from the day's sporting events). Because sports on television is far more established in the medium of television and in people's homes, shows such as the aforementioned can exist independent to the sports broadcasts themselves. Poker, still in its infant televisual stages and specific to one topic (sports encompasses many games, both team and individual), incorporates these journalistic aspects directly into the texts of the tournaments aired. The *World Series of Poker* features a segment called "The Nuts"; it gives profiles of players and their anecdotal recounts of table drama as well as montages of occurrences on the poker table not directly related to the action of the game. For example, player Chris "Jesus" Ferguson in one segment demonstrates his ability to slice a banana in half from a distance of eight feet using only a playing card (*WSOP*

2005). The journalistic aspect of televised poker, as in sports, also aids in informing viewers of poker players' standings in the tournament circuits and their winnings for the year. The provision of more information gives audiences the ability to better follow their favorite players, a point which is directly adopted from the sports model.

Finally, there is "sports as promotion", which Brookes says "often performs an explicitly promotional role. Title sequences and video segments promote sporting events through constructing narrative conflicts between participants, using techniques that are similar to those used in advertisements...pop videos...and movie trailers" (87). Creating that sense of excitement around any particular event is a manner of selling itself as well as keeping people tuned in to absorb commercials. Brookes: "frequent advertisement breaks are integral to commercial sports broadcasts as broadcasters seek to maximize, within regulatory constraints, the revenue that can be generated" (88). Televised poker also seeks to pique the interest of audiences by employing that dramatic narrative device. Opening segments of all poker programming raise the question about past winners and their ability to retain their title, or will the younger, flashier player prevail. Other popular tournament players are also featured, their fate remaining in the balance. With dramatic circumstances sufficiently in place, the audience is locked in. During ESPN's airings of the *WSOP*, commercial advertisements have remained consistent, predominantly featuring online gaming site advertisements and beer commercials. In 2005, Miller Brewing's

Milwaukee's Best was a primary sponsor, as was online gaming site FullTiltPoker (Beirne pars. 18-22).

Also common in advertising of sports is the use of players to sell products, often hawking products with their own labels on them. One the most successful cases in sports in this case is that of Michael Jordan and his marketing empire, which is estimated in the hundreds of million of dollars in revenue over the last 21 years. Ongoing contracts with companies such as Nike and his very famous Air Jordans, Gatorade, Hanes, Ball Park Franks, and Wheaties (wikipedia.org). Jordan played for the Chicago Bulls for fifteen years between 1984 and 2001 and was MVP of the NBA (National Basketball Association) five times. Cashing in on his tremendous talent and popularity is still reaping him tremendous profits today. In a similar although not nearly as lucrative vein, 2003 *WSOP* winner Chris Moneymaker has filmed a series of commercials for the Poker Stars gaming sight which he played poker on and qualified to play in the *WSOP* main event (see chapter 2). He has also written a book about his experience and launched his own gaming company, Moneymaker Gaming, where he sells "poker accessories, including chips, chip sets and playing tables that are co-branded with Playboy (Beirne par. 25). The promotional opportunities for sports figures and poker players seem to be endless. The cultural implications of this conjoining of genre and consumerism blur the line between sports and televised poker, providing further evidence of their intimate involvement with each other, televised poker being another branch on sports genre's evolutionary tree.

The most apparent adherence to the sports genre model by televised poker is the televisual and aural implementations adopted. Sports programs have always provided commentary for its listeners on the radio and viewers of televised events, ensuring that their prospective audiences may follow the action of the game with understanding of the rules and players' positions in team sports and/or progress in the game at hand as well as the overall season. Brookes expands this:

Following radio, the conventions of television commentary have also developed to respond to uncertainty in the action. Commentary is organized around a distinction between a commentator (UK) or play-by-play announcer (USA), and a summarizer (UK) or color announcer (USA). Typically, the former will be an expert at narrating the event and takes responsibility for controlling the commentary, whereas the latter will be an ex-athlete and provide a participant's perspective. (87)

This two-person announcing team also works for and is always utilized in televised poker. A television personality provides the summary, as Brookes defines it, and a professional poker player adds the players' point of view, yielding a balance of practical information and entertainment. For example, the *World Poker Tour* features *WSOP* winner Mike Sexton and actor Vince Van Patten as their commentators. These commentators act as translators of the events that unfold, and often share anecdotes about players and their backgrounds.

Construction of the transmitted image in both genres seeks to infuse the spectatorial gaze with sports psychology. A phenomenon occurs here that is summarized by Lloyd Reynolds Sloan in *Sports, Games and Play: Social and*

Psychological Viewpoints (1989). Although Sloan analyzes teams, his ideas may be applied to the individual competitor:

...some identification with team is necessary to share products of its outcomes. To the degree that fan's reactions are similar to those of individuals who personally succeed or fail, it might be inferred that the team is in some fashion felt to be a kind of component of the fan's concept of self. Given this possibility it may be useful to consider our knowledge of self and self-esteem motivated actions. (213)

As conveyed through visual and aural construct, it is this sense of self which reverberates with sports fans and poker aficionados. In addition to the information-packed commentary in televised poker tournaments, on-screen graphics further heighten a viewer's experience; players' hands, where the action of play rests, how much has been bet or raised, a running pot amount (how much money will be won on that particular hand), and statistical probabilities of victory for any given player at any point in the action are all on display during a televised poker show (see Figs. 4-12). Because poker is a mental game and not hashed out on the playing field in a physical manner, the enjoyment of observing someone play would be lost were it not for these computer graphic aides.

Anna Everett's observances of digitextuality in *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality* within the medium of television points out the role to the digital and "its function that simultaneously enables aesthetic enhancement and diminution of the televisual image" (10). The aesthetic enhancement here unveils the virtual self we impose on the broadcast, both in terms of sports and televised poker, although poker's success on television is reliant upon the

digitexual more so than sports. There would be no televised poker were it not for the environment created by producers and editors that put us in the player's seat. This is achieved through the use of Orenstein's table-embedded cameras (see chapter 2) and the on-screen graphics which remind us of the cards, the stakes, and who has what to lose. Our gaze is made complete by the aural component that accompanies the visual. There is no music played during the action of the game; rather it is provided over fade-ins and fade-outs from and to commercial breaks. Tables are wired for sound and pick up every finger tap, loud sigh, and clinking echo made by the shuffling of chips. Players' comments to one another, sometimes in very mocking tones in the wake of the recent outcome of a hand, are always heard. Such banter between players, in conjunction with commentators' background information, humanizes the players and makes a spectator's identification with them all the more seamless. The sense of empowerment in the knowledge provided is the completion of self as the role of spectator. Sports also have such digital aides, but their success on television has long superceded that of televised poker without the technology ever having been available. This is another example of televised poker's temporal contingencies upon available technologies.

Chapter 4

CROSS-POLLINATING TELEVISED POKER

To understand genres as cultural categories, we need different methods; generic discourses are not deep repositories of hidden meanings, formal structures or subtextual insights. Rather, we should follow the Foucauldian genealogy, emphasizing breadth over depth and collecting as many discursive instances surrounding a given instance of generic process as we can. (Mittell 17)

Televised poker's success has been in conjunction with poker's dissemination across the spectrum of media outlets. The cultural influence of the genre has spurred hundreds of online gaming sites, dozens of new poker magazines and a stark jump in published books on the game of poker, mainstream commercial spots, and poker video games in the last three years. When taking the operations of a genre into consideration, Mittell's cultural approach offers insight into how all of these phenomena are related. He states "we should focus on the breadth of discursive enunciations around any given instance, mapping out as many articulations of genre as possible and situating them within larger cultural contexts and relations" (9). Thus, it is by incorporating all that has been discussed in this paper, from historical and cultural roots to genre origins, and including resulting and effected media "enunciations" of the televised poker genre which gives a completed picture. Mittell continues: "Linking together these numerous discourses will begin to suggest more large-scale patterns of generic definitions, meanings, and hierarchies" (9).

In outlining poker's multimedia dissemination, we will first examine the print medium. There are numerous effects on the publishing industry as a result of televised poker's popularity. The first is the big rise in the number of books being published about poker:

A search on Amazon.com reveals that at least 61 titles related to the game have been or are being published in 2005, up from 46 in 2004, 37 in 2003 and 16 in 2002...the surge in interest caught Two Plus Two's publisher, Mason Malmuth, by surprise. "Sales exploded in 2003 a couple of months after the World Poker Tour began to appear on the Travel Channel," says Malmuth. "We thought it was a fluke, but the sales kept on climbing. And now you have hundreds of thousands playing". (Peters 20)

There is an undeniable link between televised poker's emergence and the incredible jump in published books on poker, not to mention sales of those books and previously published works: "(Avery) Cardoza, whose company has published about 50 books on poker, estimates that two volumes by Doyle Brunson have easily sold more than 250,000 copies combined. Cardoza's biggest competitor, Two Plus Two, has sold more than a million copies of its books, and now has 30 titles in print" (Peters 22).

There has also been a proliferation of magazines on poker since televised poker's arrival. In a 2005 Associated Press article, Daniel Yee writes about one of the fastest-growing new card magazines, *Bluff*: "Bluff seeks to feed young players' dreams...by focusing more on poker personalities and lifestyle and less on strategy. It's that creativity that publisher Eric Morris credits with the magazine's impressive growth in popularity in just 12 months, now with a self-reported circulation of 250,000" (par. 10). While *Bluff* seeks to capitalize on the

glamorous side of the high-stakes poker world, clearly non-traditionalist and leaning towards the televised representation of poker, *Card Player* represents a more strategy-based magazine. *Card Player* has been in publication for eighteen years, but had to undergo a major image overhaul to keep in step with the changes brought about by televised poker and newly-introduced competition (Yee pars. 15-16). *All In* was another magazine released in 2004. *American Poker Player* launched in November of 2005. There is also *Woman Poker Player*, catering to women and their emergence in the poker world. *Poker Player* is a newspaper that gives listings of tournaments taking place around the country as well as who the big winners are in completed tournaments. *Top Pair* magazine is published bi-monthly and regularly features celebrity poker players such as Kevin Nealon, James Woods and Jennifer Tilly. In all, poker magazines “bring in between \$5 million and \$10 million” (Yee par. 8). All of the mentioned publications also have corresponding websites which have a wealth of features; *Card Player*’s site even includes an online television broadcast called *Card Player TV* which offers interviews, up-to-date poker news and tutorials.

The ubiquitous nature of poker’s multimedia reach also includes radio shows on Sirius Satellite Radio (Bluff Poker Radio- every Wednesday evening 8pm EST and 5pm PDT) and ESPNRadio.com’s “The Poker Edge”, a web-based radio show. HoldemRadio.com is a Texas hold’em radio talk show also pod-casting live, twenty-four hours a day. There are other pod-casts available, including *World Talk Radio* and *Poker Radio*.

Poker also has an outlet in the world of video games. Recent 2006 releases include spring's *World Poker Tour 2K6* for Sony's PSP (Play Station Portable), which means other PSP owners with the same game may compete against each other or with players online. It was previously available for the PlayStation 2, Sony's Xbox, and Nintendo's Game Boy Advance. *Stacked with Daniel Negreanu's* PSP version was released in October of 2006. It features commentary by the professional poker player Daniel Negreanu and learns a player's style of play, offering advice on how to improve one's game in the process. Both games closely mimic televised poker visuals, complete with commentary (Vince Van Patten from the *WPT* supplies the voice-overs for their game) and televisual styling. There are also not surprisingly video game versions of the *World Series of Poker*, made by Activision. Their first version was released in 2005 and their latest offering is the *Tournament of Champions 2007*, released in September of 2006 for the Xbox, PlayStation 2, the Nintendo Gamecube and a PC version for Windows.

One of the latest media manifestations of poker is mobile technologies. *Business Wire's* article on "Phantom Fiber's Advanced Wireless Platform for Mobile Poker" from FindArticle's website acknowledges televised poker's role in their success:

Poker lends itself to Internet and wireless channels because players compete against each other which has allowed poker to explode in popularity. In addition, televised poker tournaments have encouraged casual players to hone their skills and strategies before playing internet or mobile poker. The success of Internet

and mobile poker formats is largely driven by the power of "multi-player communities". (par. 3)

There are numerous poker programs on the market that may be downloaded onto cellular phones, allowing for participants to play against each other from any location at any time. This includes real money games as well as the innocuous free-play versions. The interactive and portable nature of this growing technology allows for a new manifestation of the poker genre to thrive. Hands-On Mobile, a company which offers entertainment (including poker) through mobile phones, teamed with the Travel Channel and the *WPT* in a sweepstakes that would allow one winner the opportunity to attend the 2006 *WPT* World Championship. *WPT* website's April 26, 2006 press release explains their company's role in the wireless industry and poker's place in it:

Hands-On Mobile brought World Poker Tour into the wireless arena through its Texas Hold'Em game, allowing poker fans the opportunity to enjoy high-stakes and high-energy poker in the palm of their hand. Hands-On Mobile's leading mobile entertainment product, World Poker Tour's Texas Hold'Em, has logged more than 4 million hands played since its launch in March, 2005. (par. 2)

Cooperation between the televised poker arena and technology companies such as Hands-On Mobile demonstrates a further reach into our already technology-driven culture.

These emergences lend themselves directly to Mittell's idea that "genre historiography should provide a genealogy of discursive shifts and re-articulations to account for a genre's evolution and redefinition, not just a chronology of changing textual examples" (11). In other words, the texts of any

given genre cannot be examined in isolation. Rather, one must incorporate every technological advance, every cultural paradigm shift and every mitigating external incident in order to understand how a genre comes to be what it is and how it evolves. Nowhere in televised poker genre is this more apparent than when discussing online gaming.

According to *U. S. News and World Report*, there are 2300 online gaming sites in cyberspace today, a large amount dedicated solely to poker (Clark 46). According to Daniel G. Habib in an article from *Sports Illustrated's* May 2005 issue, "More than 1.8 million users play each month, according to the independent tracking service PokerPulse.com. They wager an average of \$200 million a day, and the industry generates \$2.2 billion in gross revenue annually" (par. 5). This is just in the United States and does not account for the vast European market or the Asian market. Some of the more popular sites include Poker Stars, Full Tilt Poker, Bodog Poker, Mansion Poker, Poker.com, Absolute Poker, Ultimate Bet, Paradise Poker, Poker Ocean, Empire Poker, and Doyle's Room (pokerforum.com).

While these and other sites have had tremendous monetary success, they may soon have to seek overseas markets due to October of 2006's passage in congress of the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act (UIGEA), which makes all transactions with American financial institutions a federal crime. Party Poker, which once boasted revenue twice that of Poker Stars (the current leader in the industry), have abandoned all commercial ties with the United States,

focusing primarily on the European market (wikipedia.org). The final chapter will discuss this subject and the future of online poker in further detail.

It is important to note that online gaming sites precede televised poker by a number of years. LaunchPoker.com states the following:

In October of 1996 InterCasino goes online and claims to be the first online casino to accept a real money wager over the internet. Like ants lured by the scent of a picnic lunch, others jumped on the bandwagon of online gaming. By 1999 there were approximately 700 online casinos. A March 2001 survey reported that around 8 million people had gambled with real money online. It was just about a year later, on 30 May 2002, an online casino produced it's first millionaire. (par. 5)

This is of significance because there could be debate as to which medium propelled which into such great popularity and resulting wealth for the gaming industry and poker television producers. One could postulate that televised poker only furthered the success of poker online, or one could draw the exact opposite conclusion, but the answer most likely lies somewhere in between; it is a mutually beneficial relationship. If we remember Chris Moneymaker and his unlikely story, we will recall that he would not have gone to the *WSOP* at all were it not for those satellite games with the online poker site, Poker Stars. 2004's champion Greg Raymer qualified the same way as Moneymaker and also represented Poker Stars. The result of these situations is a marked growth in fame, recognition, and wealth for everyone involved with the business of poker and online poker gaming sites, including the players that made their fortunes as a result of the online tournaments that lead them to, in particular, the *World Series of Poker*.

Poker industry sources estimated that the top Web sites contributed about half of this year's record field, nearly 8,800 players, to the World Series of Poker Main Event held at the Rio Suites Resort & Casino...Poker TV shows, such as ESPN's presentations of the poker world series and the Travel Channel's broadcasts of the World Poker Tour, are supported, in part, by commercials advertising the for-play-money dot-net versions of real-money Internet poker rooms. (Ordine pars. 16-17)

Oftentimes professional players who are regularly seen on the televised tournament circuit back a particular online gaming site for endorsement money. The aforementioned Chris Moneymaker and Greg Raymer were featured in print advertisements as well as television commercials for Poker Stars, extolling the online poker site and wonderful lives they subsequently lead as a result of their wins at the *WSOP*. Joseph Hachem, the 2005 main event winner, is also a spokesperson of Poker Stars, although he did not qualify for the main event through a satellite tournament, rather he paid the \$10,000 entry fee (wikipedia.org). Moneymaker and Raymer's endorsement has lead to great success for not only Poker Stars but many other poker sites as well. It is an echoing of the "anyone can win this enormous cash prize" sentiment discussed in chapter two, only now the sentiment seeps into the multimedia realm and propagates great profits for another media entity. Long-time professional poker player and multiple-*WSOP* winner Doyle "Texas Dolly" Brunson has his own online poker site, Doyle's Room. Full Tilt Poker offers players the chance to play against their professional team in live online games. Some of their professionals include Phil Ivey, Chris "Jesus" Ferguson, Jennifer Harman, Phil Gordon, Howard Lederer, Gus Hansen, and Mike Matusow. These are all players regularly

featured on the tournament circuits, including the *World Poker Tour* and the *World Series of Poker* and offer poker players at home the opportunity to interact with the biggest players in the world, bridging the televisual reality with virtual reality (fulltilt.com). These are examples of not only the sports model mentioned in the previous chapter, but also indicative of the two mediums' reliance on the other.

The cultural hegemony of poker and its media predecessors and offspring dictate a further reliance on Mittell's framework for cultural and historical examinations of genre. He states: "An analysis of the television industry's generic practices must look beyond production to how exhibition, advertising, and textual framing all work to constitute television genres" (13). Nowhere is this more apparent than with online poker, as the marriage between it and televised poker is, at this historical and cultural juncture, codependent at the very least. The onslaught of advertisements offered during every televised poker event aired feature online poker rooms regularly, and poker professionals wear logos of the online poker site they represent on shirts and hats while playing in the tournaments. There has been contention between the networks which air poker shows and professional players because of this issue. The right to wear logos on a show such as the *WPT* causes possible legal issues and is an ongoing battle (cardplayer.com).

As with other programs on television, poker is self-promoting. In promoting online venues to an audience, there is a cyclic distribution of benefits.

There has been a major cultural shift over the past ten years that has made the internet a mainstay media outlet, coupling with television for an assault on the senses at every turn. As the *WPT* and *WSOP* and the like amass a solid fan base, they boost online poker sites numbers as a result of omnipresent media bombardment. Having the opportunity to play with professionals, qualifying for a seat at the *WSOP* or just playing in the comfort of one's own home would never have been perpetuated were it not for the televised coverage and accompanying technologies that made professional poker play such an intimate and self-identifying experience. This self-feeding model reflects one of Jane Feuer's approaches to studying television genre: "The *ritual approach* sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which a culture speaks to itself" (119). Culture does indeed speak to itself through the use of multimedia, leaving room for an academic discursive on topics like the televised poker genre and its changing landscape.

Thus, it is clear that the televised poker model serves to present readers with a different view of television genre studies, encompassing a much broader base than a simple textual dissection. These other forms of media which have been fully affected by the televised poker genre have also transmuted the genre itself, forcing one to question what actually constitutes a genre in the first place. This harkens back to the theoretical topics that have been weaved into this media sampling of televised poker's reach. There continues to be change and evolution within the genre and there always will be; transformations within the

culture and dominant technologies dictate that it will always occur, the flux of cultural tastes are constant and never-ending.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

As for the future of televised poker, it remains to be seen whether the phenomenon will retain its hold on audiences in the years to come. The breadth of programming available now may over-saturate the masses and lose its potency, although the *World Series of Poker* will most likely continue to draw players and audiences for some time to come. The game's appeal supercedes the components of media and is not itself a product of technological viability. Rather, poker's medial enunciations reflect a cultural acceptance of a pastime that has risen above the taboo assignments of previous generations. There can be no return to an American culture that exists without televised poker tournaments and captivated audiences looking to emulate their favorite poker stars.

There are however deep troubles for the online gaming industry in this country, as was mentioned in chapter four, and the backlash over the glamorization of gambling has begun. Having established the strong interconnectivity of these two media representations of poker, it will be interesting to see to what extent there is a direct effect on televised poker. The passage of the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act (UIGEA) in October of 2006 has crippled the industry in the United States, making online poker play for money a very difficult process. This act was attached to the SAFE Port Act, calling for

greater security in our nation's ports. There is little to connect the two acts exclusively, but Congress did so the night before adjourning for 2006 mid-term elections nonetheless. These are the findings of Congress:

SUBCHAPTER IV PROHIBITION ON FUNDING OF UNLAWFUL INTERNET GAMBLING

§ 5361. Congressional findings and purpose

(a) FINDINGS.

Congress finds the following:

- (1) Internet gambling is primarily funded through personal use of payment system instruments, credit cards, and wire transfers.
- (2) The National Gambling Impact Study Commission in 1999 recommended the passage of legislation to prohibit wire transfers to Internet gambling sites or the banks which represent such sites.
- (3) Internet gambling is a growing cause of debt collection problems for insured depository institutions and the consumer credit industry.
- (4) New mechanisms for enforcing gambling laws on the Internet are necessary because traditional law enforcement mechanisms are often inadequate for enforcing gambling prohibitions or regulations on the Internet, especially where such gambling crosses State or national borders. (SAFE Port Act, H. R. 4954)

Further exacerbating players' difficulties are the predicament of the online payment processing company, Neteller. *All In* magazine's web site reports:

Neteller, which had been one of the largest online payment processors in the poker industry, withdrew from the US market on January 19--just days after founders John Lefebvre and Stephen Lawrence were arrested on money laundering charges...The US Attorney's office decided to freeze all the funds of US poker players, effectively keeping their cash in limbo until the courts reach a decision on whether or not to indict the Neteller founders. (Feb. 2007)

The extent to which the televised poker genre has made its mark in the current cultural climate will have much to do with how it recovers from the virtual loss of its biggest media ally. As has been shown, the tandem natures of online

poker and televised poker have tremendous effects on each other. The number of entrants which made for such entertaining television in the form of online poker qualifiers this past year at the *World Series of Poker* accounted for more than half of the playing field in the main event and boosted the first place award to \$12 million (cardplayer.com). Without that kind of spectacle and prize pool money for audience members to gasp over and envy, the tournament may lose the appeal which was established by the unlikely rookie, Chris Moneymaker, in 2003.

Even within the televised poker genre itself, there are many more avenues to be explored. For instance, there is the new breed of celebrity created amongst the poker players who have achieved success in televised poker tournaments. They have their following, not unlike film and television stars or athletes. There is the matter of dissecting that notoriety and what distinguishes it from other forms of celebrity. Also, what is it that makes certain players so recognizable amongst a large field of contenders? It could be their appearance, their attitude on or off the table, or perhaps their background and compelling poker journeys that acts as the catalyst for popularity. Barry Greenstein is a professional player who donates every dollar of his poker winnings to charity and has been nicknamed "The Robin Hood of Poker" for obvious reasons. Chris "Jesus" Ferguson is dubbed such because his long hair and beard closely resembles the common depiction of Jesus Christ. Mike "The Mouth" Matusow is so called because he frequently berates his fellow players for what he considers poor poker plays, a

kind of reputation which makes him recognizable for negative comments and foul language.

There is also the matter of celebrity within celebrity, where actors known for their work on television and in movies have a new identification within the poker realm. Stars like James Woods, Mimi Rogers, Tobey McGuire, Ben Affleck, and Jennifer Tilly regularly participate in tournaments like the *WSOP* and the *WPT*. Other celebrities participate in Bravo's *Celebrity Poker Showdown*, which puts famous television and film personalities in an environment slightly less intense than the usual tournament situation; they play for charity and often make jokes with their competitors while playing. This would also be an interesting field in which to apply established theories, such as celebrity theory and fame theory.

There is also more to be said about the subject of spectacle when it comes to televised poker. In this paper, the historical, cultural, and multimedia aspects were explored. More perspective may be gained on the phenomenon of televised poker by investigating the spectacle facet; this delves far more into psychological theories than what has been discussed in this thesis. Spectacle analysis may provide for scholars the underlying impetus of viewership in this culture.

There must also be a consideration for the evolution of poker video games. Technology has progressed to a point where poker video games mimic actual televised tournament conditions with great accuracy. The likenesses of

professional players in games such as *Daniel Negreanu's Stacked* are impeccable; this is in addition to players which are created by gamers within the virtual video realm (see Figs. 1-3). How the virtual conditions created by such televised poker video games bear weight on societal perceptions of the game would also be an interesting avenue of exploration.

The history of poker's journey to our television sets, subsequent multimedia proliferations and co-existences is a rich one. Fascinatingly, this specific genre and its constantly changing landscape only represent the beginning of a new approach to dissecting television genres. This thesis serves to begin a discourse on how television genre separates itself from genre in the traditional, literature-based and film studies. Using televised poker as a model, cultural and historical instances serve to inform readers that no genre in any televisual manifestation comes to be without the societal and technological consent of circumstance. Genre theorists have begun to open the discourse to these notions, most notably Jason Mittell and his amply-utilized observations from "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory." It is the thorough examination of the non-textual which gives meaning to the text and makes a new flux categorization possible. We are beginning to move beyond a genre system that does not make allowances for cultural/historical variation and evolution. The luxury of immediacy and connectivity afforded citizens of the twenty-first century continues to accelerate, demanding different modes of processing information, both on the technological front and in theoretical studies. These observations

are merely a microcosmic reflection of scholastic attitudes adjusting and evolving to reflect inevitable cultural paradigm shifts in multimedia studies.

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