

(Feature Article – TV Guide online, November 2000)

## Let the Games Begin!

**Everybody wants to be a millionaire and the TV networks are making *zillions* catering to the fantasy of fast fame and riches.**

Scott Paton



*Once upon a time, programs like Password, Truth or Consequences, Concentration and The Match Game used to dot the TV landscape. But soaps and talk shows came into vogue and the game shows were out. Hold-overs from another era, only Jeopardy!, Wheel of Fortune and The Price Is Right survived. But like that wheel that Vanna White spins nightly, everything comes back around eventually. Recently, classics like Hollywood Squares and Family Feud have been revived in syndication. The real story, though, is in prime time. Since Who Wants to Be a Millionaire debuted last September to blockbuster ratings, all the networks have jumped on the bandwagon with new game shows of their own.*



“Is that your final answer?” The phrase has insinuated itself into our collective vocabulary like no other since the days of “Where’s the beef?” Surely Regis Philbin’s place in the next edition of *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* is assured. Little did he know that when he first uttered that line last September, that countless friends and strangers alike would be peppering him back with it at every turn. “I was recently on a flight from L.A. back to New York,” recounts Philbin, “and half the people that passed me had to do it! They had to ask me, ‘is that your final answer?’ Finally, a guy sat down near me. I made eye contact with him. He opened his mouth and I just waited for it. But he said, ‘I just can’t do it to you.’ I could’ve kissed him!”

## **Mr. Millionaire**

If some good-natured heckling from appreciative fans is the only downside to Regis’ anointment as King of TV these days, then he has little to complain about. With *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* a regular staple and the linchpin of ABC’s TV schedule, it has been reported that Philbin is pulling in a hefty \$7-million paycheck for his hosting duties on the program. With *Millionaire* propping up the network’s ratings to an all-time high, though, that salary is a bargain by any yardstick.

## **Beginnings**

The origin of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* lay more than 3,000 miles east of the Manhattan studio where Regis Philbin tapes the American version of the show. Created by four Englishmen, the program made its debut on British TV in the fall of 1998 and was instantly at the top of the ratings. ABC executive Michael Davies –himself a transplanted Brit—snatched up domestic rights immediately. Initially, personalities including Bob Costas, Phil Donahue and Montel Williams were on the inside track for the hosting

job, but Philbin lobbied hard for it and, obviously, everyone involved has been pleased with the results.



## Criticisms

While *Millionaire* has clearly become a pop culture phenomenon, with success comes the naysayers. Initial criticism leveled at the show pointed out that the contestants on the program were predominantly white males. Since the first two rounds of qualifying heats are played over the phone, the producers could hardly be charged with discrimination. Still, an explanation was in order. ABC trotted out some expert “cultural anthropologists” who explained that white males had “no intellectual advantage” over other groups, but might have, on average, “superior hand-to-eye coordination skills” due to increased exposure to video and arcade games. Presumably that made them quicker on the touchtone pad. The controversy was defused and the panelists on the show have been a bit more diversified lately.

## Copy Cats and Competition

Notoriously an imitative medium, the other TV networks were green with envy over ABC’s success with *Millionaire* and quickly green-lighted quiz shows of their own. Fox stepped up to the plate with *Greed*, a study in modern anthropology all its own as contestants not only compete with one another, but are actually encouraged to sabotage each other as well. Always one to maximize his opportunities, Dick Clark not only produces *Greed* for Fox, but produced and hosted *Winning Lines* for CBS. *Lines* resembles the *Hollywood Squares* set on steroids as 49 contestants are all seated in a grid that is several stories high. But so far, the only other ratings success has been *Twenty One*, NBC’s update of the ‘50s scandal-ridden program that inspired the film *Quiz Show*.

With at least four more shows in development, it remains to be seen if game show mania will continue to build or burn itself out with over-saturation.

# GAME SHOW

## Multi-millions

If any of the new games shows has a chance of enduring, it's *Millionaire*. And with books, CD-ROMs, board games, electronic games and countless other merchandise out or in the pipeline, it's the one that has become a major franchise. Rosie O'Donnell recently served as a contestant's "telephone lifeline" on the show and offered to pay him the 32-grand that was at stake if she goofed. (She didn't.) Coming soon: an all-celebrity version of the show and a pre-Oscar edition as well. "I don't know what the questions are going to be," says Regis Philbin, "but they'll be all about Oscar winners, movies and stars. That'll be a lot of fun."



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