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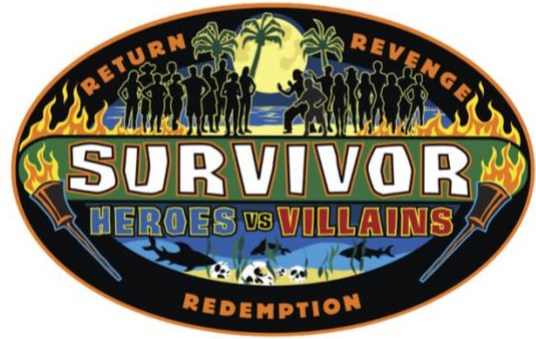
Survivor: Analyzing the Humor of Reality TV at its Finest

The memories I have of my biological father are limited—few are even remotely positive. He was a ranging alcoholic, suffered from nicotine and drug addictions, and stayed consistently unemployed for two reasons: one being laziness, and another being busted for watching porn on work computers (smart move, dad). He neglected my siblings and I every visit... but for some odd reason, I remember the seldom good times over the plethora of bad. In the few moments my father was sober enough to watch TV, he and I shared one love that distracted me from our depressing life: the reality show *Survivor* (2000). Everything sucked a little less when we watched contestants¹ fight for resources and socially destroy each other just to stay in... paradise? The point is, this show allowed me to laugh during times that were a lot less than laughable. For me, the entire goal of winning seemed to be the opposite of funny. The “castaways” have to play dirty, betray their tribes, physically battle each other, become social manipulators, and develop cunning strategies in order to make it to the end. Why is it so funny?

¹ A group of contestants are divided into two tribes in a remote location, with little to nothing except for the clothes they're wearing.

Season 20—known as “Heroes v. Villains”—most vividly stands out in my mind, featuring twenty returning players. I believe this is arguably the funniest of the forty-five ongoing seasons.

First of all, the cast was iconic—so many fan favorites took the screen again (including my fave, Colby) and several of them were past winners. The forming of relationships in this game is a breeding ground for humor, and during this season, there were already standing relationships from past seasons that made the challenges and dynamics of tribal council²



The logo of Season 20, with exclusive slogan “Return. Revenge. Redemption.” instead of the regular motto “Outwit. Outplay. Outlast.”

even more hilarious. Take Amanda and Parvati, who had played together before but were placed on opposite tribes this go around. Once the tribes merged,³ they were extremely superficial in their interactions. They attempted to see if the fact they previously played together would make them allies,⁴ but they actually just used each other to gain information for their own alliances. Watching the tense drama floating in the air between the two of them made me laugh hysterically, and my father lied when he said he didn’t have a crush on Parvati.

Reality shows are a multifaceted phenomenon; people watch them because they’re social experiments with entertainment value. Series like *Survivor* reinforce a sense of superiority and highlight struggles others can relate to. Both contestants and viewers alike experience this superiority theory, “the idea that people laugh at the misfortune of others,” discussed in McGraw

² Each day (or couple of days) contestants compete in various physical and puzzle challenges—as tribes—to win one or both of the following things: rewards, such as food or supplies, or tribal immunity. The losing team must go to tribal council and vote one of their players out.

³ When around half of the contestants have been eliminated, the tribes merge into a single tribe.

⁴ In order to keep themselves from being voted out, players strategize by forming alliances. Allied players generally do not vote for one another unless they choose to blind side.

& Warner’s article about the theory of comedy. People that watch the show get a kick out of all of the contestant’s failures and social commotion. Watching the contestants scramble made *me* feel better about my own external problems. I didn’t have to think about good ol’ dad smoking weed inside our trailer because—look! Ha!!! Amanda just lost a challenge at the last second!! Do you see what I mean? Reality TV makes us laugh as a coping mechanism and a distraction, and that’s why it’s so popular.

The survivors often laugh at each other as a way to cope; for example, Sandra knew she was a weak physical performer and acknowledged that it hurt her game. But, she willingly sat out of all



Sandra enjoying her cookies after bowing out of an immunity challenge.

the difficult challenges, picking on the others as they struggled. In an individual immunity challenge, Jeff (the host), tempted people to step down with treats, and Sandra immediately went out. She sat her butt down and said: “Oh, these

cookies are off the hook, you don’t know what you’re missing.” She unabashedly watched everyone use their energy on challenges while joking about it to make herself feel better. She mastered the system (in my book). Strategically deploying humor to deflect attention and subtly influence others proved to be a game-winning strategy when Sandra ended Season 20 with a check.⁵

⁵ Sandra was the winner of Season 20.

Every player has to consider what will take them to the end. They all have an eye on the prize: one million dollars. This complex strategy process is why McGraw & Warner's argument is so true relative to comedy in *Survivor*, because the entire goal of the show is to make people laugh at how chaotic the competition is, as well as to cause the survivors to laugh at each other to distract themselves from their circumstances. At one point at the Heroes' camp, they were experiencing a food shortage. Rather than getting caught up in the harsh reality of their situation, they used it as an opportunity to use humor to cope, *and* as a tactic to shift the attention to someone they wanted to vote off. This particular episode was called "Banana Etiquette." James, who hurt his leg in an earlier challenge, was a physical liability. It made no sense to keep him.



The caption shows the comments of Rupert (another player in the Heroes' tribe) as James eats up all the camp bananas.

Besides that, he would not stop eating their bananas. How would they survive a food shortage if a literal liability was gobbling them all up? James jokingly asked if anyone else wanted a banana, and everyone chuckled about it; he went to tribal council with a sense of

security. I wanted his keister GONE. I found his jabbering about how he should stay in the game incredibly annoying, especially when this man thought his leg wouldn't impact tribal performance. He was in denial. Talk about irony, because jokes couldn't save him from being voted out. Goodbye! (I guess banana etiquette is important after all).

I believe the best moment of Season 20 is when JT willingly hands over his immunity idol⁶ to Russell Hantz. JT is a hero, Russell is a villain, and their tribes still haven't merged. JT hasn't the slightest idea what's truly happening in the Villains' camp, but he assumes that Russell is about



Russel holding JT's letter at the Heroes v. Villains Reunion show.

to become victim to a women's alliance because he's the only guy left in a tribe of six. He secretly passes over a game-changing item accompanied by a letter, and it comes back to bite him in the butt.

Russell laughed and laughed, and I

shook my head. He showed his allied women the handwritten note, and they relentlessly mocked how it was written. They compare it to a love letter, making fun of quotes like "DESTROY THIS RIGHT WHEN YOU FINISH READING!" Immediately after the merge, Russell plays both of his immunity idols, and JT goes home. JT ended up winning a trophy for the "Dumbest Move in *Survivor* History," determined by a viewer poll. Now THAT'S funny. If I didn't already hate Russell from the beginning, I hated him even more when he flaunted the letter in JT's face after the game was over. It's incredibly funny considering Russell's a sore loser and will use anything to highlight someone else's failures to take the heat off of his own. Not only does this show illustrate how humor serves as a coping mechanism and a strategic tool in a high-stakes game, but it caters to its audience by allowing us to vote for hilarious awards such as this one.

⁶ An immunity idol is found using a clue disclosing it's hidden location at one of the tribal camps; clues are randomly disbursed during the show. If found, an idol can be played at tribal council, in which any elimination votes for the holder will not be cast against them.

The driving force of the show is the ever-looming threat of elimination. Even though competitors in this show work in tribes, they orchestrate backstabbing blindsides to stay in the game. Russell was infamous for these manipulative strategies, which took him to the final three, but afforded him no votes to win the million—he had been so conniving that none of the voted-out jury⁷ members thought he deserved the title of “sole survivor.” Some of them, and I’m serious, laughed in his face at the finals. After all, he lied to most of them. I’m flabbergasted he even made it to the final three... they should’ve gotten rid of him the moment he made his first betraying move by lying to Tyson (who listened to Russel and got *himself* voted out). Navigating these alliances and betrayals reveal the true roots of humanity, but it also gives us something to laugh about. What better way to be ignorant of our fatal flaws than to laugh as we watch others succumb to them?

Personally, I can admit that judging people on a screen was a lot easier than judging my family situation at the time. Whether or not Colby got sent off the island didn’t directly affect my life



Colby Donaldson at tribal council.

like the fact I hadn’t eaten in forty-eight hours did. Instead of confronting or reporting my father, I invested into parasocial relationships. A psychological study on why people watch reality TV reveals that sensitivity theory “suggests that individuals prefer to watch those shows that arouse the joys most important to them. People who are strongly motivated to socialize, for example, should be especially interested in shows that portray groups, fun, or friendship” (Reiss & Wiltz, 370). I

⁷After the tribes merge, and the challenges become for individual immunity from elimination. All players voted out become part of the jury. Once three competitors remain, the jury votes for who will be named “sole survivor” and win a cash prize of one million dollars.

always needed a strong, male role model in my life (as a father should be, but mine wasn't). Watching people like Colby on *Survivor*, who had remained loyal and true throughout the game, satisfied that social motivation for me. I laughed at how his physical abilities had deteriorated compared to the last time he played. It was sort of like how able-bodied dads are: dad can throw a ball and play catch, but only for thirty minutes or he'll hurt his shoulder—that's how Colby played during Season 20. Colby was the dad I didn't have.

Analyzing the interplay between the complex development of relationships, competition, and strategy in *Survivor* provides a fascinating perspective on how reality TV is shaped by humor. I know that many people look to shows like this in order to find escape or feel connected to a particular situation, and for me, it did just that.

When observing the psychology of humor,

Martin & Ford note that “humans are social animals that require close relationships in order to survive” (26) and “humor is a way of refusing to be overcome by the people and situations, both large and small, that threaten our well-being” (27). The contestants, in facing their own trials, were symbolic figures of resilience and determination. My father was a terrible man, yet *Survivor* allowed us to laugh together and made me forget the bad things occurring in my life. It gave us something to talk about, and it gave me something to root for. From my experience with *Survivor*, I've learned that humor overshadows traumatic events, and that observing the relationships of others reveals what we lack in our personal relationships. Reality TV shows are



The Heroes' tribe: starting in the back row, from left to right, is Colby, Stephanie, Sugar, Amanda, and Rupert. In the front row, from left to right, is Cirie, JT, James, Candice, and Tom.

efficient in serving as distractions from the real world—my past makes this evident. The real question is this: do these humorous media diversions and parasocial interactions actually help, or do they just cause emotional disconnection and denial of trauma?

The Villains' tribe: strating in the back row, from left to right, is Boston Rob, Jerri, Randy, Parvati, Danielle, and Coach. In the front row, from left to right, is Tyson, Sandra, Russell, and Courtney.



“I certify that this assignment represents my own work. I have not used any unauthorized or unacknowledged assistance or sources or tools in completing it including free or commercial systems or services offered on the Internet.”

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Unreleased viewer poll results revealed in "Heroes v. Villains Reunion: Live Show in NYC" *Survivor*, Season 20, Episode 14, hosted by Jeff Probst.

All images are personal screenshots from CBS, <https://www.cbs.com/shows/survivor>.