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“Expect the Unexpected”:

Narrative Pleasure and Uncertainty Due to Chance in *Survivor*

In the wrap episode of *Survivor*'s fifth season (*Survivor 5: Thailand*), host Jeff Probst expressed wonder at the unpredictability of *Survivor*. Five people each managed to get through the game to be the sole survivor and win the million dollars, yet each winner was different from the others, in personality, in background, and in game strategy. Probst takes evident pleasure in the fact that even he cannot predict the outcomes of *Survivor*, as close to the action as he is. Probst advised viewers interested in improving their *Survivor* skills to become acquainted with mathematician John Nash's theory of games. Probst's evocation on national television of Nash's game theory invites both fans and critics to apply mathematics to playing and analyzing *Survivor*.¹

While a game-theoretic analysis of *Survivor* is the subject for another essay, this essay explores our understanding of narrative pleasure of *Survivor* through mathematical modes of inquiry. Such exploration assumes that there is something about *Survivor* that lends itself to mathematical analysis. That is the element of genuine, unscripted chance. It is the presence of chance and its almost irresistible invitation to try to predict outcomes that distinguishes the *Survivor* reality game hybrid. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes explored how narrative whets our desire to know what happens next.² In *Survivor*'s reality game, the pleasure of “what happens next” is not based on the cleverness of scriptwriters or the narrowly evident skills of the players. Even though the pleasure of knowing and guessing the final outcome becomes more intense and feasible as the number of variables decreases, unscripted chance can

still intervene. The pleasure of the text of *Survivor* is based in an essential unpredictability that is woven into the *Survivor* reality show genre.

Survivor is a hybrid of game and adventure with drama. This blend results in what a statistician would consider “genuine” unpredictability in its outcomes, in what happens next. The program’s hybrid design allows for, indeed requires, unscripted chance to play a significant role in each episode and across the series. The possibilities of chance contribute to suspense about “what happens next” akin to the pleasure of scripted fiction. Furthermore, chance extends into the production and the reception of the program. Although castaways are carefully selected and diverse attributes are combined to generate drama, the producers cannot predict how the contestants will behave during the game. In *Survivor*’s first season, its fundamental unpredictability allowed castaways to challenge the production for control of the program’s direction and mission. Although the production gave in to the castaways in some areas, the producers ultimately devised strategies that would allow them to regain and maintain control of the program. In the reception of *Survivor*, prediction is promoted and encouraged as fans and former castaways try to predict outcomes in magazines, on tv shows and on the internet. Part of the pleasure of imagining scenarios for “what happens next” on *Survivor* is the fact that the activity of prediction is inherently uncertain—“expect the unexpected.”

Section I: The *Survivor* Hybrid

You have no idea the number of people far more experienced than I who told me that I needed to choose whether I was making a drama or an adventure or a game show. That I couldn't have that combination—that it really wouldn't work.³ Mark Burnett

In its assessment of *Survivor*’s production values, *Variety* aligns *Survivor* with episodic drama rather than reality television: “Burnett knew American viewers expect top-notch production values in primetime programs, so he eschewed the cheap-is-better convention of most

reality shows and gave ‘Survivor’ a virtually cinematic look that made the show look as good as (if not better than) the typical network drama.” Indeed, the logistics of production justify Burnett’s description of *Survivor* as “epic.” The opening of *Survivor I: Borneo* used “seven hours of non-stop shooting coverage, one take, live, 23 crew members.” *Survivor*’s reality super-production is paired with a high concept genre strategy. In *Survivor*’s recombination, each genre interacts with the others. Games and adventure, on their own, may not necessarily produce drama among the participants. *Survivor*’s unpredictability and pleasure come about as game collides with adventure and drama.⁴

Quoted in a *Variety* article on reality television producers, NBC Entertainment president Garth Ancier observes, "In scripted programming, the horse that pulls the cart is the writer. But in reality, it's all about the producer." The *Survivor* hybrid of drama/adventure/game evolved from "method producer" Mark Burnett's previous experiences with adventure television, non-fiction programs that foreground the impact of nature on people. In his advocacy of the *Survivor* hybrid, Burnett asserts that the popularity of adventure programming derives from basic human needs and contemporary lifestyle preferences. He imagines the audience to have "an innate desire to connect with the great outdoors" [and] "an innate desire to be adventurers." In preparing his pitch for the Emmy-nominated *Eco-Challenge: The Expedition Race* (1995-present), Burnett cited market research about the adventure lifestyle and its potential lure to the surrogate adventurer television viewer: "Family travel adventures ... were becoming enormously popular even as hotel rooms in traditional destinations were going begging. This new trend was a lifestyle shift instead of a short-term travel phenomenon." Thus, the US television market seemed primed for a program like *Survivor* in which Americans seek adventure in exotic locations with global politics rendered invisible.⁵

Various production decisions on *Eco-Challenge* reveal how Burnett came to accentuate the dramatic potential of adventure situations in *Survivor*. In producing *Eco-Challenge*, Burnett found drama (conflict, emotion, suspense) in the relationships among Eco-Challenge team

members. Burnett describes his self-discovery as a producer: "I didn't belong in a purely documentary world, I belonged in the dramatic world." He parted ways with The Discovery Channel, whose mission was more focused on nature documentary than the potential for interpersonal drama in the race, and took *Eco-Challenge* to USA. Unlike the Raid Gauloises, in which Burnett raced and on which *Eco-Challenge* is based, *Eco-Challenge* insisted on mixed gender teams ("In *Eco-Challenge*, the mountains, rivers, and forest are equal-opportunity punishers"). Similarly, "when MTV balked at airing another *Eco-Challenge* without a stipulation that all competitors be between 18 and 25," Burnett pitched the series to other networks. Burnett's experience with *Eco-Challenge* led to the casting dynamics of *Survivor*, whose diverse demographics of age, race, sexuality and gender intensify the relationships between participants. The 16 castaways are placed in wilderness conditions that figure prominently in the tension of the adventure--Burnett even asserts that "location is the seventeenth character on *Survivor*."⁶

In *Survivor*, the castaways play layers of games. The Reward and Immunity Challenges severely limit the individual's scope of action, through sets of highly specific rules, and are immediately recognizable as traditional games and sporting contests. Despite the critical importance of these games, when the castaways refer to "playing the game" they are not referring to the individual Challenges, but to the overarching game of *Survivor* itself, whose objective is to "outwit, outplay, outlast" the other players. This larger game allows each individual enormous scope of action, but it too has its rules. The castaways are restricted to a remote location with a hostile environment; every three days, a tribe must submit to a Tribal Council and vote one of its members out of the game; one person has immunity and cannot be voted off; et cetera.

The rules of the *Survivor* game include unscripted chance. Subject to *Survivor's* rules, its players enjoy the freedom to act as they see fit. The outcomes of *Survivor* are authentically unpredictable in the sense that no one is in a position to know what is going to happen. Although *Survivor's* studied use of sporting phrases ("playing field", "game", "final four") is obviously self-conscious, it is also remarkably legitimate. *Survivor* has an essential need for faith in the game

and the assumption that *Survivor* isn't fixed. In her 2001 lawsuit against CBS, *Survivor 1: Borneo* contestant and attorney Stacey Stillman claimed that she was voted out in the third Tribal Council because "Mr. Burnett `breached my agreement' by deliberately manipulating the outcome of the tribal voting to banish her from the island." In covering the story, *Electronic Media* makes a crucial observation about the need for faith in the reality game show:

What makes us watch these shows is the belief that what we are seeing, despite the forced situations and the tireless editing for dramatic impact, is real. Should Ms. Stillman's accusation turn out to be true, `Survivor' and others in the genre face a confidence crisis that could alienate viewers. The reality audience isn't the `Smackdown!' audience; if viewers get the impression the action is fake, they'll be voting themselves off the island in droves.

Indeed, the industrial and social trauma of the 1950s quiz show scandals convincingly demonstrates that the power and popularity of reality programming depends on the authenticity of the contrived reality. As Jeremy Butler observes, some television nonfiction programs "invite us to suspend our distrust of television's `devious' ways. For their impact, these programs depend on our belief in the television producer's nonintervention." If the outcomes are found to be fixed, then a social and televisual contract with the audience will have been broken.⁷

Where the *Survivor* hybrid diverges from traditional game shows and sporting events is in the mutability of certain rules. In *Survivor 3: Africa*, the producers suddenly shuffled tribal membership, apparently to prevent the show from becoming too predictable. In one tribe, a faction was systematically eliminating their rival faction; the shuffle effectively stopped that strategy. *Survivor's* producers have attempted to rationalize this mutability as a sort of meta-rule ("expect the unexpected") and they did a random shuffle of castaways in *Survivor 4: Marquesas*. As seasons go on, castaways demonstrate more awareness of "how to play the game" and *Survivor* reveals the hand of the producer refining and maintaining the uncertainty of the playing field. While fiction hopes to provide the certainty of suspense and conflict between characters,

Survivor is structured to elicit and intensify drama without actually scripting it. *Survivor's* reality becomes dramatic through the careful casting of the contestants, the circumstances and environment of the playing field, the rules of the game, the physical and mental challenges, and (of course) the Tribal Councils. On top of these carefully engineered circumstances, "tribal chief" Jeff Probst asks questions that spotlight the castaways' various fears and hopes and machinations. The *Survivor* production team has a word for all of this, "dramality"--"that convergence of drama and reality" where drama is engendered by the real events.⁸

In *Survivor* lore, a famous example of dramality occurred in *Survivor 1: Borneo*. The producers pushed for melodrama by constructing a Reward Challenge that allowed the castaways a small degree of contact with family and loved ones. The castaways were told they would compete in an archery contest for the prize of watching a videotape from home. Castaway Jenna, yearning for news of her two young daughters, was desperate to win the challenge and practiced for it obsessively. At the Reward Challenge, each castaway was allowed to view only one minute of his/her videotape. The winner of the archery contest would be allowed to view the entire tape. Jenna was stunned and her spirit broken when she realized there was no tape for her to watch. In the "Inside *Survivor*" documentary, Jeff Probst recalls the value of this unscripted twist, "One of the most poignant and most delicious moments was when Jenna's video didn't show up. This was good television and I relished the chance to be the one to deliver it, but how heartbreaking is this?"⁹ Each subsequent *Survivor* series has included a similar Reward Challenge intended to tug at the hearts of audiences, although never with such dramatic effect.

Survivor's "3-act structure" derives from the structure of the overall game (tribe versus tribe; merger; final *Survivor*), which seems calculated to maximize emotional and interpersonal tensions. The first four seasons of *Survivor* began by subjecting the castaways to a supremely disorienting introduction to their new reality, a race against time and a confrontation with physical adversity.¹⁰ In *Survivor 1: Borneo*, the castaways had just two minutes to throw their possessions overboard, into the China Sea. Each tribe then maneuvered its raft of supplies to its

respective beach, an effort that required hours of paddling and/or swimming. "Act One" goes on to pit tribe versus tribe in Reward and Immunity Challenges. Burnett relishes the drama: "By the end of Act One ... life has been forged in the wilderness and stasis prevails."¹¹

"Act Two" ruptures that stasis as the tribes merge, pitting the surviving castaways against each other in a free-for-all competition. Attributes that were valued in Act One (strength, athletic prowess) often become liabilities in Act Two because the castaway who possesses them is perceived as a strong competitor, a threat, someone to be eliminated. The phrases that Burnett uses to describe Act Two are compellingly dramatic: "friction ... paranoia ... power ... intimidate the meek."¹² When stasis is ruptured on *Survivor*, the result is intense emotions and psychological states.

"Act Three" comprises the final week of *Survivor* and culminates in the final Tribal Council. This Council may conclude the game by determining the ultimate winner of \$1 million. But the jury members' sometimes-raw speeches about betrayal and integrity demonstrate that the final Tribal Council exacerbates the dramatic tensions that have been opened in the previous "acts." Some issues are put to rest in the "post-game" interview show, hosted by Bryant Gumbel for four seasons and by Probst for season five. However, *Survivor* does not attempt to reach narrative closure for each season. In the "post-game" show, *Survivor* reaffirms the reality and dramality of the game. The first castaway voted off is asked how it felt (some express bitterness; some relief; some admit to not playing the game well). Key dramatic points in each season are kept alive, such as betrayal (Jerry's allegations about Kel eating beef jerky on *Survivor 2: Australian Outback*) and sexual tensions (Ted to Ghandia on *Survivor 5: Thailand*: "I never found you attractive.").

Some former castaways appear on television and in print commenting on the current *Survivor* game (as experts) or on Emmy fashions (as ordinary people). Most recede from the spotlight. Unlike fiction, where writers can produce a happy ending for characters or an

ambiguous open ending, the *Survivor* production maintains an aftermath for its castaways and thus extends the popular life of each game and season.

Section Two: Uncertainty Due to Chance

You cannot predict how human beings will react in a strange, unfamiliar peer group situation plus unfamiliar harsh environment.¹³ Mark Burnett

Unpredictability is fundamental to the series design and the narrative pleasure of *Survivor*. Some aspects of *Survivor* are predictable: the sun will set and rise the next day; there will be hardships and challenges and votes; Jeff Probst will referee Tribal Councils; et cetera. Although the castaways' situation is contrived (that is, designed by the producers), one convention of the program is that castaway actions are unscripted and therefore not completely predictable. Unlike scripted entertainment, no one--neither producers nor crew, not even the castaways themselves--could know how the relationships within the game would evolve. With each episode of the series, one person is voted off. As the game goes on, the remaining relationships and castaway strategies become better known to the viewer. With this knowledge comes a presumed increase in ability to predict who will be voted off next, yet it never becomes certainty. No matter how much one knows, genuine chance is fundamental to *Survivor* and a source of its invitation to pleasure.

The role of chance in the *Survivor* hybrid is different from the role of chance in scripted productions. Some studies of film have explored how notions of chance and game may function in narrative and to produce audience pleasure. In Kristin Thompson's analysis of Andre Bazin's essay on the "illusion of chance" in *Bicycle Thieves*, she finds "chance and peripheral events constitute a disproportionate amount of the film" but they are countered by "priming devices." That is, "the film provides a very clear-cut series of deadlines, appointments, and dialogue hooks that keep us oriented at all times, no matter how far the action digresses or how abruptly it shifts."

In his study of Hitchcock films, Thomas M. Leitch uses the concept of the two-person game played by Hitchcock with his audience as a metaphor for the process of watching a Hitchcock film. Like Thompson, Leitch acknowledges the need for rules to contain chance, for "contractual limits to which the audience freely and knowingly subscribes" in an implied contract between the author of a fictional work and the audience. Both critics situate chance or game firmly within the containment structure of scripted narrative. Rather than producing uncertainty about outcomes, chance or game in fiction helps position the viewer more firmly within the narrative of the film.¹⁴

Rather than anchoring the viewer, *Survivor* uses chance to place the viewer in a space of uncertainty. In this regard, uncertainty is akin to the narrative concept of the gap between cause and effect. Narrative pleasure stems from the desire to know what will happen next, to have that gap opened and closed, again and again, until the resolution of the story. In scripted narrative, desire has particular and limited directions drawn from the story's characters and its conflict. In *Survivor*, unpredictability whets the desire to know what happens next, but how that gap will be closed is grounded in uncertainty due to chance. It isn't a scriptwriter who has already decided how the action will end, but the players themselves and unscripted chance. This distinction between the pleasure of scripted entertainment and the pleasure of the *Survivor* hybrid can be seen as parallel to a familiar distinction in the discipline of statistics: the distinction between uncertainty due to chance and uncertainty due to ignorance.¹⁵ The answer to "what happens next" in *Survivor* is based on uncertainty due to chance while in fiction the answer is based on uncertainty due to ignorance.

Uncertainty due to chance is associated with phenomena that are truly stochastic (that is, random). For statisticians, "chance" comprehends any phenomenon for which the outcome has some degree of uncertainty. Stochastic phenomena are not limited to situations that are completely random, but include situations which have some degree of predictability, in which some outcomes are more likely than others. For example, in the Belmont Stakes, we are uncertain about which horse will win but we know that some horses are more likely to win than

others. This uncertainty is quantified by the odds that each horse will win, and betting depends on such quantification. *Survivor* is like a horse race. Different castaways have different abilities (the odds are not equal), but only the competition itself will reveal what happens when these abilities collide (the outcome is uncertain). And, of course, the outcome is also affected by unscripted chance events that cannot be foreseen: the favorite to win the 2002 Belmont Stakes stumbles as he leaves the gate, Michael falls into the fire in *Survivor 2: Australian Outback* and has to be airlifted out of the game.

In contrast, uncertainty due to ignorance describes a person's state of mind, the extent of knowledge, the strength of belief. For example, suppose we ask Susan what will happen next in a Hitchcock film, *Vertigo*, after Scotty follows Madeleine up the tower. Susan could venture that Scotty will save Madeleine, that he would throw her off the tower, that she could fall. This is uncertainty due to ignorance, which Susan might attempt to quantify with a statement like, "I'm 80% certain Scotty will save her, but it's a Hitchcock film so she might fall." Susan might even make a friendly wager with JJ that Scotty will save Madeleine, but no bookie will give her odds. The uncertainty is all in Susan's mind. The filmmakers already know how the film will end.

To put a finer point on this distinction, it is obviously that, for the television audience watching the episodes each week, uncertainty about *Survivor's* outcome is uncertainty due to ignorance. The production team already knows what happens in each episode and how it will end. However, chance played a crucial role in constructing the edited product that airs. Although this perspective is correct, it fails to describe the quality of the viewing experience of *Survivor*. Viewers are asked to accept the *Survivor* time frame as if the events were occurring in the present and not in the past. In this regard, watching *Survivor* is like watching the Olympics or Emmy awards in tape-delay. Even for viewers who maintain a critical distance and awareness of production (i.e., how editing may be directing suspicion toward the machinations of particular castaways), it is necessary to enter into the "present" of the episode to engage the pleasure of uncertainty due to chance. As Leitch and Thompson imply, scripted fiction can invite the viewer

to suspend awareness that there are filmmakers and/or screenwriters working to produce the experience of the film. In the creation of *Survivor*'s episodic experience, genuine chance is as powerful a force as the production team.

In its invitation to prediction, *Survivor* is more like a horse race than fiction. *Survivor* foregrounds the role of uncertainty due to chance in a way that fiction cannot. At the core of *Survivor*'s narrative is the question of who will be voted out when. If we think of the outcome of the *Survivor* game as the order in which the 16 castaways are voted out, then the possible outcomes number $16!$, pronounced "sixteen factorial" and defined by the formula,

$16! = 16 \times 15 \times 14 \times \dots \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 20,922,789,888,000$,
roughly 21 trillion.¹⁶

The possibilities become more manageable when *Survivor* is analyzed in 3-day cycles or "evolutions," each containing an Immunity Challenge and a Tribal Council. A simple example occurred in *Survivor I: Borneo*. Initially, we know so little about the castaways that prediction is an exercise in futility. It would be ludicrous to attempt to predict which of $16!$ possible outcomes will be realized. But suppose we pause as the first Tribal Council begins and try to predict its outcome. We know that the Tagi tribe must eliminate one of its eight members, a rather small number of possibilities to contemplate. Furthermore, we know that 63-year-old Sonja fell in the Immunity Challenge, revealing her relative weakness in physical prowess. It's not difficult to predict that Sonja will be the first castaway voted off the island.

Trying to figure out what is going to happen is a source of *Survivor*'s pleasure. When there are too many possibilities, and no way of narrowing them down, so many outcomes can happen that prediction becomes overwhelming and ceases to be fun. With each episode, *Survivor* reduces the number of possible outcomes to a smaller and increasingly manageable number. The attributes and relationships of the remaining castaways become better known, allowing *Survivor* viewers to speculate about the castaways' actions and attempt predictions about what they will do next. This invitation to prediction runs through the books and ancillary products related to

Survivor. Like major sporting events, *Survivor* has even spawned its own pre-game show on MTV, on which panelists offer analyses such as the above.¹⁷

The official CBS website is heavily invested in prediction, devoting an entire section to viewer polls. The site maintains a “Who’s Next Poll” (who will be voted off the island next week), a “Sole Survivor Poll” (who will be the Sole Survivor) and an archive that contains the results of each poll. The SurvivorAddicts.com site maintains numerous bulletin boards and chat rooms with threads such as Critic's Corner, Speculation, Predictions, Recaps and Survivor Gossip. The distinctions between prediction, speculation and spoiling have to do with the extent to which one invests in the diegetic reality of *Survivor*. If one limits comments to information gleaned from the *Survivor* episodes, one engages in prediction. If one uses extra-diegetic information (e.g., analysis of promos for the upcoming episode of *Survivor*), one engages in speculation. If one uses information that is not generated by CBS’s textual practices, such as a report that a castaway returned to the US and had lost a lot of weight (thereby suggesting s/he was in the game for a long time), one engages in spoiling (e.g., information from outside the diegetic world of the game can ruin the pleasure of prediction).

Published before *Survivor 2: Australian Outback* aired, *Survivor II: The Field Guide* encouraged television audiences to engage in prediction. The book recounted the following anecdote about Richard Hatch, the legendary winner of *Survivor 1: Borneo*:

Eighteen days before [the Immunity Challenge involving Kelly, Rich, and Rudy], when the island still had half its original residents, that master schemer [Rich] had stood off-camera and told Probst exactly which individuals would be voted off all the way to the show's end--and in the proper order. He had not been wrong once.¹⁸

At that point in the game, there were $8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 = 6720$ possible ways to progress from eight *Survivors* to just three. Rich correctly predicted the one way that actually occurred. Had a crew member or viewer done so, it would have been uncanny. Rich's prediction may have been

inspired. However, as a castaway, Rich had access to information and, as the maestro of the Tagi Alliance, he had an ability to influence events.

To help organize the viewer's predictions, the book includes a foldout "Play Along Pool" that allows up to seven players to chart their predictions for Tribal Councils 1 through 15. The instructions specify: "Before each Tribal Council, each player writes his/her guess for which castaway will be voted off in the space above. More than one player can vote for each castaway." The game awards points for correct guesses. The points are totaled to form a final score for each player. Interestingly, the number of points awarded varies with the difficulty of prediction. The first three Tribal Councils are each worth 5 points, the next three are each worth 4 points, etc. As *Survivor* progresses, the number of points per Tribal Council decreases, suggesting that prediction will become easier (and therefore less valuable in terms of points) as the players accumulate information and the number of outcomes decreases.¹⁹

However, even at season's end, when the outcomes should become most predictable, unscripted chance may intervene. The following analysis of the final Tribal Council of *Survivor 2: Australian Outback* is savvy about the winning strategy and would seem to be a plausible prediction.

Colby, Keith and Tina remain. There are 6 possible outcomes. Having won so many previous challenges, Colby seems like a good bet to win immunity. It appears that Tina is more popular than Keith, so Colby will eliminate Tina. It appears that Colby is more popular than Keith, so the jury will vote for Colby. Predicted order of elimination: Tina-Keith-Colby.

In fact, Colby did win immunity as predicted. The analysis assumes that Colby would pursue a strategy by which he would become the ultimate winner of the game. Thus, he would "play the game" and increase his chances of winning the million dollars by eliminating his friend, the popular Tina. In a choice between Colby and Keith, the savvy analyst predicts, Colby stands the better chance of winning. However, that analysis is limited by the logic of the game and does not

allow for other and unpredictable values. Colby valued his alliance and friendship with Tina more than winning the game. In an unexpected move, Colby eliminated Keith, making the final choice between Tina and Colby. The jury of castaways selected Tina to win the million dollars. Observed order of elimination: Keith-Colby-Tina.

Compare the suspense of the watching the finale unfold on *Survivor 2: Australian Outback* to the suspense generated by a famous television event, the 1985 cliffhanger of *Dynasty*. Jane Feuer writes, "On the evening of the fall 1985 season premiere that would reveal the outcomes of the previous season's cliffhanger (the Moldavian massacre), the lead story on the ABC-affiliate evening news in my local market concerned the way in which 'local citizens' had gathered to celebrate this event."²⁰ The outcome being celebrated was the revelation of the survivors of the Moldavian massacre. *Dynasty's* producers and writers selected these survivors. Although the actors may have engaged in summer salary negotiations that could get their characters killed off, the characters did not "outwit, outplay, outlast" to determine which ones would return for the next season. Whether fiction or reality game, cliffhanger outcomes are jealously guarded secrets that are absolutely critical to the pleasure of anticipation of what happens next. But in fiction, the pleasure of this suspense is a game with the producers based on uncertainty due to ignorance, not on uncertainty due to chance.

Survivor's invitation to participate in predicting who will be voted off next comes with a healthy skepticism about the authenticity of information in any episode. The edited version that becomes available to viewers is not an ethnographic attempt to document life in the tribes. There is an obvious need for editorial selection to meet the time constraints of episodic television, and the footage may provide false leads or cover up obvious leads to enhance the potential for viewer surprise at who is eliminated next. Thus, we can see that *Survivor* includes a degree of uncertainty due to ignorance. However, the invitation of the program is not to outguess the editors and discover planted clues, but to watch the remaining castaways manage through the

game. To underscore the unscripted nature of *Survivor* and the essential role of the castaways in creating the action, *Survivor* offers viewers a documentary device, a form of direct address.

As Jeremy Butler notes, "Most narrative television programs do not acknowledge the viewer ... characters in narrative TV address one another. They are sealed within their narrative or diegetic worlds." *Survivor* opens its diegetic world to the viewer with a variation of the personal diary. These confessional videos of castaways function as the anecdote does in Roland Barthes' description: "whatever furthers the solution of the riddle; the revelation of fate." *Survivor's* personal diary anecdotes are like secret correspondence with the viewer, providing information about the game that the other castaways may not have. On the surface, the anecdotes offer viewers the delight of knowing something the other castaways don't (as when a castaway admits that s/he must betray another). However, the personal diaries may not contain accurate clues for predicting outcomes. Burnett reports that as *Survivor I: Borneo* progressed, the castaways began to dissemble, staging conversations about strategy that were intended to mislead the production crew.²¹ Part of the game in the first season of *Survivor*, unknown to the home viewer at the time, was the challenge the castaways gave the producers over control of the program.

SECTION THREE: Managing Uncertainty

The green [outwit flag] would stand for the production crew, desperately trying to stay one mental step ahead of the increasingly-brilliant castaways.²² Mark Burnett

For better or worse, the tag line "expect the unexpected" describes the work environment of the production as well as the game played by the castaways. *Survivor's* production team has to respond to uncertainty in the playing field (weather, storms, snakes, insects, jellyfish) and to castaways who, in *Survivor I: Borneo*, challenged the production for control of the show. The *Survivor* host plays a crucial role in implementing strategies to contain uncertainty and make it

productive for *Survivor's* mission of dramality. Jeff Probst gives instructions to castaways and referees games. He manages castaways when their behavior threatens the mission of the show.

Survivor selects a cast of 16 people with traits and attributes, but it cannot create characters to specification. The diverse demographics of the *Survivor* castaways suggest the producers try to select people who will lead to good drama. ("One reason Stacey had been selected for the show was her volatility.") In *Survivor II: The Ultimate Guide*, a chapter on casting *Survivor 2: Australian Outback* presents each castaway with a photo, first name, age and occupation. That is followed by comments of the casting director and of the *Survivor* psychologist (Dr. Richard Levak). Their comments invite speculation on what the individual castaway will do when s/he plays *Survivor*, on how s/he will potentially enter into dramatic relationships with other castaways ("Rodger is not used to deferring to anyone younger or female." "Kimmi will manipulate the guys in order to advance."). After identifying the individual castaways of season two, the book goes on to present "Sixteen Strategies for Winning *Survivor*," suggesting the sixteen castaways that form the complement of each season of *Survivor*. Each strategy is generated by a form of typage: the entertainer, the leader, the flirt, the determined victim (a.k.a., the underdog), the professor, the zealot, the mom, the athlete, the wild and crazy guy (or girl), the quiet one, everybody's friend, the feral child, the introvert, the redneck, the slacker, the snake. Each character type has positive and negative strategic attributes reminiscent of personality charts in women's magazine articles or descriptions of astrological signs.²³

The process of identifying the combination of personalities for *Survivor 2: Australian Outback* castaways began with 49,000 initial applicants. Casting director Lynn Spiegel Spillman, "one of just a handful of people in Hollywood who solely recruit regular people to play themselves on TV," winnowed the cohort down to 800 finalists who are screened by Burnett. Forty-eight were invited to Los Angeles for "an intensive two weeks of interviews" conducted by the *Survivor* production team and CBS network executives. Burnett relishes the scope and depth

of the interviews: “Potential contestants were grilled relentlessly. No question--none!--was off limits: sex, drugs, you name it.” In a separate process, the 48 were given psychological and medical testing by the *Survivor* medical team.²⁴

Although the producers must know the final 16 very well, even they cannot predict how the castaways will behave when thrust into the adventure game environment. In some ways, the castaways’ situation is like that of game show contestants and talk show guests as described by Jeremy Butler: they “must come to ... the space of a television reality” rather than being observed in their own reality. In entering the television reality, the castaways and contestants are “subjected immediately to the medium’s rules and conventions.” However, *Survivor’s* castaways are not subjected to rules that “rigidly limit improvisation by situating the social actor within a tightly structured competition.”²⁵ The castaways have greater scope of action than their game show counterparts.

Survivor 1: Borneo castaways challenged the constructs of the game. The production was faced with a variety of what Burnett and Probst describe as “mutiny” situations which required the producers to outwit, outplay and outlast the castaways. Delays in setting up Immunity Challenges affected the budget and also the willing mood of the game players. Burnett recalls his concerns: “*Survivor’s* stars were standing in equatorial sun and rain. Making them wait not only angered them, it was rude. If they perceived us as [lacking respect for them], they could band together, mutiny, and become the puppeteers.”²⁶ Clearly, unfettered castaways could pose a threat to the production. Yet, the producers’ awareness of the castaways and their negotiations with them can be considered a productive collaborative and creative relationship that is fundamental to the production of *Survivor*.

In *Survivor 1: Borneo*, Kelly’s Malaysian cantina rewards resulted from the production responding to castaway expectations for greater rewards. After Sean won a spectacular reward, a night on a yacht with his father flown in from the US, the next reward was to be a single bottle of beer, the only one on the island. In the minutes leading up to that Challenge, Burnett learned that

castaways expected a new car for the reward. In *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon*, a “making of” documentary, Burnett and Probst relate, good-naturedly, the story:

The rewards we provided to the castaways got continually bigger and bigger ... We made a mistake because we followed the yacht reward with a simple reward which was a bottle of beer. While that’s a great reward, it wasn’t enough for them anymore. Sean had just been on a yacht and you’d better up the ante. We had heard that they were going to maybe mutiny and say, “You know what? We’re not doin’ it.” I realized I had a problem. The one day the sponsors from the show, that make this show possible, are on the island, we have a potential mutiny.

What neither television audiences nor Kelly knew at the time was that the production made a last-minute decision to boost the reward to a night with Jeff at a local bar. This required the art department to transform the production compound into a Malaysian bar in the span of several hours.²⁷

Reward Challenge adjustments can be seen as routine accommodations as *Survivor* establishes its production protocols during its first season. However, one of the castaways presented a serious challenge to the mission of *Survivor* and pushed the boundaries of the game. Greg’s challenge illustrates the freedom of action enjoyed by unscripted castaways, the fundamental unpredictability of *Survivor* and the strategic role played by the host in establishing and maintaining *Survivor*’s tone and level of drama.

Burnett recounts that Greg “was proving a master of mental manipulation. His goal was to control the pace of the island. To that end, he took to stalking camera crews when they trekked through the jungle. He delighted in leaping from bushes and scaring people ... and recit[ing] rambling monologues.” In Greg and other Gen-X’ers in the Pagong tribe, Burnett and Probst perceived a threat that *Survivor* could devolve into parody. Obviously, the production had to play by the rules and could not intervene to influence the vote. They would have to wait for the castaways to vote Greg off the island. This was unlikely to happen any time soon because Greg

had good relationships with other castaways.²⁸ *Survivor* used conversations at Tribal Council as a means of controlling the castaways.

More than anywhere else, the Tribal Council brings together the elements of the *Survivor* hybrid. Tribal Council is crucial to the dramality, the game, and the adventure. It is where Rudy found out Richard is gay; where a stunned cast and crew saw Gretchen voted off; where castaways answer Jeff's probing questions. Burnett reports that Greg "refus[ed] to accept the gravity of the Tribal Council ... Greg mocked it . . . [it] seemed absurd to him ... [Greg's] nonstop schtick was designed to make him the center of attention instead of Jeff." Greg's disrespect for Tribal Council threatened a key element of the show. *Survivor* host Jeff Probst had to minimize the challenge to Tribal Council: "If Jeff didn't get it right the show might descend into parody, or worse, anarchy."²⁹

The first Tribal Council of *Survivor 1: Borneo* achieved the dramality Burnett sought. When Sonja was voted off,

her Tagi tribe members were genuinely sad to see her go, which took some of the surrealism off the proceedings and brought the show closer to the vision I had for Tribal Council--a tense, dramatic proceeding where an individual comes face to face with what they truly stand for by having their actions and words recounted and questioned before their peers.

In contrast, the second Tribal Council (where B.B. was voted off) was

a raucous, irreverent Council. The Pagong tribe did not take the proceedings seriously. I knew the American public would pick up on their sarcasm. Would it affect the show's credibility? I didn't know, but I couldn't take that chance.

In the first episodes of its first season, *Survivor* faced the possibility of ridicule.³⁰

The production team met to discuss how to regain control or "the final television show wouldn't resemble the reality of a deserted island so much as a peek into the lives of a dozen spoiled Americans." The producers called on the genres of game and adventure to help restore

dramality and the *Survivor* hybrid. They decided to make the Immunity Challenges more difficult so that "the reality of `Survivor' would grow deeper and deeper, no matter how hard Greg tried to pretend it was absurd." Because "only time on the island ... would curb Pagong's arrogance," they would "let the island do its work." The production team huddled on how to handle the third Tribal Council. Burnett

decided to accentuate the drama as much as possible. I wanted Jeff to ask deeper, tougher questions of the castaways, not letting them dodge anything. I wanted to coordinate the logistics of the Council so that everything went off in a crisp, punctual fashion. I knew that keeping to a schedule would accentuate our control.

The production had a plan that relied on the *Survivor* host to pull it off in the improvisational Q&A of Tribal Council.³¹

Unscripted chance intervened. A violent tropical storm threatened to undermine the game plan for the crucial third Tribal Council.³² Nevertheless, the production trumped both the castaways and the storm. Probst established his authority over discussions at Tribal Council and the crew filmed the Tribal Council in extreme weather conditions. One element of chance (the storm) became part of the dramality while the other (Greg's challenge) was diminished. However, Greg's irreverence re-emerged at the final Tribal Council where his decision between Richard and Kelly was based on a classic game of chance, "guess a number from 1 to 10," instead of the anticipated evaluations of a castaway's loyalty or betrayal and performance as a tribe member.

One of the key mechanisms used to control the castaways' challenge was the *Survivor* host. In important ways, the *Survivor* host acts to constrain the uncertainty and keep it within the limits prescribed by the series design. The role of the *Survivor* host is to maintain *Survivor*'s credibility, from the first episode when he receives the castaways in a hand-off from Burnett (who remains off-camera) through the Immunity Challenges and the Tribal Councils. Burnett comments on the crucial role of the *Survivor* host in the program's hybrid genre:

More than any other inhabitant, Jeff Probst was clearly aware of the fine line between reality and scripted make-believe. His job, though, was to keep it real. His on-camera deliveries had to be just-so--neither too faux-epic like the voice of NFL Films ... nor too much like a game show host, but somewhere in between ... Jeff [is] a professional host paid to interact with their lives on-camera.

To a greater degree than a game show host or sportscaster, the *Survivor* host enters into the events that he is moderating.³³

While amiable, Probst maintains a distance from the castaways. It is clear he is there on behalf of the production, not as an advocate for the castaways. In his freshness, clean pressed clothes, and comfort, he is a visual reminder of the outside. The production does not shut down for weather ("Getting soaked by torrential rain was becoming a key part of his job description"). Environmental challenges serve as a reminder that the production takes place out there in nature ("Real meant shooting until it was unsafe, not stopping because it was merely uncomfortable").³⁴ Not solely a referee, the *Survivor* host also enhances the dramality of Immunity Challenges. He makes "occasionally forays on-camera to banter with the castaways, interviewing them and interjecting tension and controversy into the tedium." He tantalizes the hungry contestants with fresh fruit if they will only give up on the Challenge. He is neither especially sympathetic nor celebratory with losers or winners.

The *Survivor* host decides strategy at Tribal Council to protect the dramality and suspense and, at the final Tribal Council, "to delineate the heroes and villains, the proud and regretful." Burnett describes Probst's preparation for Tribal Councils:

[Probst] spend[s] his spare hours studying tapes of their beach life ... [preparing to ask] detailed questions about their relationships. He wanted to know who was vulnerable, who was strong, who was clueless about their fate. Of course, he already knew the answer. And each tribe member already knew the answer ... '*Survivor*' was all about

keeping secrets. Chief Jeff's job was to focus a laser beam on those secrets, bringing them into the light.

At Tribal Councils, the *Survivor* host is expected to tap into castaways' emotions, desires and situations, working them for dramatic effect.³⁵

The host must also exercise restraint to avoid intervening in the outcome of the game. The defining element of the way *Survivor 1: Borneo* unfolded was the secret Tagi Alliance, a group of tribal members who committed to support each other early in the game. The Alliance membership was known to the production crew and to viewers (through the personal diaries) but not to the other castaways. At one Tribal Council, Alliance member Sue admitted the existence of the Alliance and asserted her leadership. This opened the door for Jeff to ask for a response from Rich, the creator of the Tagi Alliance. However, "Jeff didn't go to Rich ... Chief Jeff knew he [Rich] wouldn't be smug about Sue's admission. Something like that could crush the Alliance." Probst, in his ordinary capacity of Tribal Council host asking probing questions, could easily have revealed the composition of the Alliance to the other tribe members and thus substantially skew the game's outcome.³⁶

This essay has explored the role that uncertainty due to chance plays in the design, the production and the pleasure of the reality game series, *Survivor*. In linking the viewer activities of outcome prediction and narrative desire, we find that mathematical processes and narrative processes are both involved in the experience of *Survivor*'s reality game hybrid. Mathematical methods have value for understanding the television experience, when unscripted chance is a fundamental component of the program. The *Survivor* mantra to "expect the unexpected" is more than an exploitation promo tag. It is from the unexpected that both outcome prediction and narrative pleasure are derived.

¹ John Nash became a familiar figure in popular culture through a best seller and a bio-pic, *A Beautiful Mind*, that concentrated on Nash's schizophrenia. Nash is best known to mathematicians and economists for introducing the concept of what is now known as the Nash equilibrium, for which he shared the 1994 Nobel Prize in Economics. In 1950, Nash showed that a game, in which the players behave according to certain "rational" rules, necessarily has a unique solution. Whether these rules apply to *Survivor* and the actual behavior of castaways is a subject for future research.

² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

³ Quoted in Jennie Phipps, "The man behind 'Survivor': From paratrooper to nanny to reality-TV Svengali, Burnett is hot in Hollywood," *Electronic Media* (19 February 2001): 16.

⁴ Josef Adalian, "Producers wield power on tv's 'real world'," *Variety* (25 September 2000): 1. About *Survivor 3: Africa*, Burnett declares, "More than ever, I wanted my television show to look like a movie," Mark Burnett, *Dare to Succeed: How to Survive and Thrive in the Game of Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 206. "The way I planned to shoot *Survivor* bore more comparison, logistically, to a feature film than a television show," Mark Burnett, *Survivor II: The Field Guide* (New York: TV Books, LLC, 2001), 151. "My *Survivor* would be bigger, more dramatic, and more epic than any non-fiction television ever seen," *Dare to Succeed*, 6. See also commentary by Mark Burnett, *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon* (Season One dvd documentary, 2000).

Survivor received two 2001 Emmy awards: Outstanding Non-Fiction Program and Outstanding Sound Mixing for Non-Fiction Programming. It was nominated for four other 2001 Emmys: Outstanding Cinematography for Non-Fiction Programming, Outstanding Main Title Theme Music, Outstanding Picture Editing for Non-Fiction Programming, and Outstanding Technical Direction, Camerawork, Video for A Miniseries, Movie or Special.

The success of *Survivor* led directly to the production of Jerry Bruckheimer's *Amazing Race* for CBS. To create *Amazing Race* (described by Les Moonves as "*Survivor* on speed"), 11 camera crews follow teams around the world. See James Frutkin, "An Eye for Pop Culture" *MediaWeek* (30 July 2001).

⁵ Adalian, "Producers wield power on tv's 'real world'," *Variety* (25 September 2000): 1. Burnett's personal background includes adventurous pursuits (British paratrooper; the Race Gauloises). In his descriptions of producing television during raging weather or enduring terrifying turbulence in a small airplane with the castaways, Burnett refers to himself as a "method producer." *Dare to Succeed*, 154 and 184.

Dare to Succeed; 203-205 and 87-88; *Survivor II*, 145-6.

From ecochallenge.com: "Eco-Challenge is an expedition race. Each team of four, comprising men and women, races non-stop for 6 to 12 days, 24-hours a day, over a rugged 300 miles course using mountain biking, river rafting, horseback riding, mountaineering and fixed ropes, kayaking and navigation skills. The first team to cross the finish line together, in full complement, is the winner. If a team loses a member due to illness, fatigue, injury or a team disagreement, they are disqualified. Only teams that can work together as friends have any hope of reaching the finish line."

Documentary maker Beverly Seckinger has commented that the real survivors are the native peoples whose countries have been the subject of US foreign policy and are now locations for adventure. Her experimental documentary video, *Planet in My Pocket* (1995), is a satiric parody of first world adventurers exploring the world.

⁶ *Dare to Succeed*, 127-8, 100, 106-7, 175.

⁷ "Suit against CBS: It's the reality, stupid," *Electronic Media* (12 February 2001): 8. CBS counter-sued charging that Stillman violated a confidentiality agreement. See "CBS sues *Survivor* cast-off," *Broadcasting and Cable* (26 February 2001): 10; "CBS wins '*Survivor*'

round,” *Los Angeles Business Journal* (28 May 2001): 37. Jeremy Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 2nd edition (Mahwah, New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002), 68.

⁸ *Survivor II*, 25; see also *Dare to Succeed*, 147.

⁹ Commentary by Jeff Probst, *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon*. See also Burnett, “Day Twenty-Three,” *Survivor: The Ultimate Game* (New York: TV Books LLC, 2000), 139-145.

¹⁰ The fifth season of *Survivor* had a different beginning. On the first day, the castaways gathered on a beach. The two oldest castaways took turns selecting members for their tribe.

¹¹ *Survivor II*, 152-154.

¹² *Survivor II*, 154.

¹³ Commentary by Mark Burnett, *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon*.

¹⁴ Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 204 and 208; Thomas M. Leitch, *Find the Director and Other Hitchcock Games* (The University of Georgia Press, 1991), 10.

¹⁵ Both types of uncertainty can be expressed in the language of probability: frequentist probability quantifies uncertainty due to chance, subjective probability quantifies uncertainty due to ignorance. Frequentists usually confine themselves to the former, whereas Bayesians insist that all uncertainty should be quantified probabilistically. See *International Encyclopedia of Statistics*, Volumes 1 and 2, edited by W. H. Kruskal and J. M. Tanur (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

¹⁶ The role that chance plays in *Survivor* resembles the role that chance plays in a sporting event. For example, the NCAA men's basketball tournament begins with 64 teams that will play a six-round elimination tournament. The tournament involves a total of 63 games (that is, a person attempting to predict the entire tournament would have to specify the winners of 63 games), so there are

$$2^{63} = 2 \times 2 \times \dots \times 2 \times 2 = 9,223,372,036,854,775,808$$

possible tournament outcomes. In neither NCAA basketball or *Survivor* is the outcome scripted. Both involve uncertainty due to chance. Just as fans bet on which team will win/lose in the next round of the NCAA tournament after observing the results of the previous round, so might some persons bet on which castaway will be eliminated at the next Tribal Council. As both of these events progress, the number of unresolved possibilities decreases and becomes manageable. Both *Survivor* and the NCAA have a Final Four, the basketball variant admitting $2^3 = 8$ possible outcomes, the *Survivor* variant admitting $4! = 24$ possible outcomes.

¹⁷ In the *Survivor* board game, players roll die, draw cards, answer trivia questions and solve puzzles. Curiously, the game does not involve negotiations between players, as in Monopoly. Both Monopoly and the *Survivor* show emphasize negotiating strategies and involve strategic concepts like immunity and alliances. Trading in immunity and forming partnerships are strategies suggested by Jay Walker and Jeff Lehman, *One Thousand Ways to Win Monopoly Games* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1975).

¹⁸ *Survivor II*, 13.

¹⁹ "Play Along Pool" insert, *Survivor II*.

²⁰ Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Duke University Press, 1995), 136 ff.

²¹ Butler, 64; Barthes, 11; *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 204-205.

²² *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 78.

²³ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 45; *Survivor II*, 74-85 and 120-130.

²⁴ "A Listing of L.A.'s Biggest Players in Reality TV Game," *Los Angeles Business Journal* (11 September 2000): 37; *Survivor II*, 28. For clips from the interviews, see the *Survivor* dvd.

²⁵ Butler, 83 and 66.

²⁶ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 183-184.

²⁷ Commentary by Burnett and Probst, *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon*. See also “Day Thirty Four,” *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 197-202. *Survivor* has seen an increasing commercialization of the rewards that undercuts the constructed reality of the show. The Challenges were far more compelling (that is, the dramality was more intense) when the castaways competed for the pleasure of a piece of fruit than for branded vacations and SUVs.

²⁸ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 109. For a description of Greg’s relationship with other tribe members, see especially 50 and 113.

²⁹ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 50-51, 57.

³⁰ *Dare to Succeed*, 151.

³¹ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 53-54, 57; *Dare to Succeed*, 152; commentary by Probst, *Survivor: Inside the Phenomenon*.

³² *Dare to Succeed*, 154-5.

³³ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 14; *Dare to Succeed*, 185; *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 54.

³⁴ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 62 and 186; *Survivor II*, 12-13.

³⁵ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 208 and 79.

³⁶ *Survivor: The Ultimate Game*, 179.