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Reality Pawns: The New Money TV

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Abstract

One of the vilest reality shows in the history of American television, Repo Games, premiered on Spike in 2011 with no fanfare and a simple premise, delivered in a voice over intro: "Nobody wants to meet the repo man. But when this repo man comes, you'll get the chance to ditch those late notices for good." A little more than a minute later, we see a man built like a professional wrestler pull up in front a woman's house, along with a camera crew that rushes into her driveway like a SWAT team. The owner's "REPO REPORT" then flashes across the screen: "Name: Wallace. Age: 44. Vehicle: '96 Dodge Caravan. Intel: Her weave alone will whoop your ass." Heavy metal plays in the background. A tow truck backs in under the van, which Wallace does not appreciate, and then the wrestler, co-host Tom De Tone, proceeds to describe the situation in which Wallace now finds herself.

Reality Pawns: The New Money TV

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One of the vilest reality shows in the history of American television, Repo Games, premiered on Spike in 2011 with no fanfare and a simple premise, delivered in a voiceover intro: "Nobody wants to meet the repo man. But when this repo man comes, you'll get the chance to ditch those late notices for good." A little more than a minute later, we see a man built like a professional wrestler pull up in front a woman's house, along with a camera crew that rushes into her driveway like a SWAT team. The owner's "REPO REPORT" then flashes across the screen: "Name: Wallace. Age: 44. Vehicle: '96 Dodge Caravan. Intel: Her weave alone will whoop your ass." Heavy metal plays in the background. A tow truck backs in under the van, which Wallace does not appreciate, and then the wrestler, co-host Tom DeTone, proceeds to describe the situation in which Wallace now finds herself: Tom is going to repo her car, but if she can answer three of five trivia questions right, the car will be hers, and fully paid off. The tow rig lifts the back of the car when she gets answers wrong and brings it down when she gets them right. With six family members watching on, Wallace prevails. She dances with Tom and then boasts in the post-game interview, "I ain't going to even fucking look for a job now."

The next contestant, a skinny, shirtless stoner living at his mom's, has a similar message when he wins: "Guess what I learned, America: if you don't pay your bill, somebody else will."

The last contestant, a woebegone fifty-eight-year-old man, grovels when he loses: "Even though I lost, you guys gave me an opportunity to save my car and I appreciate that, because in this time and age not many people would even do that." Tom responds, "Wish you all the best, John, and I wish I

could pay off everybody's car. It's just not possible."

Even in "this time and age"—years into a hollow economic recovery built atop an already hollowed-out economy, more than a decade after the ascendance of American reality television—and even given the very low bar of taste set by Spike, I expected to find some online traces of outrage at the cruelty, exploitation, and heavy-handed stereotypes on display in *Repo Games*. All I could find was a commentary in the *American Thinker*, a conservative website, speculating that "the numerous stupid and vulgar contestants" on the show were typical Obama voters. In depicting these people seemingly cast from a Tea Partier's nightmare—the lazy welfare queen, the languid video-gamer mooching off the 'rents, the emasculated, aging white man who "never should've gotten this far"—the show "inadvertently [veered] from goofy entertainment into trenchant social commentary."

Reality television, though almost never considered serious, was seriously considered in its early days, and the attention was mostly negative. Some early precursors, such as MTV's *The Real World* (1992–present), which brought a group of young strangers together under one roof for a few months, earned begrudging respect for their occasionally frank depictions of stigmatized subjects. But the ethical tone and artistic qualities of reality TV seemed to be set by *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*, a one-night special aired on Fox in February 2000. *Multi-Millionaire* was like a beauty pageant that collided with a high-stakes *Dating Game*: women were paraded on stage for a rich man, seen only in silhouette, who would pick a lucky winner and marry her right then and there. The National Organization of Women denounced the show, as did the bride in numerous interviews. (It turns out that a restraining order had been

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