

**TEMPORARILY MACHIAVELLIAN:
PERFORMING THE SELF ON *SURVIVOR***

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Temporarily Machiavellian: Performing the Self on *Survivor*

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Temporarily Machiavellian examines the performance of self in reality television. This study demonstrates how contestants on *Survivor* manipulate and reinvent their identities in performance. Combining the disciplines of performance studies and social psychology, this thesis analyzes the hit reality television show, *Survivor*. Using qualitative interviews with former contestants and close analysis of their conduct on screen, I have evaluated the behavioral performances and motivations of contestants and spectators. In addition, I have explored how these behavioral performances and motivations alter when the roles of contestant and spectator are combined. By using an interdisciplinary approach to analyze *Survivor*, I have discovered many methods through which contestants manipulate their identity and justify their divisive behavior to themselves, other contestants, and audience members.

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INTRODUCTION

“I’d lied to people, I’d betrayed people, I’d been so horrible in certain ways. I’d always thought of myself as a good person, and then I came back and I was like, ‘I think I’m a bad person.’”

Parvati Shallow

On *Survivor*, contestants have to be willing to temporarily set aside their morals and ethics in order to be successful players. They have to become temporarily Machiavellian; ready to be sneaky, dishonest, and cunning when the need arises. Social psychologists use the word “Machiavellian” to describe a person’s ability to detach themselves from conventional morality (Paulhus and Williams). This is a tendency readily seen in multiple contestants throughout the history of *Survivor*. What then can we learn about human behavior by examining contestants’ performances on *Survivor*? By connecting popular entertainment to audience interaction while examining behavioral processes, this project explores the Machiavellian tactics found within contestants’ performances of self in *Survivor*.

Being such a wildly popular reality television show, it is surprising that *Survivor* has not seen the same amount of sustained study from performance studies scholars that other reality television shows have. For instance, Bignell analyzes the use of surveillance and the artificiality of “reality” on *Big Brother*. And Hartley examines the presence of stock characters and self-presentation on *Big Brother*, similar to those found on *Survivor*. Likewise, McGlothlin evaluates *Undercover Boss* as a tool to influence audience opinion of corporate culture. Meanwhile,

Kozinn studies various courtroom dramas and their use of performance as both entertainment and representations of justice.

Erving Goffman's theories of self-presentation and impression management can be found in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which is a foundational text for both performance studies and social psychology. Thus, Goffman serves as my conduit between these two disciplines. He uses the terms "self-presentation" and "impression management" to describe human behavior in everyday life. However, I evaluate these concepts in an environment, like *Survivor*, with extremely heightened stakes – a public entertainment spectacle viewed by millions of people.

In *Survivor*, contestants' onscreen behaviors suggest a reinvention of self, leaving audiences to assume that they are not embodying a true representation of who they really are. Also, knowing that audiences will be watching their every move, contestants feel the need to justify their onscreen actions by saying that they are just playing a part. These behaviors can be considered a form of what Goffman called "impression management." According to Goffman, impression management is an attempt to influence people's perception of themselves. This is accomplished through the manipulation and regulation of information revealed in social interactions. In *Survivor*, contestants appear to participate in a certain form of impression management in regards to both fellow contestants' and audience members' perceptions of their actions.

It is also important to examine other elements of performance in contestants' behavior on *Survivor*, such as their interactions and dealings with fellow contestants. The psychological theory of symbolic interactionism suggests that individuals have multiple roles in their repertoire which can be drawn upon in a variety of situations (Scott). In everyday life, we adapt our

behavior or manner of speaking, based on the places we go or the people we interact with. In the same way, by having the ability to react and adapt to multiple situations and fellow tribemates, contestants are also drawing upon these multiple roles and performing them as needed. And just as there are times in normal life to be more sly and cunning than others, there are similar times in the game of *Survivor*.

Scott also analyzes the frame of mind people experience when interacting with others, calling it “double-agentry” because of the levels of perception and perception management that simultaneously occur. These behaviors can also be explicitly found throughout any season of *Survivor*, as contestants second guess everything they hear and overthink everything they say. Schechner also draws upon the metaphor of spying in *The Future of Ritual*, in his performance studies theory of dark play. He uses this theory of performance to expound on the existence of double-agentry in real life during moments of reckless abandon or harmless deception. Again, we can relate such moments to ones found on *Survivor* as this isolated environment encourages contestants to set aside daily precautions and play out alternative selves.

Another important facet in this research is the figure of the spectator. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman suggested that people have a frontstage and a backstage self. He claimed that the frontstage self is knowingly performing for audiences and the backstage self is a more authentic version of the self. In *Survivor*, the spectators believe themselves to be privy to both the front and backstage selves of the contestants. They witness the way contestants perform in front of each other, as well as isolated interviews which reveal contestants’ inner thoughts and motivations. By examining audience spectatorship, I analyze how being entertained by watching contestants manipulating and scheming against each other in *Survivor* affects the perceptions of the modern spectator. Additionally, I identify whether audiences of *Survivor* can

mentally separate conventional morality from the alternative moral framework found on the show, when judging contestants' performances.

Finally, I explore the importance of what I call the "meta-player," in *Survivor*. This is the *Survivor* superfan who goes from watching season after season of *Survivor*, to becoming an actual contestant on the show. Something becomes "meta" when it creates new layers of abstraction for itself. The meta-player is a student of the game who then becomes a part of the game. They have watched past contestants' strategies, thought processes, and performances of self. And they have been imagining how much more ruthless and cunning they would be as a contestant. This is all put to the test when they are selected to be a competitor on the show. An even deeper version of the meta-player is the contestant who goes from fan, to contestant, to repeat player. This contestant has multiple layers of self-presentation and spectatorship (from audience member to live observer) that can be examined to give us even more insight into the role of performance on *Survivor*.

Research comes from conducting close readings of the show, itself. This gives me access to examine the different types of performances on *Survivor*, as well as interpretations of events recounted in contestants' own words through confessional interviews. I have also found ephemera from the show – discussion board posts, interviews, tweets – all the way from 2000 to 2018, in order to understand the public's reception of certain contestants and seasons of *Survivor*. Finally, I have located relevant third-party interviews which can be found on YouTube, podcasts, and other social media platforms, as well as conducted qualitative interviews with former *Survivor* contestants. These interviews have given me important insight and understanding into how contestants narrate their own experiences and performances seen on *Survivor*.

Ultimately, by using an interdisciplinary approach to analyze *Survivor*, I have generated a better understanding of how the self can be manipulated and reinvented in performance. Chapter One takes the time to examine the rules and structure of the show itself, making it clear why certain behavior and performances on the show are expected and generally required. Chapter Two is an analysis of the *Survivor* contestant, looking at identity and self-presentation in their performances on the show. This chapter breaks down typecasting and role performance, as well as the role of morality on *Survivor*. Finally, I assess Machiavellian tactics by contrasting two notorious *Survivor* contestants' successes and failures on the show.

In Chapter Three, I closely analyze the *Survivor* audience, looking at spectatorship and perception of behavior seen on the show. By finding data and ephemera around certain seasons, I reveal audiences' truly unexpected and inconsistent reception to events and contestants on the show. And in Chapter Four, I explore how all of these behavioral performances and motivations alter when the role of contestant and spectator are combined. Through this thesis, I note the presence of impression management exists not only on *Survivor*, but in all aspects of life. And I conclude that perhaps people are merely a product of the levels of impression management they construct for themselves every day.

CHAPTER I

OUTWIT. OUTPLAY. OUTLAST.

Imagine waking up after your first night on the island. You probably haven't eaten for a full day. You are dehydrated because you need fire to boil water...but you haven't quite mastered fire making. You slept in a makeshift shelter with people you've only just met. You're trying to make a good impression ...but not too good of an impression. You're trying to decide who should be booted off the island first...but also avoiding being booted off yourself. You want to get to know the other contestants...but you don't want to get too close to anyone too fast. The phrase "every action has a consequence" has suddenly developed a new meaning. The paranoia has already set in. You're second guessing every small step that you're thinking of making. Congratulations! Your time on *Survivor* has officially begun.

History of *Survivor*

Survivor is a reality competition television show in which 16-20 strangers are brought together to live in an isolated location – typically a remote island. Each contestant is split between 2-4 tribes and is expected to live with their tribe, while competing against the other tribes in Reward and Immunity Challenges. If a tribe loses an Immunity Challenge, they have to go to a Tribal Council, led by *Survivor* host, Jeff Probst. The tribemates chat with Jeff about camp life and any struggles they may be encountering with each other, in a group-therapy format. Jeff's goal is similar to that of a therapist: to get people to open up, dig deep within, and reveal previously unspoken feelings. However, unlike an actual therapy session, revealing those hidden emotions will typically lead to further distrust, anxiety, and resentment within the group,

instead of healing. After unearthing these discontents, Jeff has each contestant place an anonymous vote toward who they want to vote off of the island. The person with the most votes is then eliminated from the game.

Over the course of 39 days, contestants are voted off of the island one-by-one by the other contestants, during these Tribal Councils. The votes are usually cast based on contestants' value to the team, trustworthiness, likeability, or how big of a threat they present to the other contestants. This means that contestants have to constantly be mindful of how they are being perceived by the other contestants. Typically, alliances develop within the tribes, and the majority alliance decides who will be voted out. However, it is not always quite that cut-and-dry. Each season is full of unique twists and turns established by the show's producers to keep audiences engaged and contestants on their toes. The only sure thing about *Survivor* is that nothing is sure.

Around the mid-way point in the game, the tribes merge. This is when *Survivor* becomes more of an individual game (though many would argue that one should always play an individual game). As soon as the merge occurs, all Immunity Challenges are for individual immunity (meaning the winner can't be voted off at the next Tribal Council). After the merge, anyone who is voted off of the island joins a jury panel. They are able to sit in on future Tribal Councils and observe what goes on, for the remainder of the show. When only two or three contestants are left standing, the power shifts into the hands of the players previously voted off. The jury gets to vote on which remaining contestant, who each had a hand in their elimination, deserves to win \$1 million and the coveted title of Sole Survivor.

Since *Survivor* began filming in 2000, the game has gradually evolved into the nuanced competition it is today, 18 years and 36 consecutive seasons later. It took Mark Burnett several

years and pitches to eventually have the show picked up by CBS. He was the one who suggested that contestants be dropped off at a remote location for 39 days, depend on strangers to thrive, and one-by-one eliminate newly found companions, while simultaneously trying to avoid being eliminated. Burnett may have been the one who developed this highly stylized environment in which the game would take place, but it was the players of the first few seasons that built the culture of *Survivor* that we know today.

Origin Story of *Survivor*

In the first season, *Survivor: Borneo*, the game was new, expectations were limited, and it was up to the producers and contestants to build a world in which this show could thrive for years to come. The terminology now associated with *Survivor* – alliances, flipping the vote, blindsides – was nonexistent before the show actually began taping. The casting directors did a fine job of choosing a variety of people to be stranded on a remote island together. However, it was the contestants that embodied and created the kinds of “characters” that are now expected to be seen on the show.

In fact, one of the most important things that *Survivor: Borneo* did was to establish the prototype Sole Survivor. Richard Hatch was the first winner of *Survivor*. He was also the most disliked, manipulative, arrogant contestant from Day 1, when he told the camera, “It’s all a waste of time. I’ve already won” (“The Marooning”). Richard spent the entire season running around the island naked, being lazy, and rubbing his fellow tribemates the wrong way. He also developed the first “alliance” within his tribe – a term still in use today. This was perceived as devious by the other tribemates because it had yet to become an accepted move within the culture of the show.

In an era of *Survivor* where strategy had no preexisting claim on behavior, Richard established himself as a villain on the show. And yet, in the end, Richard Hatch was chosen by his peers to win the \$1 million prize and title of Sole Survivor. His mindset initiated a new kind of moral framework, one that subsequent contestants embraced and elaborated upon, as the seasons progressed. This mindset can be best described with Richard's own words: "Whatever it takes to win here is the point. It's a game. And call it 'Machiavellian.' Sure..." ("Crack in the Alliance"). This unique moral framework created an environment in which contestants are not only open, but are required, to use cutthroat, Machiavellian tactics, in order to be successful players.

Richard Hatch winning *Survivor* was an unexpected result, stemming from the complexities of human nature. Perhaps he won because the other contestants truly respected his gameplay and calculated maneuvering throughout the season. Perhaps it was merely because he was the lesser of two evils when comparing him to the alternative, someone who was strategically incapacitated throughout the season. It's hard to know, especially as they had no previous season to base their votes on. All that first tribe of *Survivor* players knew was that they had to vote for someone who embodied the show's mantra – Outwit, Outplay, and Outlast – the most successfully. And to them, that person was Richard Hatch. The idea that the ultimate villain can win a game that rests on the opinions of fellow players is unprecedented. And one can't help but wonder if the show would have lasted as long as it has, had Richard Hatch not won.

In a magazine article written by *Survivor* host Jeff Probst, he cites this moment of Richard Hatch winning the first season of *Survivor* as one of his favorite moments in 36 seasons of the show. He says, "After 39 days of living in the jungle, Richard Hatch – the show's biggest villain – was crowned the winner, and television was never the same." Richard Hatch paved the

way for the hundreds of contestants that would come after him. By winning the very first season, he proved that, in *Survivor*, morality is relative. It's okay to lie, manipulate, and scheme, if it's for the greater good of winning \$1 million and the title of Sole Survivor.

Becoming the Sole Survivor

Okay, so you've made it through your first full day on *Survivor*. You made it through your first Immunity Challenge. Maybe you even made it through your first Tribal Council. So, what's next? How can you successfully last 39 days on the island without getting voted off? And once you do that, how can you convince the jury of people you had a hand in voting off, that you deserve to win?

When the jury is voting on who they think should win *Survivor*, they're asked to consider which contestant embodied the show's mantra: Outwit, Outplay, Outlast. In a paper comparing the *Survivor* jury system to the American jury system, past *Survivor* contestant John Cochran stated, "Regardless of their personal allegiances and vendettas [...] Having lived with the finalists for several weeks, witnessing their acts of loyalty and betrayal – and, in many instances, being the beneficiaries or victims of such acts – these jurors, more than anyone else, are able to base their votes on an intimate knowledge of the finalists and their actions throughout the competition." No one knows who deserves to win \$1 million more than the people who have also spent weeks fiercely competing in a miserable atmosphere...all for nothing.

However, this means that even if a contestant is physically strong, has a high IQ, or is incredibly personable...they're not automatically destined to win the game of *Survivor*. In an interview, a past *Survivor* contestant who wished to remain anonymous cited this innovative concept for a competition as the reason why *Survivor* was so intriguing. They said, "I realized

that people were taking this seriously. And the kind of voting was based on how people play the game [...] That's kind of what was really cool to me. It was exciting. It's not just the best athlete or the smartest person or the fittest person that would win. Everyone's got a fair shot.”

This concept also led to two different seasons themed as Brains vs Brawn vs Beauty, which separated original tribes based on which characteristic they (supposedly) best exemplified. At first glance, the idea of reducing complex people into specific, stereotypical categories – brains, brawn, beauty – seems to devalue the intricacies of individuals. However, by setting out with that initial division, the producers were able to visually signify that there is not simply one characteristic that determines whether someone will be successful on *Survivor*. Each tribe had its own strengths and differences, and in the end, the winner was someone who exhibited traits from each category and was able to play them at the right time in the right circumstances. In doing so, these seasons also elaborated on the fact that it is not fair to assume that someone can only demonstrate a single characteristic, or to place people in restrictive categories based on easily observable traits.

To be successful in the game of *Survivor*, one has to be able to manipulate their strengths and weaknesses. *Survivor* is all about perceived balance. Symbolic interactionist theory claims that people have multiple roles in their repertoire that they can pull upon, based on specific situations in everyday life. Susie Scott states that these roles “are negotiated, emergent and adaptable, as actors navigate a careful path between the demands of the occasion and their own personal agendas of self-presentation” (84). Similarly, contestants on *Survivor* have to consider when to accentuate certain roles, based on the people or situations they are encountering and how they want to be perceived by them.

Typically, at the beginning of each season when the tribes are competing against each other for immunity, it is important to keep the stronger players around. However, as soon as the tribes merge and contestants are playing for Individual Immunity, physical players become the biggest target. A similar structure can also be seen in strategic players, though those can be harder to identify and know when to vote out. In an article using *Survivor* as a televisual text to investigate game theory in popular culture, Salter closely examined correlations between contestants' strengths and their perceived threat. He found that "physical skills were valued when linked to tribal immunity challenges, but perceived as a threat in the individual stage of the game. Mental weakness, or a lack of strategy, often led to elimination" (367). The shift from team strength to individual strength can clearly be seen in the evolution of voting strategies through the season, as well as the way that contestants expose or conceal their strengths from their tribe.

Contestants can't come across as too powerful because they'd be seen as a physical threat. They can't come across as too weak because they'd be seen as dead weight. Too smart and they're a strategic threat; too dumb and they're not a useful ally. They can't be too friendly, too anti-social, too flirty, and so on because each strong characteristic comes with its own set of consequences. They have to downplay their strengths throughout the 38 days they are on the island, to avoid being voted out. But on Day 39 they have to convince the jury that they played to each of those strengths perfectly, while embodying the expectations of a Sole Survivor.

Being perceived as a successful player who deserves to win \$1 million is all about finding the balance between being a passive and an active player. This is typically what a contestant will call their "strategy." And though each jury is completely unique and intrinsically biased toward the finalists, contestants with the most strategic gameplay are almost always

rewarded, in the end. There are multiple ways to go about finding that balance, and sometimes someone's strategy will be to disregard that balance altogether. Though this strategy has worked in the past, it is typically not a safe bet. If they play too passively, they're not the one making big moves and voting out major threats. They're just along for the ride, and they let other contestants get their hands dirty. This could be a good strategy, since they won't be considered a huge threat and get voted off, and the people on the jury probably won't hold a grudge toward them. So, as a passive contestant they would likely outplay and outlast the other contestants. But they would be missing the outwit element, the feature on which a jury will typically favor most heavily.

Conversely, if they play an extremely active game, they will have a much more difficult time making it to the end. If they make a lot of big moves, instigate voting decisions, and play hard, they will be considered a huge threat throughout the entire game. But if they end up making it to the end, they will have a much better chance of winning. This is especially in line with Machiavelli's leadership tactic that "nothing makes a Prince so well thought of as to undertake great enterprises and give striking proofs of his capacity" (59). However, if the active contestant plays just a little *too* hard, they might get an embittered jury who got a little too hurt by their gameplay.

However, every jury is different. Certain strategies to playing *Survivor* might work great for one jury, and be catastrophic with a different jury. Contestants have to be keenly aware of how the other contestants are perceiving them, and they also have to become an active observer of the other contestants' behavior, values, and attitudes. Though this might seem like an overwhelming thought process to be constantly considering, it is actually something we do every day. In *Negotiating Identity*, Scott uses Goffman's metaphors of spying to explore what occurs during daily social interactions. She writes, "We act as double agents, seeking simultaneously to

control the impressions we convey, second-guess the intentions behind others' actions, conceal the fact that we are doing this and feign a breezy nonchalance" (218). The double-agentry we employ in everyday life is merely magnified in *Survivor*, when trying to accurately predict what a potential jury of people will consider most important. By doing so, contestants might just be able to alter their behavior in such a way that will benefit them when being judged by a jury of people they've been intimately competing against for 39 days, as they make that final \$1 million decision.

Machiavelli eloquently vocalizes this perfect balance of successful gameplay that people will find most admirable in his description of the ideal Prince. He states that one "will find in him all the fierceness of the lion and all the craft of the fox, and will note how he was feared and respected by the people, yet not hated by the army" (52). The ideal leader and (presumably) winner of *Survivor* knows how to formidably show their power, while retaining the respect of the people around them. This convoluted paradox leads me to assume that to be that ideal leader, one must not only know how to play a manipulative game, but must also know how to successfully manipulate other's impressions of oneself.

CHAPTER II

IDENTITY & SELF-PRESENTATION

Role Performance

The contestants who compete on *Survivor* are chosen by casting directors who have been working on the show for years. An essay on uncertainty in *Survivor* remarks, “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,” (Haralovich and Trosset 76). The casting directors have a carefully crafted, slightly stereotypical formula for creating the perfect blend of players. However, the remarkable thing about that formula is that the interactions between these typecast players always lead to new and different alliances, strategies, and gameplay.

The goal of the casting directors is for each contestant to be surrounded by types of people they would likely never encounter in their everyday lives. In his *Watch! Magazine* article, Jeff Probst says, “I see it as a great example of why *Survivor* is so compelling. When you take people from very different walks of life, they bring very different life experiences into the game.” It’s this kind of carefully crafted environment that encourages the unlikely alliances that occasionally occur, like J.T. Thomas & Stephen Fishbach in *Survivor: Tocantins*. A rancher from Alabama and a corporate consultant from New York can join forces, become true friends, work off each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and make it to the very end of the game. The caveat? Only one of them can win.

Similar to a casting director for a movie or play, the casting directors on *Survivor* have very specific roles they are trying to fill. According to Mark Burnett, in his book *Survivor II*,

these roles range from leader, class clown, introvert, villain, underdog, girl next door, athlete, mom, sleaze ball, flirt, academic, and so on (74-85, 120-30). Contestants are then selected to compete, after thorough vetting and psychological evaluations. By creating this diverse cast of contestants, casting directors aren't ensuring that a certain type of person will be successful and win. On the contrary, they are ensuring that there are enough different types of people playing, that the winner is almost completely uncertain. This is exemplified when examining the large variety of different "roles" who have won *Survivor*. For example, season one may have seen Richard Hatch, the villainous leader, win. But only two seasons later, Ethan Zohn, the amiable athlete, dominated the game in his own way and also won.

That said, is it fair to cast people as contestants on *Survivor*, merely based on a type of role they fill? Are they then constricted to playing to these roles they think they need to fill, or is there room for exploration? According to Parvati Shallow it might be a little of both. In our interview, she remarked, "People will play into these sort of stereotypical roles, out there, because it's so primal. And I think everyone's kind of broken down into their, like, archetype patterns, and that's what pops out when you're out on the island, surviving off the land with one another."

As much planning and preparation as producers and contestants might try to do, it's impossible to predict how living in a remote location for 39 days is going to affect the type of role someone is going to embody. And to that extent, taking on the role of "mom" doesn't necessarily mean that role will look the same on a tropical island. Past seasons of *Survivor* have taught us that nothing is more thrilling than seeing the juxtaposition of a "mom" character simultaneously caring for and deceiving their tribemates. Indeed, they may appear to begin the show at a disadvantage – not being the strongest or most aggressive. However, characters like

the mom, the introvert, or the underdog can take advantage of the stereotypical image that has been placed on them by blindsiding the other contestants with their ability to set aside the moral compass they are expected to represent.

Internal vs External Morality

When contestants decide who they want to keep or vote off, there is typically more thought put into whether or not the contestant in question is trustworthy. In an article on perceptions of moral goodness, the authors suggest that “knowing whether a given individual will help us or harm us is more important than knowing where their particular talents, knowledge, and skills lie. This may be why morality is more central to representations of personal identity than competence” (Christy et al. 6). Identity on *Survivor* is more centered on perceived morality than anything else, because it is someone else’s morality that will affect their time on *Survivor* more than anything else.

At the beginning of every season, there is a large emphasis placed on keeping the tribe strong so that they can beat the other tribe in challenges. However, “strong” is a subjective descriptor. Keeping the tribe physically strong may potentially lead to winning more challenges, but if the trust isn’t there, ultimate success will not follow. A divided tribe, even if dominant in numbers, does not necessarily ensure longevity in the game once the merge occurs. Thus, more often than not, elimination votes will be dependent on contestants’ trustworthiness and perceived morality (whether or not that trustworthiness is legitimate).

Morality is one’s internal sense of right and wrong. However, morality is also subjective. There are certain morals that are accepted universally and sometimes enforced through laws and regulations – don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t cheat. However, there are other more subjective morals

and ways in which people live their lives, that are not governed by laws and regulations – don't gossip, be respectful of others, have integrity, be loyal. And most morals brought from one's everyday life do not correspond to the moral framework found on *Survivor*.

In an interview with *Today*, Jeff Probst said, "The ethical line on *Survivor* is a continuum. Moral is at one end, immoral at the other. Each person decides at any given moment where they are willing to place themselves — how far down that continuum will you drift for a million dollars?" When competing, contestants have to either consciously or subconsciously answer certain questions about how they're going to approach morality. How deeply felt are their subjective morals? What is the limit where they can compromise their moral compass to behave in a certain way, in order to win \$1 million? What is the place where their moral compass is going to assert itself, in spite of the performance that they're trying to put on? And to what extent is that internal moral compass affected by the external performances that cease to be something put on?

Contestant Impression Management

The culture of *Survivor* is to use different strategies in order to make it to the end of the game and win \$1 million dollars. The highly stylized environment of *Survivor* has bred this extremely unique culture of strategic gameplay and identity manipulation. The show's mantra suggests that the goal of all players should be to outwit, outplay, and outlast...by whatever means necessary. Whether or not a contestant decides to play a clean or dirty game, they are still viciously annihilating competition one-by-one, in order to make it to the end and win the game. However, instead of taking responsibility for actions on the show, contestants are constantly participating in multiple forms of impression management.

What is impression management? In theatre, actors on the stage have certain impressions they want their audiences to have about the character they're portraying. Actors have a hand in creating a persona set apart from themselves, and this persona's characteristics need to be accessible to their audience, in order for them to understand the performance. Erving Goffman is a sociologist whose dramaturgical analyses have been foundational in both psychology and performance research. He used this theatrical metaphor to relate performances on stage to performances in everyday life. He suggested that we use similar forms of impression management on *our* audiences – the people we interact with every day.

Goffman claims that we desire that the people we interact with everyday have a certain impression of who we truly are. These impressions may change day-to-day, based on our environment and circumstance. However, we are always consciously or subconsciously altering our behavior, in order to influence other people's perceptions of ourselves. Reality television shows, like *Survivor*, are interesting to examine because they equip impression management in both performance and reality.

So, if contestants make it to the end of *Survivor*, it's not audience members who decide their fate...it's the people they've been lying to and manipulating for the last 39 days who get to decide if they should win the game. Thus, impression management occurs when contestants interact with each other on the show. Typically, smart players will play the game skillfully while simultaneously maintaining good relationships with the people who might end up on the jury deciding their fate, even if that includes having had a hand in voting them off. This dichotomy of cutthroat gameplay and successful social collaboration is why *Survivor* is the perfect reality television show through which to examine self-presentation and impression management.

There are a number of things to consider when trying to create a positive impression with a jury. What kind of player were they? Do they respect big moves in the game? How deeply will they feel betrayal? Are they more likely to give money to someone they like or someone they respect? How many people did you have to trick in order to make it to Day 39? Did you stay true to your core alliance? Who's sitting next to you at the Final Tribal Council? Do they deserve to win more than you do? Are you more likeable than they are? It's completely overwhelming to think about how many different scenarios there could be, leading you to wonder if it's worth even trying to think through them all.

That being said, if you do make it to Day 39, but every single person hates you...it really doesn't matter that you made it to the Final Tribal Council. The ultimate embodiment of this conundrum is Russell Hantz. In his article with *Watch! Magazine*, Jeff Probst wrote, "Russell illustrated a lesson of *Survivor*: No matter how dominant your play, if the jury doesn't like you, you will not win." Russell Hantz is often cited as the most notorious villain of *Survivor*. But what is it about Russell that separates him from other contestants with equally villainous strategies? He's been called a black hole, a sickness, and a black pit by his fellow tribemates. He has no problem using lies, intimidation, and chaos to further his own self interests. His behavior on *Survivor* is so targeted and hurtful to other contestants, his two times sitting at the Final Tribal Council both resulted in a loss.

We can use Machiavelli's *The Prince* to explore potential reasons behind why Russell is so unsuccessful at gaining the respect of his fellow contestants. Machiavelli insists that a Prince "should consider how he may avoid such courses as would make him hated or despised; and that whenever he succeeds in keeping clear of these, he has performed his part, and runs no risk though he incur other infamies" (47). Even though Russell's strategic maneuvering is incredibly

astute, as evidenced by his presence at two Final Tribal Councils, it is his social game that refutes any chance of his ever winning. Russell has difficulties adapting his attitude and behavior to soothe the perceptions of his fellow tribemates and avoid hatred, as Machiavelli would suggest he do. His self-presentation is unapologetically offensive to everyone around him, and he does not make the effort to appear to have any kind of remorse for his actions.

In fact, Russell appears to take joy from committing cruelties and deceptions against contestants. Again, Machiavelli would have key words of advice for Russell: “cruelty can either be well or ill employed. Well employed cruelties are done once for all under the necessity of self-preservation, and not afterwards persisted in [...] Ill-employed cruelties, on the other hand, are those which from small beginnings increase rather than diminish with time” (23). Though everyone on *Survivor* must take part in some level of cruelty, it must not be done to excess, like Russell is apt to do.

If Russell Hantz is the embodiment of an unsuccessful Machiavellian Prince, then “Boston” Rob Mariano is the representation of a successful one. In my personal favorite season, *Survivor: Redemption Island*, two tribes were comprised of new contestants who had never played before, led by two previous players: Russell and Boston Rob. Boston Rob had met his future wife on *Survivor: All Stars*, and they successfully instigated the strategy of creating a power couple when he was runner-up to her Sole Survivor victory. Fourteen seasons and three attempts later, on *Survivor: Redemption Island*, Rob finally achieved the win he felt he deserved.

Boston Rob skillfully led his tribe to multiple victories against Russell’s tribe (who was smart enough to vote Russell out sooner rather than later). In true Machiavellian fashion, Boston Rob chose the perfect associates – loyal to a fault and not smart enough to lead any kind of rebellion. He also instigated a buddy system, making sure that no two contestants were left alone

to strategize against him. Unlike Russell, Boston Rob made sure everyone felt that they had a voice in the tribe, and he was only ever cruel when he felt that he needed to establish his authority. Even after several setbacks and twists, Boston Rob was able to adapt and craft the perfect performance of an ideal *Survivor* leader and winner. He presented himself in such a way that instilled trust, a task that Russell was simultaneously failing at in his tribe. Performing the role of adept and benevolent leader made Boston Rob's tribe never question his authority, even as they were being voted off. And, in the end, this performance also created a persona that the jury couldn't help but respect and vote to win the title of Sole Survivor.

Everyone on *Survivor* takes part in some level of cruelty and deception because the whole premise of the show is based on the fact that contestants have to choose when it is time for their companions to lose the chance of winning \$1 million so that *they* can win \$1 million. However, it is the way that they plan and execute these power moves, which creates the impression that the other contestants will have of them through the game. Being always cognizant of managing that impression is what makes a contestant a true Machiavellian leader.

At this point in the paper, I think it only fair to mention Mark Burnett's connection to the show *The Apprentice* and, in turn, President Donald Trump. As creator and producer of both *Survivor* – a show based purely on underhand leadership tactics – and *The Apprentice* – a show that helped our current president develop his own leadership tactics through public performance, ultimately landing him in the White House – there is ample room for potential bleed-over between the two shows. This possibility leads to a very real concern that reality television may be shifting into a dangerously self-fulfilling realm of political and societal expectations. If so, what does positive audience response to shows like *Survivor*, or even *The Apprentice*, say about what society has evolved into?

CHAPTER III

SPECTATORSHIP & PERCEPTION

Audience Impression Management

While focusing on the impression contestants are consistently presenting to the other players that are around them 24 hours a day, it can be easy to forget that there's someone else that's also watching their every move – the viewers back home. There are thousands of hours of footage, as producers and cameramen follow each contestant around all day and all night. And although most moments that are filmed will end up on the cutting room floor, the big moments of deception and immorality will absolutely make it to the screen. This means that though contestants are living in an artificial environment separate from real life, evidence of what they are doing is not quite so separate.

Some contestants can't help but wonder what their friends, coworkers, family, or even strangers will think of how they behaved on national television. There have been contestants who were thrilled to have people back home see how strong, independent, and fierce they became on the show. Monica Culpepper, a stay-at-home mom, was runner-up on *Survivor: Blood vs. Water*. Accustomed to being overshadowed by her former NFL player husband Brad, Monica said that *Survivor* was an important self-discovery experience for her. In a confessional interview before her Final Tribal Council, Monica shared, "It's just amazing to think – the final 3 and Monica did it without Brad. And without her safety net. And without anybody else. The helpmate and the mom found herself, and became Monica again" ("It's My Night").

Alternatively, for some contestants there is the fear that the deceit and lying they had to perform on *Survivor* may negatively influence how people in their everyday life will then expect

them to behave when they return home. For other contestants, the audience is an immaterial factor that has nothing to do with their experience on *Survivor*. In an interview with Parvati Shallow, I asked her if thinking about who would be watching the show after the fact influenced any of her behavior. She responded, “I’m really glad that it didn’t cross my mind because if I would have been thinking, ‘Oh, if I do this, how will I be perceived by other people?’ then I would have failed miserably [...] I think if you start to play for television, then you’re not going to go very far.”

A truly ideal example of these different concerns regarding audience perception comes from *Survivor: Cagayan (Brain vs Brawn vs Beauty)*. On the brawn tribe there were two police officers, Tony Vlachos and Sarah Lacina, with two very differing views on integrity’s role on *Survivor*. Sarah was committed to playing the game with the kind of integrity that she felt her family, friends, and colleagues expected from her, as a cop. She placed the honor of her badge and reputation above all else, and failed spectacularly on *Survivor*. Some might say her lack of success stemmed from her naïve perspective.

Tony, on the other hand, had spoken with his family, friends, and colleagues back home, before coming on the show. He went on *Survivor* knowing that he had their support and blessing to behave in any way he needed to, in order to play the game successfully and win. And he did! He swore (falsely) on his badge. He snuck, clawed, and barreled his way through to the end of the game and won. And he knew everyone back home would have no problem with his behavior because they understood the separate moral framework that exists on *Survivor*.

On the *Survivor* Reunion Show, at the end of that season, one of Tony’s co-workers happened to be in attendance. When asked about Tony’s behavior on *Survivor*, he told Jeff, “It was a game. He was out there for one mission: to get the job done. And he got the job done. So,

we know why he was out there” (“Reunion”). Sarah’s co-workers, on the other hand, were upset that she *didn’t* get the job done. In an interview with *The Gazette*, Sarah said, “When I got back after the first time, my co-workers were like, ‘Why didn’t you just lie?’ I was afraid I would dishonor our profession as a police officer [...] Everybody else realized I was playing a game but me. This isn’t real life. It doesn’t reflect on who you are.” Both Tony and Sarah’s police officer co-workers knew the difference between real life and a game like *Survivor* (with its own set of rules and moral ambiguities). And Sarah’s co-workers couldn’t believe she was afraid that they wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.

What’s even more fascinating to examine is the fact that both Tony and Sarah recently returned to the show in *Survivor: Game Changers*. Sarah started the season claiming that she was going to play a completely different game with a completely different strategy – one a little more like Tony’s. And her new strategy was a success because she ended up winning that season. By releasing her anxieties about audience perception, Sarah was able to mentally identify and separate the moral frameworks that guide real life from the moral frameworks that guide the game of *Survivor*.

Sarah and Tony are truly the ideal personification of how anxiety concerning audience perception can affect one’s behavior on *Survivor*. According to friends and family back home, this concern was unnecessary, due to the already established moral framework for which *Survivor* is known. These anxieties can be difficult to set aside, because perceived morality is one of the biggest indicators of truly knowing somebody (Christy et al. 2). So, when those morals appear to be compromised, even on television, contestants can’t help but wonder if that will affect their friends and family’s opinions of them. However, contestants like Tony are able to reveal inner machinations to viewers by breaking the fourth wall and conversing directly with

the people back home. During individual interviews, contestants are given the chance to open up and share their concerns about behaving certain ways and tell the audience that they are only playing a part! This leaves it up to the audience to then decide whether or not morals observed on television have any correlation to everyday life.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

In theatre, the “fourth wall” is a term for the invisible wall that separates audience from performer, almost like a one-way mirror. The audience can see through this invisible wall and feel as though they are involved and immersed in the performance. But the performer, typically, never addresses the audience. However, throughout each episode of *Survivor*, the contestants break the fourth wall in confessional soliloquies directed at the cameras and producers.

In my interview with Parvati Shallow, she said that “when you have a conversation with producers, it feels like you can trust them and they’re the only people you can trust. So, that’s how they get the contestants to say all of those kinds of things – to let our guard down and just blab our faces off...” During these confessionals, audiences are given selective insight into unobservable components of morality. Audiences can feel as though they are part of the action because they can see the motivations that are leading the contestants to behave as they are.

However, sometimes what audiences hear in these confessionals may have the opposite effect. Contestants will often use the confessionals as a way to air grievances about other contestants. In the game, talking openly and freely about what they find annoying about certain contestants could threaten their security in the game. Negative opinions could be misconstrued in so many ways, it’s easier to just stay quiet and avoid that type of conflict altogether. There are simply too many instances of contestants blowing up at somebody, and then being labeled as

instable or a troublemaker and getting voted off at the very next Tribal Council. But in the confessionals, contestants can release frustrations that have been bottled up for days, with minimal fear of repercussions. However, hearing contestants speak negatively about their fellow tribemates, or even make fun of them as Boston Rob was apt to do, could potentially adversely affect how audiences perceive contestants.

Though audience members may feel like they're getting the full picture of who a contestant really is based on these confessionals...they aren't! They're only receiving information with a biased edge, based on what the contestants want people back home to see. However, audiences are seeing contestants through even more layers of abstraction. There is the layer of what the producer wants the audience to see, which is achieved through selective editing. And yet another layer is based on what the contestant wants the producers to know.

According to a past *Survivor* contestant who wished to remain anonymous, "As a player, you're playing your own game. You're playing against all the other contestants. Then you're playing against Jeff Probst. Probst is going to call you out on strategy at Tribal Council. So, you need to be able to manage that and how you're going to answer Jeff Probst. And you're going to have to manage how you talk to your producers in your little side interviews. Because during those side interviews, it's interesting because I couldn't give them all the information I want. I don't know how they're using that information [...] You're playing four or five games."

So, the confessionals seem to have some kind of therapeutic qualities for contestants as they are able to release pent up anxieties and aggressions without fear of recompense from the other contestants. However, there is still a level of trepidation because the contestants aren't simply speaking to a lone camera. They are surrounded by producers and cameramen who can have just as much influence on the game as anything else. Hearing strategy, concerns, cockiness,

or anything that could change the way the game progresses might cause producers to shake things up, ask other contestants leading questions, and so on. An article on uncertainty in *Survivor* discusses how “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” (Haralovich and Trosset 80). In order to keep the show fresh and interesting for 36 seasons, producers have to make sure that nothing is sure. Just as Jeff is keen to say, “The moment you get comfortable is the moment you are in trouble.”

There is another potentially negative consequence of opening up to the producers and cameras. By having an inside view into the strategies of contestants, audiences are sometimes even more aware of their scheming motivations. In *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, Jonny “Fairplay” Dalton manufactured one of the most famous premeditated schemes in *Survivor* history. In almost every season of *Survivor*, there is a loved one’s visit toward the end of the game. In *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, Jonny had concocted a plan with his friend before going on the show. He told his friend that if he made it to the loved one’s visit, when he got to the island, he should tell Jonny that his grandmother had passed away while he was competing on *Survivor*. And everything went according to plan.

Jonny’s friend walked into camp, hugged Jonny, and smiled eagerly, happy to be there. It seemed as though Jonny’s friend either forgot the plan or didn’t think Jonny would actually go through with it because it was Jonny who had to ask the question: “Dude, how’s grandma?” His reply, “She died, dude” led to a moment of subpar acting skills which somehow managed to convince the tribe that Jonny’s beloved grandmother had died. There were tears and hugs from a majority of the contestants attempting to comfort Jonny, which created a surprisingly intimate and beautiful bond in the tribe. Cut to Jonny’s confessional an hour later, laughing as he says,

“My grandmother is sitting home watching Jerry Springer right now” (“The Great Lie”). This insane strategy garnered Jonny sympathy from the other contestants that helped him make it into the final three!

An article addressing perceptions of moral goodness as it relates to knowledge of other’s true selves says, “There remains the potential for impressions of morality to be inaccurate, given that it partially consists in unobservable characteristics such as values and motivations that are only accessible to the self” (Christy et al. 7). What fellow contestants took as deep emotional turmoil and morally pure motives, viewers back home knew to be completely fabricated! Though the moral framework of *Survivor* is complicated and fairly subjective, lying about dead grandmothers seemed to be the line that many people had difficulties looking past. During the *Survivor: Pearl Islands* “Reunion” episode, Jeff Probst called it “a move so low and so evil, it definitely guaranteed Jon a spot in the *Survivor* villain hall of fame.” However, Jeff also cites this moment as one of his favorites in *Survivor* history, especially because, at the time, he believed him just as much as the other contestants did.

In searching through old message boards dedicated to *Survivor: Pearl Islands*, there seemed to be just as many positive responses to Jonny’s deception as there were negative ones. On *DVD Talk*, user namrfumot wrote, “you gotta admire Jon's skills the same way to have admire Hitler's. Both pure evil, but they're good at it,” and user Corky Roxbury exclaimed, “Jonny Fairplay the greatest survivor ever!” Meanwhile, other users disagreed, like Vegas9203 who wrote, “I agree that deception is a key to the game....but I just DESPISE Jonny Fairplay so much!! I just hate him! And horribly acted too,” and user Patman who wrote, “I had a hard time stomaching Jon and his ‘acting’. I guess some people really would sell their grandmother down the river to get 3 more days on the island.” These mixed responses to such a shocking moment

on television might lead us to assume that when watching *Survivor*, some audience members can look past otherwise despicable behavior, in order to see the merit behind the gameplay. While others remain torn about completely separating everyday morals from the unique moral framework of *Survivor*, especially when aspects of real life (his grandmother) are used to further deceptions. Additionally, the duality of the word “acting” can be seen in conflict with itself here, as audience members condemn Jonny for “acting” (performing) while on a television show that requires contestants to “act” (behave) in a certain way. But it was the artificiality of Jonny’s acting – versus the acting every contestant employs in one way or another when on the show – which tuned in certain audience members to the performance, leading them to maintain a negative perception of his behavior.

Immersion & Interaction

As the show has progressed, the opportunities for interaction with contestants on the show have become easier, due to increased Internet presence and communications. As mentioned previously, there are fan forums, giving superfans of the show a chance to discuss theories & thoughts on certain contestants. There is also a live show where the Final Tribal Council votes are read and the Sole Survivor is announced. Fans of the show can buy tickets to attend the live show. And after a season ends, there is sometimes even an online auction hosted by CBS, auctioning off items seen on that season of *Survivor*, where all money raised is then donated to a charity. Through the years, there have even a number of podcasts and talk shows hosted by past contestants, discussing the current season of *Survivor*.

For a while, CBS offered a chance for audience members to vote online for their favorite contestants, announcing the Fan Favorite winner at the Live Finale show. Fan Favorite choices

Season	Sole Survivor	Fan Favorite
Season 8	Amber Brkich	Rupert Boneham
Season 9	Chris Daugherty	N/A
Season 10	Tom Westman	N/A
Season 11	Danni Boatwright	N/A
Season 12	Aras Baskaukas	Cirie Fields
Season 13	Yul Kwon	Ozzy Lusth
Season 14	Earl Cole	N/A
Season 15	Todd Herzog	James Clement
Season 16	Parvati Shallow	James Clement
Season 17	Bob Crowley	Bob Crowley
Season 18	J.T. Thomas	J.T. Thomas
Season 19	Natalie White	Russell Hantz
Season 20	Sandra Diaz-Twine	Russell Hantz
Season 21	Fabio Birza	Jane Bright
Season 22	Rob Mariano	Rob Mariano
Season 23	Sophie Clarke	Ozzy Lusth
Season 24	Kim Spradlin	Kim Spradlin
Season 25	Denise Stapley	Lisa Whelchel
Season 26	John Cochran	Malcolm Freberg

Figure 1: Sole Survivor Winners vs. Fan Favorite Winners

were rarely congruent with who actually ended up winning (Figure 1). And, again, there is really no consistency with whom audience members tend to favor. A number of Fan Favorite winners – Rupert, Cirie, Bob – were strongly associated with playing a clean game, with an emphasis on their social interactions. Others were the “boy next door” types – Ozzy, James, J.T., Malcolm – who were physical powerhouses, but never quite mastered the art of manipulation and deception. While still others – Rob and Russell – dominated strategically, unafraid of obliterating anyone in their way.

Every day we are spectators of the human race, analyzing and connecting with the people we encounter. In fact, “even extremely subtle cues signaling moral character are sufficient to enhance perceived knowledge of others’ true selves...” (Christy et al. 6). So, it’s interesting to examine Fan Favorite winners and ask whether spectators of *Survivor* equip measures of

morality to determine which contestants they admire the most. It would appear that, when watching *Survivor*, audiences are able to mentally shift their notions of established moral frameworks with a new set of guidelines. But then there's something so universal about the desire to see Bob Crowley, the 57-year-old high school physics teacher, be the oldest person to win *Survivor*. So universal, in fact, that his fellow contestants voted the same way. Or for J.T. Thomas, a sweet country boy from Alabama, to play a perfect game with no votes ever cast against him, receive every single jury vote, and also be the choice for Fan Favorite.

Another major method of interaction with the show is through Twitter. Though not around when the show began, as Twitter grew, there became even more ways for audience members to interact with *Survivor* contestants. They can read tweets that contestants are posting live while episodes are airing, since the show airs after contestants have returned home from competing. They can send questions to contestants via Twitter. There are even hashtags in the bottom corner of the screen during episodes, especially when something unexpected or exciting happens – #blindsides #gamechanger #immunityidol.

Last year, on *Survivor: Game Changers*, there was something truly shocking that occurred. During a Tribal Council, contestant Jeff Varner outed fellow tribemate Zeke Smith as transgender. Zeke had chosen to keep that personal information about himself private. And when Jeff Varner asked, "Why haven't you told anyone you're transgender?" in front of the whole tribe, he insinuated that Zeke had been dishonest and secretive, and should be voted out before him ("What Happened On Exile, Stays On Exile"). Jeff Varner took advantage of a preexisting stereotype about transgender people being dishonest about gender identity, and twisted it to help him further his time on *Survivor*. It backfired. In this moment of total rashness, Jeff Varner altered his course in the game, as he was immediately voted off the island after an intensely

emotional Tribal Council. He also altered his course in life, as he was fired from his job back home, once the episode aired. And worst of all, he altered the course of Zeke's life, as he revealed private information about him not only to their fellow tribemates, but also to America.

When the episode aired, the incident went viral. Jeff Varner posted an apology tweet saying, "Yep. I did that. And I offer my deepest, most heart-felt apologies to Zeke Smith [...] I was wrong and I make no excuses for it." Meanwhile, Zeke posted, "We cannot control the hazards we face, we can only control how we respond. Love each other. #Survivor #Zekevivor." As the weeks went on, both posted links to interviews they'd done and essays they'd written about the experience. Both also received support from fans of the show and followers on Twitter: @SundropVission wrote "@JEFFVARNER it seems to me that the only person who hasn't forgiven you yet is YOU, hope this helps" while @bena_w wrote "@zekeerchief You *are* a role model. Your strength, composure, kindness & ability to forgive are all qualities I hope my kids will have. You are awesome."

These moments of interaction from both within and outside the world of *Survivor* are perfect opportunities to consider moments where contestants are performing their identity once more. Social media websites, like Twitter, offer opportunities for all users to create and convey a manicured self-presentation, which may or may not be congruent with reality. Users may truly believe that the posts they share accurately represent their real life, with no intent to deceive their audience. While others may see social media as the perfect venue to maintain a false identity, based on what they want people to see. For example, Jeff Varner used Twitter to attempt to restore favor with audience members who may have held him in contempt, by tweeting apologies, creating a remorseful image for himself. Simultaneously, Zeke was able to take a traumatizing event and turn it into something positive and constructive, creating an empowering

image for himself. Ultimately, accumulating a large following through reality television fame may lead past *Survivor* contestants on Twitter to maintain the levels of audience impression management they performed on camera, by carefully choosing what they decide to share once they return home.

Discussion boards, Twitter, live shows, and audience polls are all very interesting cross-overs occurring from onscreen to off screen, leading us to consider the effects of audience perceptions of role impression management on *Survivor*. Perhaps reactions, both on and off the island, to Jeff Varner's misstep on national television are indicative of an evolving society. Jeff's intentions were to create distrust about Zeke's identity based on existing stereotypes, but it did quite the opposite. Is this due to a new progressive attitude toward transgender people? Did the contestants at that specific Tribal Council react in horror because of deeply felt convictions about transgender equality? Or were their reactions an effect of impression management based on societal expectations, as well as how they wanted to be perceived by fellow contestants and audience members? And, in turn, were audience members' reactions proof of a progressive society because of the same reasons, or were they equipping similar forms of impression management? If, based on the argument of this thesis, we are to believe that each of us engage in forms of impression management in everyday life, then how might these efforts of impression management obscure progressive attitudes in society?

CHAPTER IV

THE META-PLAYER

In *Survivor: Micronesia (Fans vs Favorites)*, for the first time in the history of the show, contestants who were self-appointed superfans of *Survivor* were asked to face-off against some of the greatest, well-known competitors the show had ever seen. The producers made sure to find ten contestants who all had one thing in common: they were superfans who had been watching *Survivor* since it began airing seven years ago, at that point. Producers also made sure to choose ten previous contestants who were true legends and proven fan favorites (three of which had actually won the title of Fan Favorite in their previous seasons).

Unaware that they would be competing against people they had been watching on television for years, there was a clear emotional progression in the faces of the fans as the favorites walked onto the beach – from awe and excitement, to dread, anxiety, and even a level of cockiness. In her first confessional, superfan Alexis revealed, “I think the Fans vs Favorites setup is the ultimate challenge. Because we have the favorites who obviously played this game before, so they’re coming in here with the experience. But at the same time, you have us. And we know their game. We know not only their strengths, but their weaknesses, too. So, I think that puts us at a huge advantage” (“You Guys Are Dumber Than You Look”).

The *Survivor* Superfan

In her book on reality television, Annette Hill remarks that the “symbiotic relationship between producer, performer and audience is encapsulated in the casting of superfans as contestants in reality formats” (57). By casting superfans, the producers of *Survivor* are initiating

a crack in the barrier that has been separating living room and tropical island. The *Survivor* superfan who goes from watching season after season of *Survivor* to becoming an actual contestant on the show establishes, what I will be calling, the “meta-player.”

Something becomes “meta” when it creates new layers of abstraction for itself. The meta-player is a student of the game who then becomes a part of the game. They have watched past contestants’ strategies, thought processes, and performances of self. They have been at home watching and imagining how much more ruthless and cunning they would be as contestants. This is all put to the test when they are selected to be a competitor on the show.

These superfans give the moral framework of *Survivor* new life, because they come onto the show ready, willing, and excited to do whatever it takes to win. They begin their seasons with a predisposed attitude of wanting to become the next winner (or, better yet, legend) of *Survivor*. A superfan contestant will typically try to embody what they perceive to be the ultimate *Survivor* contestant, by taking on and performing characteristics they’ve seen be successful in the past.

Though there are superfans throughout every season of the show, *Survivor: Micronesia* created a very visual representation of the superfan metaphorically stepping out of the screen and into an idealized environment. Not only were they interacting with the godlike Jeff Probst, but they were living on an island with some of the heroes of their youth. Even more impacting, they were having to eliminate and scheme against the very heroes they spent years revering. They had to decide whether they emulate their heroes gameplay, or whether they use their superfan knowledge against the players, since they were extremely acquainted with their gameplay strategies.

There have been superfans who were not very successful when competing against their childhood idols. For example, in *Survivor: Micronesia*, Erik Reichenbach was a superfan who

managed to make it to the final five of his season. In a moment of unexplained idiocy, Erik was convinced by the other four contestants (three of which were repeat players) that he should give away his individual immunity during Tribal Council. Since then, this move is typically cited as the dumbest decision in *Survivor* history, as he was voted out minutes later. In an interview with *Reality TV World*, Erik was asked if he thought that being star struck by the favorites affected his strategies. Erik responded, “I think it did. I really do think it did [...] They clouded my judgement.”

Some superfans were given the opportunity to return to the show and make up for their haphazard initial experience. John Cochran was on *Survivor: South Pacific*, which saw 2 returning players competing with 16 new contestants. Cochran was probably the ultimate superfan, as evidenced by the fact that he won a prize for an essay he wrote at Harvard Law discussing the jury system on *Survivor* and how it relates to the American legal system, as mentioned previously. A superfan and well-studied aficionado of the show, Cochran was primed to be an extremely successful strategic player.

In his very first episode on the show, Cochran asked Jeff Probst to call him by his last name, saying that Jeff always calls his favorite contestants by their last names. Unfortunately, even knowing the show as well as he did, Cochran failed miserably on *Survivor: South Pacific*. He had difficulties with both the social and physical aspects of *Survivor*, and he ended up lasting only 13 days on the island. However, Cochran was chosen to return in *Survivor: Caramoan*, where he dominated in all aspects of the competition, played a perfect game by never having one vote cast against him, and received every jury vote in the Final Tribal Council.

But not every player that goes on *Survivor* is a superfan. Multiple contestants, Parvati Shallow included, began their time on *Survivor* without having ever watched it. And for most,

coming onto the show without any preconceived notions about what is required to be successful on *Survivor*, it is difficult to make it far in the game. According to Parvati Shallow, contestants are shown a few episodes, prior to landing on the island, to get them acclimated to what their experience might be like. But being on *Survivor* is a bit like culture shock. The highly schematized culture of *Survivor* is something that has been cultivated through years and years of *Survivor* power players.

The *Survivor* Repeat Player

Why would someone return to the misery, suffering, and trauma that *Survivor* presents (especially when they've unsuccessfully gone through all of it before)? *Survivor* power players will typically be on *Survivor* more than once because they are unsatisfied with the way they played previously, they have come up with new methods as a new approach toward the game, or they just love the game of *Survivor* that much. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Jeff Probst said of repeat players, "There is that idea of diminishing returns, but there's also the idea of, 'Maybe this is the time!' It's like playing a lottery, 'Maybe I'll win this week.' [...] It's always a question of 'what if?'"

In the history of *Survivor*, there have been 91 returnees – 69 have played twice, 22 have played three times, and 4 have played four times. Ozzy Lusth currently holds the record for most days in the game – 128 – while still having never won. Before his most recent season began, Ozzy told *Entertainment Weekly*, "It's my fourth time playing. Yeah, I've got to keep doing it until I win. Hopefully fourth time's a charm. I'm back for more!"

For some returning players, it might be hard for them to fully acknowledge their shift from superfan to fan favorite. In *Survivor: Micronesia*, James Clement, who had won the title of

Fan Favorite just one season previously, remarked, “I could almost be on the fan side. I’m a fan of all these people. So, for me to see like Yau and Ozzy over here, it’s like crazy” (“You Guys Are Dumber Than You Look”). James then went on to win Fan Favorite that season, as well. The *Survivor* repeat player is a meta-player in their own right. They have created new levels of abstraction for themselves by returning to the scene of the crime and restarting the experience. However, they are not starting from scratch. They were on *Survivor* before. They’ve experienced the trauma and intensity of the game. And yet, they want to do it again. Regardless of the difficulties they may have previously experienced, there seems to be some kind of rush that certain players get from being on *Survivor* that makes them want to go through all of it again for a second, third, or even fourth time.

However, just because a repeat player has experienced the game before, it doesn’t mean they have an overwhelming advantage over those who haven’t. Though they understand the culture and rules of the game, they no longer have the upper hand as a stranger to those they are competing against. In an interview, a past *Survivor* winner who wished to remain anonymous suggested that the game “is just for strangers. Because I can go out there and I can be whoever the hell I want to be – doctor, lawyer, nurse, homeless person. It doesn’t matter. I can create a narrative about myself that fits the way I want to play the game.” Superfans and repeat players have both likely watched the way that they initially played the game. This means that any kind of strategy secrets revealed in confessionals, Final Tribal Councils, or interviews after the game ended are no longer secret! By returning to the show, repeat contestants have to learn a new way that they can perform their self on *Survivor*.

For some returning players, however, coming back to *Survivor* is the perfect opportunity to reinvent themselves as a new character on the show. They can return with fellow contestants

expecting them to act a certain way and then unexpectedly totally change strategies, throwing everyone else off their guard. This is true of the winner of *Survivor: Micronesia*, Parvati Shallow. In her first season, *Survivor: Cook Islands*, Parvati had no idea what to expect from *Survivor*. She was not a superfan and she barely knew the premise of the show. In her own words, “The first time I played, I really went for the flirty, sort of like everyone’s friend, non-threatening character – like persona. But I wasn’t really playing to win. I was just going for the adventure.” Parvati was branded as the “flirt” character, when cast to play *Survivor*. This role stereotype followed her in her subsequent seasons. But when returning, she took advantage of the stereotype she had been given. In our interview, Parvati remarked, “The second time I went out there, I was like, ‘Okay. Everyone’s going to think I’m the flirt. But you know what, they’re not going to know how competitive I really am. So, I’m going to go out and be a fierce competitor. And I’m going to still play the flirt, because that’s what people expect.’” By playing into expectations, Parvati was able to take the island by storm and truly become one of the fiercest competitors *Survivor* has ever seen.

In analyzing this reiterative nature of meta-players, it’s important to once more circle back around to contestants’ performance of self on the show. The superfans who study and rewatch old seasons of *Survivor* might be trying to emulate something/someone that they really admire, just as we might try to imitate the people in our lives that we admire. However, the superfan isn’t successful until they start to make their own moves and create a singularly original path on the show, with the help of successful templates from the past.

Similarly, by returning to the show again and again, repeat players are reminiscent of our behavior in everyday life as we attempt to rework and revamp who we are and how we are perceived by others. And even the repeat players who are successful in their quest for the title of

Sole Survivor are not always truly happy, and they return yet again. Or, in the case of Sandra Diaz-Twine who won both *Survivor: One World* and *Survivor: Heroes vs Villains*, they return for a third time. It's not difficult to see the similarities in our constant manipulation of self-presentation in real life, and theirs on the show.

Who we are is constantly expanding every day. In our workplace, homes, online, and even on the street, we adapt and vary the identity that we are putting forth for others to perceive. So, real life already has a number of layers through which we are presenting ourselves and our behavior to the world every day. Reality television simply takes that presentation of self to a whole new level, based on what part of yourself you want to be perceived as "real." But using *Survivor* as a lens through which to analyze self-presentation gives us the opportunity for even further scrutiny. It takes a show like *Survivor* to examine something already incredibly complex, and multiply it exponentially.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the varied audience responses toward *Survivor* exposes the show's impact on modern societal values and our everyday lives. The fact that *Survivor* has lasted 36 seasons indicates a desire audiences must have to witness and celebrate such a cutthroat world. And the unpredictability of audience response to overly aggressive Machiavellian tactics suggests that society is not innately compelled to celebrate moral goodness. Instead, celebration is more guided by the success of one's strategy and tactics – ethical or not.

What, then, does what we value on *Survivor* say about what we value as a society? Do we cite the ambiguous moral framework of *Survivor* as a form of impression management, in order to justify our commendations of such Machiavellian behavior? Are successful authority figures only successful because they are able to manipulate their image, based on what the people want to see? How are economic and political structures in real life affected by the kinds of destructively competitive behavior we see enacted and rewarded on *Survivor*, and reality television in general?

Reflecting on contestants' impression management on *Survivor* can lead to similar conclusions and questions about how we equip impression management in our everyday lives. Our daily construction of personal identity appears to be led by the levels of impression management we feel convicted to implement. Moreover, it is the environment and people interact with who regulate the intensity of our levels of impression management. So, competing on a reality television show where the main focus is that of manipulating others' perceptions of your actions and behavior leads to a much higher intensity of impression management.

In *Survivor*, there's what you perceive to be the inner/authentic "you" that no one else can see. Then there's the reality television "you" that you want America to see (and love). Even further, there's the distorted version that is led by the strategic behavior you want other contestants to think is "you." Put all that together and you have to wonder...what part of all that is actually just *you*?

In a *Survivor After Show* interview, Ethan Zohn, winner of *Survivor: Africa* said, "Once you take away food, once you take away water, you're tired, you're hungry, you're thirsty...your true colors come out. And like, unless you're the best actor or actress in the world, I don't think you can hide that. So, I feel the person inside you comes out. And, you know, the people that come back from the like, 'Oh my god, they edited me to look like a total bitch,' I'm like, 'Well, you really are a bitch. You've just never seen yourself on TV before.'"

By analyzing *Survivor* through both psychological performative lenses, I have come to the conclusion that it is the environment, the people, and the stakes that shape what you become and who you present yourself to be. This is not dependent on your innate self, because the perceived innate self is merely an additional element of impression management. And in situations of such heightened stakes, like *Survivor*, how we choose to *behave* says a lot about who we truly *are*. Like Ethan said, there is only so much acting one can do.

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APPENDIX

DIVISION OF RESEARCH



APPROVAL OF RESEARCH Using Expedited Procedures

January 02, 2018

Type of Review:	Submission Response for Initial Review Submission Form
Title:	Temporarily Machiavellian: Performing the Self on "Survivor"
Investigator:	James Ball
IRB ID:	IRB2017-0967D
Reference Number:	069764
Funding:	None
Documents Approved:	IRB Application v. 1.1 Temporarily Machiavellian: Informed Consent Document v. 1.1 Temporarily Machiavellian- Recruitment Email v. 1.1 Temporarily Machiavellian- Interview Questions v. 1.0
Special Determinations:	None
Risk Level of Study:	Not Greater than Minimal Risk under 45 CFR 46 / 21 CFR 56
Review Category:	Category 7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Figure 2: IRB Approval