



Reality Check or Parody Bit?

It started in the '60s with Allen Funt's *Candid Camera*: the concept that real life is more interesting than fantasy. No need for celebrities, scripts, or big budgets to attract viewers. Chuck Barris upped the ante in the '60s and '70s with *The Dating Game*, *The Newlywed Game*, and *The Gong Show*, all exploiting our social quirks.

In the '90s, *The Real World*'s "seven strangers living together and having their lives taped" ushered in a reality TV explosion: With one part voyeurism, two parts duplicity, and three parts *schadenfreude*, you have a natural rubbernecker. Reality TV introduced us to interesting careers like that of the ice road trucker, avian vomitologist, derrickhand, maggot farmer, saucier, and catfish noodler ... but no engineers.

Why is that? If viewers can stomach Kate nagging Jon (or her eight kids) or Ramsey's kitchen expletives, surely they could bear brunch with Booch, tea with Torvalds, or cocktails with Cockburn. Think of the possibilities to promote our industry with software engineering versions of reality TV shows.

We could start with *Big Brother*, a "Fly-on-the-Wall" (FotW) show where twelve Agile software engineers move into a government project to develop the National Medical Records Database with no outside help. Watch tensions rise as a National Information Czar drops daily obstacles on the team: CMMI Level 5, Six Sigma, Lean, an unexpected thumb drive ban¹, limited Internet access, staff meetings, and Foreign Object Damage training. Each week an engineer is discharged from the team based on compliance, seniority, and staff meeting attendance.

On our version of *The Real World*, a project manager is coerced into joining his subordinates as a contributing engineer. Watch in amazement as he tries to boot up test stands and simulators. See paralysis set in during critical design review. Tempers flare when peer reviews turn to payback. Tears flow during budget cuts and schedule accelerations.

Closing out the FotW genre, we have *Engineer vs. Wild*, where, each week, a software engineer is dropped into the middle of a start-up company and asked to develop a company-wide knowledge management system with a laptop, an Internet connection, and a can of Mountain Dew. Watch as he or she rubs two modules together to create a parser and erects a makeshift database from an abandoned VisiCalc application. Cringe as he or she battles exposure to hackers, constant schedule heat, and budget dehydration. Cheer as he or she accomplishes his or her first back-up recovery.

In the "vocational" genre, we could start with engineering's version of *Dirty Jobs*. Mike Rowe demonstrates jobs engineers loathe: configuration management, sales, documentation, supervision, and quality assurance—all death knells to an engineer's career.

Next, we could offer a "vocational" quartet starting with *Deadliest Catch*, in which CEOs bid for the talent of a prima donna architect experienced in three design methods, six programming languages, and four software development environments, and speaks fluent CMMI, PSPSM, and Earned Value. This is followed by *Wail Wars*, where current project engineers welcome said prima donna architect with distractions, ploys, and impediments to foil his attempt to whip them into shape. Then there's *Ax Men*, where the project manager—who never wanted

to hire said prima donna architect—consults with the CEO, CFO, human resources, and legal council to determine whether to sack the architect or the rebellious engineers. The final of the four shows would be *Dog the Bounty Hunter*, where said prima donna architect, whose first name happens to be Dog, writes a book titled "Prima Donna Design: Architecture for Those Who Can." We follow Dog as he travels the country hunting companies he can fleece through lectures, workshops, and consulting gigs.

Switching channels we find a surplus of "reality-competition" shows to work with, starting with the slightly re-named *Project Runaway*. Here engineers are given a runaway project with no oversight, schedule, or quality assurance. The first to bankruptcy wins an autographed Heidi Klum poster. *Shear Genius* pits engineers against each other as they cut, trim, shape, and transform mainframe legacy code into an iPhone app. In *Hell's Kitchen*, programmers try to find a software bug nestled inside two million lines of undocumented spaghetti code. In *America's Got Talent*, project managers are asked to develop software-intensive systems with no H-1B visas, foreign workers, or offshore outsourcing. *Wipeout* pits system administrators against software engineers for control of the software development environment while *Fear Factor* is a fun little show that forces engineers to use their own products in near-death situations. *The Biggest Loser* tests software engineers' ability to provide minimal functionality for the most money. In *The Mole*, anti-process engineers are planted inside Engineering Process Groups to sabotage quality assurance ratings before they are discovered. Finally, engineering teams match wits in *The Weakest Link* as they transfer critical data across random platforms, data links, and protocols like an electronic hot potato. Lose the data and "you are the weakest link ... goodbye!"

Finally we offer the "makeover" genre. In *Trading Spaces*, real-time programmers are assigned to data processing centers with abundant memory, storage, and resources while database programmers are assigned to a real-time software intensive system with cycle constraints, interrupts, and memory paging. Each tries to improve the other's system and then critiques the results. In *Supernanny*, top-notch consultants race to be the first to convert talented cowboy programmers to PSP and TSPSM. *Peer Eye for the Late Guy* drops in on team interventions, disguised as peer reviews, to help procrastinating engineers meet milestones and deadlines. And *What Not to Wear* ... for engineers, the possibilities are endless.

Engineering reality TV may not be the answer. Most reality shows grow more scripted and less real with success. We are probably better off sticking with *MythBusters*. That show captures the heart of an engineer: showing how something works, watching it being built, and then blowing it up! Don't let success taint your engineering skills. Undergo regular reality checks to assure your parity bit is true and not a parody bit.

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Note

1. For those not working with or for the government, you may be surprised to find that this actually happened. See: <www.nextgov.com/nextgov/ng_20090217_6795.php>.

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