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3-17-2022

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Josie De Jong

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Recommended Citation

De Jong, J. (2022). Here be Dragons: Squid Game and Wealth Disparity. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/student_work/76

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Here be Dragons: *Squid Game* and Wealth Disparity

Josie De Jong

March 17, 2022

“The paradise of the rich is made out of the hell of the poor.” -Victor Hugo

On September 17 of 2021, a Netflix Original titled *Squid Game* went live. The South Korean drama (“K-Drama”) became immensely popular soon after its release, with a sudden influx of international viewers—many of whom had little to no experience with foreign media or the practice of reading subtitles. Despite that hurdle, the show hooked a diverse audience and held an engaged space on social media for around a month, reportedly earning Netflix nearly 900 million dollars.¹ That would be astronomical for an American Netflix original. It’s nearly inconceivable for a K-Drama.

So, what *was* it about *Squid Game* that led to 900 million in profit?

The show follows the story of Seong Gi-hun, a divorced man with a gambling addiction in one pocket and a young, “see you next week” daughter in the other. He’s a deadbeat who wasted away all his money (or mother’s money) on quick fixes of dopamine, making promises and fulfilling none of them. His lifestyle isn’t sustainable. And then a man in a clean-cut suit shows up, offering the kind of money Gi-hun has never had the opportunity to *see*, let alone have the opportunity to lose. He gets a business card and a promise that there’s more where that came from.

Bingo. Gi-hun takes the bait.

And then he gets drugged and transported to an unknown location where he meets everyone else who fell for the same offer. They’re all “players,” assigned numbers of identification and a bunk in a communal dorm. And then they’re forced to play childhood games to survive: or, more importantly, to win prize money, which increases each time a player dies. It’s violent and gory, the deaths often dealt from the hands of masked guards when the player screws up. So, “red light, green light,” except the person next to you is shot down when they don’t freeze fast enough. Mercy does not exist on this playground.

But the thing that all these players have in common is their desperation. Each person playing the games is poor—and if they manage to survive to the end, they’ll be pulled from the very

bottom of society to finally eat with that silver spoon they've been dreaming of for years. For people like Gi-hun, a spoon like that means everything. But it also means everything to everyone alongside him.

After viewers start to understand the games more, they're given another twist. Their blood-soaked scramble for a new life is all for the amusement of the nation's most wealthy, who bet on the players like horses about to step on the track. These gilded voyeurs don't even recognize the participants as humans, as someone of value. They sit on velvet couches with one hand slipped around a girl's waist and the other circling wine in a glass. They are anonymous, demanding, and crude—mascots of the seven deadly sins with no God in sight and no Jesus around to die for them.

A viewer's gut reaction to this image is often hard-wired to revulsion. They might turn to the person sitting nearest, spitting out half-rhetorical questions like "How could they do that?", "What's the point of this?", and "How is this realistic?". And more often than not, that person is sitting on a couch in a house in a city in a state whose postal address defaults to the U.S. of A. What percent of those questions are born from denial—insecurity? *Vanity Fair* confirmed the split in worldwide viewership reactions in an article, quoting one Korean viewer who said "she thought the show's depiction of the evil, selfish side of human nature 'was really repulsive to some Koreans.'"² According to that same article, many Koreans felt that "*Squid Game* did not reflect the progress that South Korea had made in its treatment of these marginalized groups since 2008, when the script was conceived."

While the show was still widely viewed in South Korea, it had a best-case, "lukewarm" response, and worst-case, a deeply offended response from those who believed it overly explicit or incorrect. The parts of *Squid Game* that didn't land with the citizens of its home country often resonated with the common American—after all, for many working-class Americans, that explicit depiction of violence, greed, or human selfishness isn't shocking anymore. Of course, South Korea has its own issues to deal with—we've both made great strides societally; yet, on our own turf, we have leagues left to go.

We don't have to look far to see how we, too, may be complicit in playing dangerous games. Think about our diabetic neighbor who, with rising health costs, can't afford insulin—the very thing that sustains their life.³ The woman across the street is fighting tooth and nail to survive on minimum wage, a "living wage."⁴ Millionaires invest in cryptocurrency and NFTs to launder money.⁵ To the death of itself, this country and its richest know how to use and abuse wealth. The upper echelon of our great West wear scales and breathe fire. America too often falls prey to dragons. Yes, dragons. Dragons that sit on ever-growing, untouched hoards. Pew Research Center states, "Household incomes have grown only modestly in this century, and household wealth has not returned to its pre-recession level."⁶ And further than that, the gaps "in income or wealth between richer and poorer households, continues to widen." This is no fantasy, and *Squid Game* is no fiction.

We can sit chest puffed and attempt to convince ourselves how heartless and unbelievable the society of *Squid Game* is. But America's poor and impoverished know the irony personally. They slog through it every day, treading their boots through the mud of a system that doesn't serve them—one that never has, and one that likely never will. The hoard continues to grow.

But amongst our populations deeply affected by the dragon's reign, a knight raises its sword. Anti-poverty movements do exist, and they're gaining traction as the issue grows in strength. In the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. formed the organization, "Poor People's Campaign." On that matter, he was quoted, "We are coming to Washington in a poor people's campaign. Yes, we are going to bring the tired, the poor, the huddled masses.... We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty."⁷ That same group is active today, re-named as the "new Poor People's Campaign." In 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement protested wealth disparity in Zuccotti Park with the rallying cry, "We are the 99 percent."⁸ They drew their swords in battle against "...banks, corporations, and the wealthiest 1 percent, whom they blamed for corrupting our democracy by buying elections to control the legislative process." This inspired a nation-wide movement, a nation-wide army inspired by a battalion of civilians.

Squid Game may be fiction, carrying a well-known message. It's on the nose. Mike Hale's review on *The New York Times* describes the show as "...a commentary on the rigid class stratification of South Korea, and a pretty obvious allegory."⁹ Yet, although it primarily serves as a critique on the wealth disparity and abuses within South Korea, is relatable to many Americans in a terrifying, familiar way—we can see our own situation on the other side of the globe, see our own dragons. And there's something attractive and addicting about familiarity: looking in a societal mirror and being validated that yes, sir, there *are* dragons, scales and all. *Squid Game* holds the hand mirror to your face so that you must look. And then look harder. Look longer. See the shoulders laid bare for plate armor, hands ready for sword and shield. And when the episode ends, the mirror fading to black, you find yourself asking: "Why did I stop fighting dragons? And how do I start again?"

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