The next big thing

Like knights questing for the Holy Grail or explorers searching for the lost city of El Dorado, the global formats community has spent years looking for The Next Big Thing. But as with the Grail and El Dorado, it's just possible that it may not exist any more. Andy Fry reports

FORMATS consultant Nathalie Wogue thinks The Next Big Thing has had its day. "The impression I get is that most companies no longer believe in The Next Big Thing," she says. "They are focusing their energies on creating relevant and engaging formats for clients, rather than finding the next Big Brother or Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?" This does not mean the formats
Nathalie Wogue: “Instead of one big show breaking through, we’re seeing many having success with different markets and audiences. It’s like having lots of ‘little big things’ at the same time”

This explains why leading format companies typically come to market with an array of titles that address distinct commercial and editorial needs. Sumi Connock, BBC Worldwide’s (BBCW) creative director of formats, for example, says her company’s portfolio covers everything from game-show reboots and factual-entertainment formats to feel-good entertainment franchises such as Strictly Come Dancing/Dancing With The Stars and Bake Off. Between them, BBC Worldwide shows can cover most schedules and time slots.

In terms of trends, Connock says there is a strong emphasis right now on shows that are “honest, authentic and uplifting”. She adds: “Part of the reason Strictly and Bake Off work well is because they are joyful shows that aren’t ruining the participants’ life ambitions. Audiences like the fact that no one is playing God.”

BBC Worldwide is enjoying success right now with a reboot of The Weakest Link and is also coming to market with an updated version of The Generation Game. This echoes the situation in the US, where revivals of classic FremantleMedia game shows such as Match Game have done great numbers for ABC.

Connock says the trend towards game-show revival is continuing “because the best shows are cost-effective at a time when channels are spending a lot on drama. The best ones have strong mechanics and can easily be refreshed with new talent.”

Banijay Group’s head of format acquisitions, Carlotta Rossi Spencer, agrees that today’s format market is characterised by parallel trends rather than one all-consuming megahit: “Increasingly you see clusters of titles. So in a genre like survival formats, you still have Survivor [or a Banijay title] going strong, but there’s also room for other titles in the genre, like A&E’s Alone. We also have a range of other survival/adventure formats, such as Fort Boyard and 71 Degrees North.”

Another dynamic cluster, according to Rossi Spencer, is “the whole area around observing couples at every stage of their relationship, from the moment they meet through to marriage and beyond”.

This action-packed space includes Banijay’s Temptation Island, ITV’s Love Island, Viacom International Media Networks’ Are You The One?, and Warner Bros’ fast-growing format First Dates. Classics like Banijay’s Wife Swap continue to do well, and there are also newcomers, such as all3media’s recently launched Wedding Day Winners and Keshet International’s Girlfi3nds. The latter, an Israeli format, has been reversioned in the UK for ITV2.

Relationship formats jostle up against a continued taste for socio-experiment shows. In this area, Red Arrow Studios International’s Married At First Sight has been one of the standout examples in the last couple of
years, but Rossi Spencer says her own company’s show, Undressed, has also caught the attention of buyers. In this show, two complete strangers undress each other in a darkened bedroom and are encouraged to accelerate the process of becoming intimate before deciding, at the end of 30 minutes, if they want to stay together. Deals for Undressed underline the point that formats can be successful within a tightly defined sector of the ever-expanding TV market.

To date, it has been picked up by several youth/lifestyle-skewing channels, including France’s NRJ 12, Australia’s SBS, Italy’s Nove and TLC in the UK, the Netherlands and Poland.

Arabelle Pouliot-Di Crescenzo, managing director of Kabo International, says her company’s response to the fragmented market has been to “start building a portfolio that includes all the main ‘food groups’ within formats”. She adds: “We have a strong game-show format, Who’s Who; some innovative technology-led formats, including the VR-based show Tilt; and a new social-experiment series called The Break-Up, which is originally from Newen in France.”

In The Break-Up, Pouliot-Di Crescenzo says the focus is on couples at the crossroads: “The show helps them decide whether the grass really is greener on the other side through the use of well-established therapy methods. It’s perfect for buyers looking for a well-constructed, insightful and emotional format.”

There is a lot of heat in this area right now, with Facebook’s Make Up Or Break Up and Twofour’s One Night With My Ex also navigating this terrain. But as Pouliot-Di Crescenzo points out, the fragmented nature of the TV market means it is not just subject matter but editorial voice that influences a buyer’s decision about a show: “There are so many niches that you get an unbelievable difference in tone between different channels. They all have their own demographic sweet spot and their own thresholds in terms of what is or isn’t shocking, which is partly where the need for so many different shows comes from.”

One interesting side effect of having so many dynamic editorial clusters sitting alongside each other is that the mechanics that work in one can be migrated into others. Red Arrow Studios International’s vice-president of non-scripted, Harry Gamsu, says his company has been looking at how the approach in Married At First Sight can be used in other scenarios.

“Married At First Sight is about trusting experts to make major life decisions for you,” he says. “We took that idea and created Blinded By Beauty, a property show in which experts take over the responsibility of buying the house, then a designer renovates it. Sales for the show to date include Nine Network Australia and RTL in the Netherlands.”

A similar link can be seen between Avalon’s hit format Taskmaster and the company’s new launch The Button, both created by Alex Horne and Andy Devonshire. In Taskmaster, five comedians compete against each other in a series of bizarre and thought-provoking challenges. In The Button, the action shifts to families. Here, a button is placed in people’s homes and, at random times, comes to life and challenges the family to undertake silly, spontaneous, timed tasks, such as wrapping someone up in toilet paper. The benefit of this set up is that it incorporates a snapshot of family-home dynamics.

Lineup Industries co-founder Julian Curtis has worked on a number of big formats in the course of his career, notably Deal Or No Deal while at Endemol and Dragon’s Den while at Sony Pictures Television. For Curtis, one of the biggest problems with setting out to create a global megahit is lack of time: “What a lot of people don’t recall about those shows is that it actually took a few years for them to win over broadcasters and build international momentum.”

Not only that, but it is not always obvious at the start which shows are going to be big, adds BBC Worldwide’s Connock. “First Dates, Gogglebox and Bake Off didn’t start that strongly in their first seasons,” she points out. “They needed support from broadcasters and nurturing by producers to develop into the hits they are now.”

Back at Lineup, Curtis has also identified factual entertainment and game shows as key oppor-
The company has been enjoying a lot of success with Emergency Call, an obs-doc format that has sold to Vox Germany, Seven Australia and C8 France, among others. Key game titles include Switch, a simple quiz-show format that was a hit in its home territory of Belgium and has just been licensed to Dutch public broadcaster AvroTros. “The game mechanic is simple; it’s inexpensive to produce and it lends itself to play-along via an app,” Curtis says. “But one thing that makes it stand out is that the same five contestants compete across the entire week, so it creates a deeper level of engagement between them, the host and the audience.”

While Switch is ideally suited for stripping across the week, Curtis says the other big trend within game shows is the push towards primetime shows with super-sized sets. The big winner in this area has been NBC’s The Wall, which has rolled out rapidly under the stewardship of Endemol Shine. “In our line-up, we have a show called Let The Games Begin, in which kids and celebrities compete against each other playing super-sized versions of famous board games in a studio,” Curtis adds. “It’s a concept I’d been talking to colleagues about for years and then we found this format in the ZDF archive. The kid/celebrity dynamic works really well and it’s also interesting to games manufacturers.”

Banijay’s Rossi Spencer agrees that the “big studio spectacular” is coming back. “We are enjoying a lot of success now with All Against One, an interactive studio-based entertainment show that pits one contestant against the entire nation. It launched successfully in Denmark and has been picked up by France 2.” At press time, Banijay was also acquiring the rights to classic German format Wetten, Dass.? (You Bet) and is in production on a version for Canale 5 Italy. The show was a huge success on Rai Uno in the 1990s and is now returning with a modern makeover for the free-to-air commercial channel.
Tim Crescenti, president of Small World IIT, has been one of the TV industry's great format spotters down the years. His view is that, while "it's certainly not a waste of time to look for The Next Big Thing, we've found that companies can also be successful with consistent strip shows and renewable formats". Crescenti echoes his peers when he says there has been a strong return to game shows. "Buyers are searching for their next successful dating game-show format," he adds. "And we've also received interest from a number of buyers looking for formats featuring older talent — especially channels aiming for a wider demographic. There's also demand for high technology, but it can be challenging to create a format structure around this."

**Old People's Home For 4 Year Olds (Red Arrow Studios International)**

Tim Crescenti:  
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Small World has successfully adapted a Korean show featuring older talent. Based on an original TV format called Grandpas Over Flowers, Better Late Than Never has now been sold into 16 countries, with more deals in the pipeline. "The show not only features major entertainment legends, but also talent in the older age range, which resonates with a wider ranging demographic," Crescenti adds. His point about older participants is by reinforced by a couple of other key developments. The first is Talpa Media's decision to launch The Voice Senior, a spin-off of its flagship talent show, and the rollout of its new format Around The World With 80-Year-Olds. This latter originally aired in the Netherlands on SBS6 before Talpa signed a deal with Chinese producer 3C Media to reversion it in China. There have also been deals closer to home in Belgium (Media- laan) and Germany (ZDF). Then there is the success of Red Arrow's Old People's Home For 4 Year Olds, in which elderly retirement-home residents are brought together with pre-schoolers to test if this inter-generational act can improve the health and wellbeing of the older people. Produced by CPI, the show was a hit for Channel 4 in the UK, and has since been picked up as a format by five territories, including France, Spain, the Netherlands, Australia and Sweden. In Gamsu's opinion, the show fits into the broader trend towards "emotional and life-affirming formats".

US studio Lionsgate has been best known for its scripted series until now. But it has made a concerted drive into formats in recent times, notably with Candy Crush, which launched on CBS in the US. Based on the popular mobile game, Candy Crush points to the trend for super-sized game shows referred to above. Jennifer O'Connell, Lionsgate's executive vice-president of alternative programming, says: "Big-name celebs continue to work in the unscripted world, from behind the scenes as executive producers like LeBron James to being featured on camera as hosts like Ellen DeGeneres [Game Of Games], Jamie Foxx [Beat Shazam] and Alex Baldwin [Match Game]. Talent like that sets the bar very high for new shows and has led to an expectation and big appetite to have A-list celebs attached to new shows from the buyers."

O'Connell also identifies the trend towards live content: "Live is the best way for viewers to connect. Since Live PD launched, several cable networks have been looking for their take on the space. But I also expect broadcast networks to look for live, feel-good shows that allow people to escape the relentless, negative news stories that have taken over our attention."

Like Curtis, O'Connell also stresses there is a lot of behind-the-scenes activity that goes into making a show successful: "It's important to come to buyers with the right package. Having A-list talent attached — in front of or behind the scenes — and the right producer with a plan to execute are key elements. Also, we almost always come to meetings with sizzle reels and pitch decks that illustrate the tone and vision of the project." Nonetheless, the above, there is still room for surprises in the new format multiverse. At the start of 2017, no one would have expected a new contender to emerge in the overcrowded talent-show market, but Armoza Formats has defied expectations with The Final Four, a show that starts out with four strong singers and invites challengers to try to displace them before the end of the series. By introducing this simple but ingenious twist to the genre, Armoza has secured sales for the show in the UK, the Nordics, Australia and, significantly, the US. In January 2018, Fox launched its own version of The Final Four as a counterweight to NBC's The Voice and ABC's Idol. Commenting on deal, Avi Armoza, CEO of Armoza Formats, says: "The Final Four is a new take on the singing competition genre, bringing all the most loved elements to the table. Any viewer who thinks they're good enough to challenge one of the finalists can do so through the app, involving the audience throughout the season. By putting a unique take on it, The Final Four has offered our industry a fresh and innovative spin on a popular genre."