

7



YEARS OF
PLAY

itv

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HELLO & WELCOME TO “70 YEARS OF...” YOUR POCKET-SIZED GUIDE TO 70 YEARS OF BRITISH CULTURAL CHANGE

This year marks 70 years of TV advertising in the UK and 70 years of ITV being on air. In order to celebrate this cultural landmark - ITV media will be taking advertisers on a journey through 70 years of British cultural change in order to better understand our ever changing present.

As part of this insight series each quarter (or so) we will be unearthing the cultural shifts in how we play, dine, spend and connect with one another. In order to help brands meaningfully connect with modern Britain.

AN EXPLORATION INTO HOW THE NATION PLAYS

In the first edition we will be taking you on a journey through 70 years of...Play

For this quarter's edition of “70 years of” we are exploring how the nation plays. We’ve utilised a blend of semiotics, analysis of 70 years of subtitle data, expert interviews and national data sets to unearth the interplay between how we play and cultural forces.

Why play?

By uncovering the forces shaping how we play, **brands** can **gain deep insight** into what’s driving the nation - what Brits are striving for, what skills we value and our attitudes towards one another. By tapping into the power of play brands can engage customers at a **deeper level** and **build brand loyalty**.

“CULTURE
ARISES AND
UNFOLDS IN
AND AS PLAY”

Johan Huizinga, Historian



For as long as there have been people living together, there have been games. Winning, competing and playing together has played a vital role in cultures since (according to historians) **6000 BC**. The games we play reflect and influence the society we live in revealing our deepest desires, the skills we value and how we relate to one another.

Games and game play might be a universal part of culture - but every culture does them differently. In the UK we have a particular affinity for games and game shows. With game shows being some of the first content broadcast on radio and TV. As a result we've focused our analysis on **game shows** and **competitive game play**.

"I THINK THAT BRITISH PEOPLE ARE DEEPLY COMPETITIVE. ALSO I THINK BRITISH PEOPLE HAVE A REALLY KEEN SENSE OF THE ABSURD. AND GAMES ARE THE PERFECT COMBINATION OF THE TWO."

Richard Osman



OUR SURVEY SAYS!

EXPLORING CULTURAL SHIFTS IN PLAY

In order to uncover the nation's changing relationship with play we analysed 70 years of classic game shows and adverts. Utilising semiotics, ITV's subtitle data and historic national data sets to track the trends and shifts in the way we play. We identified **three big cultural shifts** that show how what we play for and how we play has developed. These shifts also take into account how the state of the nation has shaped the changing nature of play: why we play and what it means to win.

1

THE ROLE OF PLAY IN BRITISH SOCIETY HAS CHANGED

In this section we're going to **explore the role of play** in society as it reflects what we value and how we cope. It's a lens on how we live our lives and how we manage the balance between work and leisure. Understanding the role of play helps us to understand how we feel towards society and what **success, competition** and **reward** looks like.

To understand the role of play in modern Britain let's start at the beginning...



50s - 60s

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Play has always had a role in British society but it has changed significantly since 1955. The **50s** and **60s** started out as a level playing field, we played for play's sake with pure intentions, there was a lack of competitiveness or reward for that matter. Leisure or playtime was respected and balanced alongside our responsibilities and priorities in life.

Mars's **“Work, Rest, Play”**, demonstrates this cultural differentiation between work and play very clearly. There was a time and place for both – from playground breaktimes to weekend afternoons outdoors. Rather than something to be squeezed in between shifts, it was an essential part of everyday life.

Our subtitle analysis of the early Coronation Street episodes tells us that mentions of **“play”** and **“playing”** peaked during the early 60s.

70s - 2000s

PLAY AGAINST THE MACHINE

By the **70s**, things started to change. An unstable economy led to play being seen as more of an outlet. It was a way to rebel against an increasingly unfair feeling system that only rewarded the grind and performance over playfulness. *Sure Men* took us to **“Stunt City”** where working men are seen disrupting their routines with stunts on the way into work as a means to break free from their routine. It was a statement that said life isn't complete without play in it – a pushback against corporate culture. The nature of our game shows reflected this shift too, with shows like **The Chase**, **Eggheads** and **Deal or No Deal** pitting David against Goliath.



2006

SURE MEN – STUNT CITY



2010s - 2020s

PLAY IS EVERYTHING AND NOTHING

Fast forwarding a decade or so, we're seeing play become intertwined with our livelihoods. It's becoming harder to tell where the fun stops and grind begins. Play was now part work, part hobby, part side-hustle. Game shows like **Great British Bake Off**, **The Glow Up** and **Pottery Throw Down** are just a few examples of the increasing focus on pastimes and hobbies as a form of competition. These gentler competitions focus on skills synonymous with hobbies and pastimes. It's reflective of the recent movement towards entrepreneurship and popularity of side hustles. In fact we've seen an increase of **197%** in the use of the word '**hustle**' between 2013 and 2020 on ITV's longest running soap, Coronation Street.

Play has constantly moved with society. Starting off as a holistic part of everyday life and turning into a way for us to express ourselves and kick back against '**the grind**' to becoming part of the everyday grind blurring with our worklives, chores and even education.

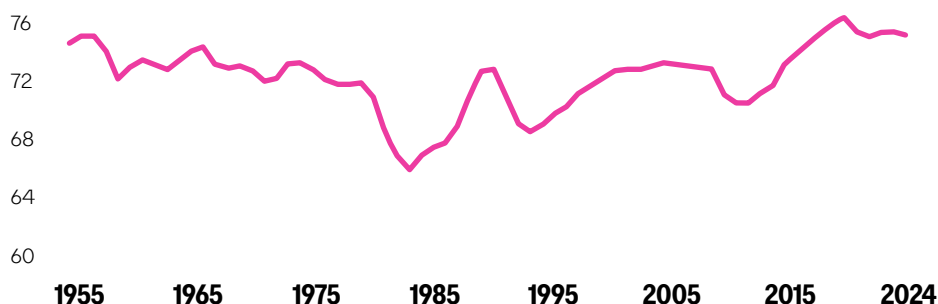


2

HOW COMPETITIVE WE GET DEPENDS ON THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY

How we play depends on our purses. Our research found that the state of the nation and social and economic factors significantly impact how we play, what we play for and what we win.

LEVELS OF EMPLOYMENT



50S - 60s POST-WAR SERENITY

The **50s** and **60s** were a time of relative economic stability, the rate of employment was in the high **70s** and compared to the turbulent war years - life was good. There wasn't a need for us to compete with one another as we lacked incentive. Play was about participation and having fun which is how it remained in harmony with the rest of our lives. Even when competition was introduced it was very low stakes and contestants never competed directly against each other. Playing **Double Your Money** could win you at most a modest £32, the rest of the reward was in your chance to be on live television. Gameshows could afford to prioritise entertainment over high pressure thrills, anticipation because people still played with pure intentions.

70s - 2000s INSTABILITY STRIKES

During the **late 70s** instability struck the economy sending ripples of uncertainty through to the **2000s**. The scarcity of the job market meant British society was a much more competitive place to be and therefore we were much more individualistic and less averse to risk in return for a win. Brits knew if they could stand out from the crowd they had a better chance of surviving financial hardship, with the use of the word **'best'** in **Coronation Street** spiking in the **1970s**.

As for play, it became about assessing real skills such as intellect, physical ability and specific knowledge. **The Krypton Factor**, assessed contestants on these unique skills as a way to determine who was special. With the economy slowing down, being seen as **'special'** was one of the few ways people could really stand out. Contestants would be graded with a so-called **"krypton factor"**, an assessment of their abilities that mirrored the growing pressure to measure up on-screen and in the public eye. It was a sign that play was becoming more about survival of the fittest and wittiest.



2010s EVERYONE'S A WINNER

After the **2008** credit crunch hit we leaned away from cutthroat competition. The mood shifted to something more supportive and participatory. This was a time in which everyone was the winner. Game shows like **The Great British Bake Off** removed monetary prizes altogether, instead rewarding effort, participation, and personality. Celebrities were brought on to bring the focus away from the competition back to entertainment. Fierce rivalries were replaced with entertaining challenges rooted in creativity and craft. There was less pressure on contestants to perform. One would think this was a return to pure play.

2020s BACK TO THE 70s

But the **2020s** marked a sharp pivot. The post-Covid job market downturn, coupled with rising economic pressures, reignited our appetite for high-stakes play. Since 2020, mentions of **"win"** and **"winning"** in **ITV gameshows** averaged to over 3 more mentions per episode, 5 more for **"money"**, while the use of the word **"play"** has declined by **24%**—revealing a cultural shift towards a more competitive playing field. We are once again craving the thrill of the chase. This revival is echoed in the return of beloved gameshows like **Gladiators** and **Wheel of Fortune**, tapping into nostalgia while reintroducing the intense, survival-style competition of decades past.

3

FROM WINNING STUFF TO STATUS

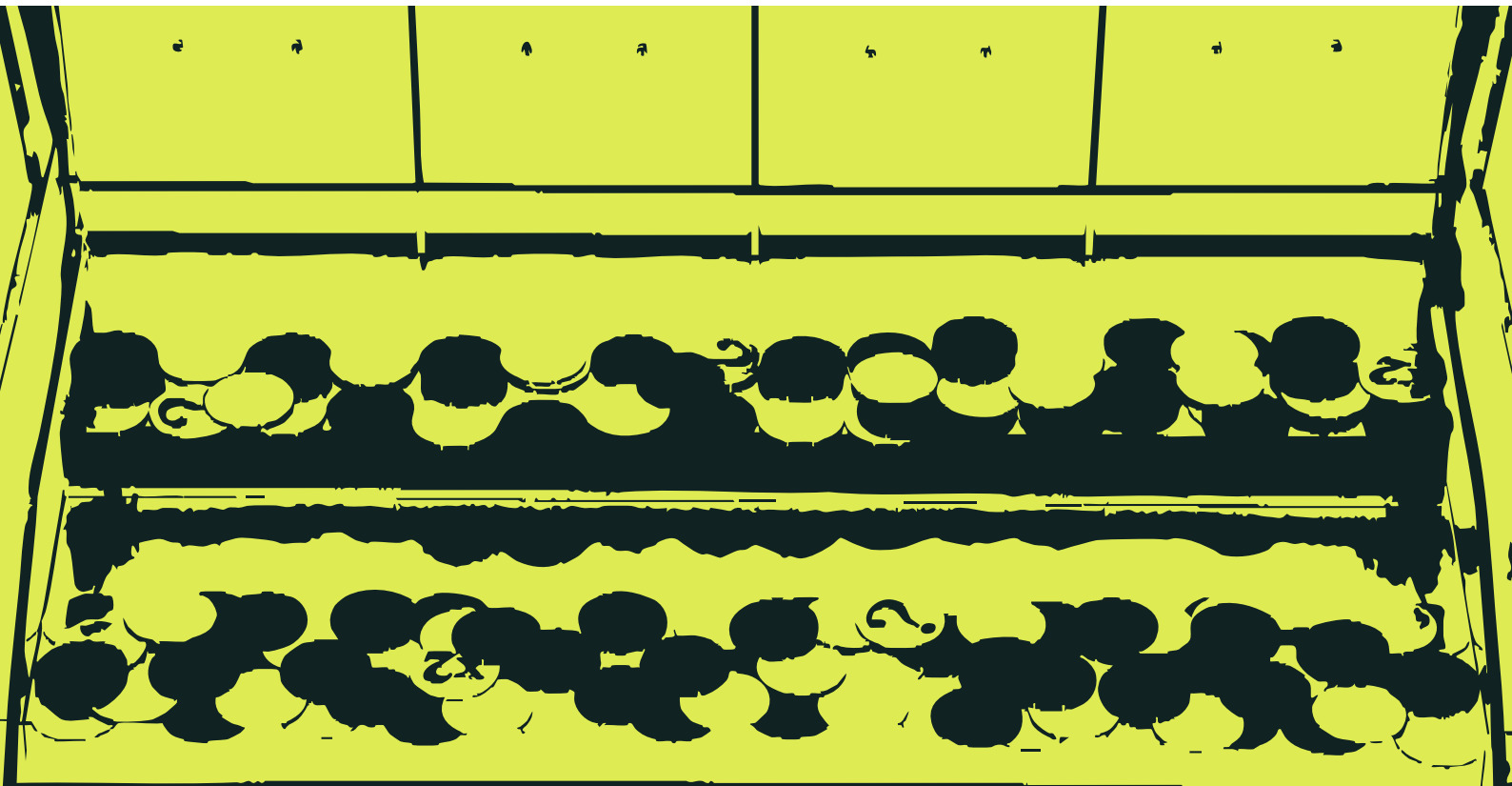
We've always needed something to play for, be it bragging rights or a bag of cash. But what we play for today has **changed significantly** since the days of winning a set of cutlery or state of the art fridge freezer.

50s - 80s

REAL SKILLS, REAL PRIZES

Game shows have been about testing your ability to perform under pressure - this often meant testing our minds or our bodies in new and challenging ways. Real skills were rewarded with real prizes however how and what we won is something which began to evolve over time. The **50s** to the **80s** saw a range of tangible rewards from fridge freezers, caravans and once in a lifetime holidays.

These prizes were markers of social status at the time, things that you were proud to show off to your neighbours. Gameshows like **Take Your Pick** which rewarded contestants' ability to recall general knowledge under scrutiny set the blueprint for modern quiz formats like **The Chase** and **Tipping Point**.



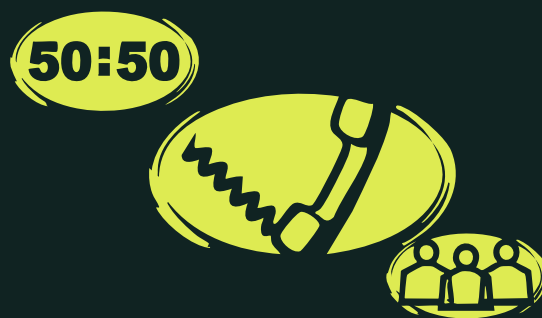
90s - 2000s

GOING TO EXTREMES

As the **millennium** approached, it was these very gameshows that raised the stakes.

Challenges became more extreme and so did the prizes.

Who wants to be a Millionaire was the first to break the million mark. Whilst shows like **Golden Balls** encouraged contestants to **Split or Steal** a life changing amount of prize money.



"I THINK WITH GAME SHOWS, WHAT YOU'RE SEARCHING FOR IS A QUESTION OR A MOMENT THAT HASN'T BEEN ASKED OF A CONTESTANT BEFORE.

YOU'RE PUSHING TO FIND A NEW SITUATION TO PUT PEOPLE IN ESSENTIALLY. IF THAT SITUATION FEELS DRAMATIC, EXCITING AND THRILLING AND SPARKS YOUR IMAGINATION AT HOME THEN YOU'RE ONTO SOMETHING."

Joe Mace

ITV Entertainment Commissioner



2010s - 2020s POWER, FAME & INFLUENCE

However, more recently we've seen a shift from shows focusing on skill, to shows rewarding contestants' ability to influence the decisions of others. Manipulation, deceit and influence became key components of a new breed of game show. **Genius Game**, **Fortune Hotel** and **The Traitors** and **Love Island** are part of a growing trend of shows that motivate you with the ability to get one over on your fellow contestants to command influence in the gameshow arena.

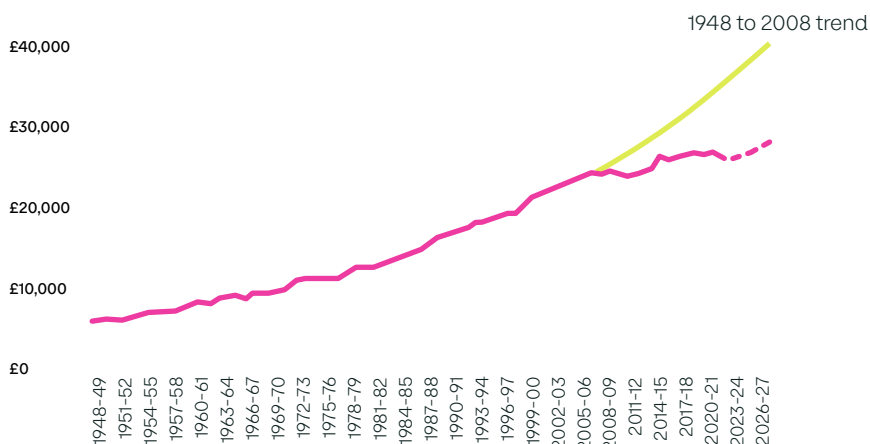


"WE DON'T TEND TO PSYCH PEOPLE UP WITH MONEY ANY MORE. THERE'S MORE EMPHASIS ON ACHIEVEMENT. THERE'S A REAL JOY FOR THE CONTESTANTS IN SIMPLY KNOWING THAT THEY'VE WON."

Tina Dixon

Media Academic in the Guardian

AVERAGE UK HOUSEHOLD INCOME PER YEAR



Source: IFS, 2023

This trend towards less tangible rewards like social status and influence is by design. Since the **mid 2000s** we have entered an era of income stagnation. Shows of this era demonstrate this shift in focus from immediate prizes to long term gains. In the case of **Love Island**, contestants have realised that the potential payoff was worth more than a romance or **£50k prize** for the winning couple, but rather it's the social capital and fame. Play today isn't just about winning or competing, it's about the recognition and the chance to shape how people perceive you.



PLAY THROUGH THE AGES

50s LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

In the **50s** we'd never had it so good, according to **Prime Minister Harold MacMillan**. Post war prosperity and economic stability generated a more convivial and less competitive environment compared to the following decades. This comfortable and relaxed attitude came to life through the first ever broadcast game shows **Take Your Pick** and **Double Your Money** (both broadcast on **ITV**).



1954

The end of **rationing** - it had been in place since the Second World War.

1955

Take Your Pick becoming the first game show to offer cash prizes, followed by **Double Your Money**.

60s ASPIRATIONAL SELF

In the **60s**, play became a showcase for personability and emotional intelligence.

Shows like **The Golden Shot** tested communication and teamwork as contestants guided a cameraman to fire a crossbow—all while keeping the mood fun and absurd. Play was still collaborative, and the joy came from participation as much as from prizes.



1960

Coronation Street launched and would run uninterrupted until the present day.

1967

The Golden Shot premieres on ITV and runs until **1975** - The show was broadcast live and used a crossbow attached to a TV camera, pioneering live and interactive game play.

70s CLASH OF THE CONTESTANTS

The **70s** marked a shift from playful collaboration to overt competition. As job security declined, gameshows like **The Krypton Factor** began testing intelligence and individuality, rewarding those who could stand out. Even adverts and kids' games like **Hungry Hippos** reflected this new hunger for dominance. Play became more serious and survival-focused.



1971

Decimalisation as the UK changes its currency - February 1971.

1975

"Stagflation" - negative growth and high inflation - hits the UK economy hard.

1977

The Krypton Factor premieres on **ITV** running until 1995. This marked a shift to tournament style game shows that pitted contestants directly against one another.

80s SELF OPTIMISATION

Thatcherism ushered in an age of self-optimisation and individualism. Play was about bettering yourself—creatively, socially, or romantically. Shows like *Blind Date* and *Family Fortunes* gamified relationships and public opinion, while ads like *Lego's Kipper* celebrated risk and reinvention. You weren't just competing—you were building the best version of yourself.



1980 - 1989

Deregulation - secured lending to households increased from 31.1% of household income in 1980 to 67.7% in 1989, while unsecured lending to individuals rose from 6.6% to 12.9%.

1980

A boom in game show commissioning with iconic game shows **Bullseye** (1982), **Family Fortunes** (1980), **You Bet!** (1988), **Blind Date** (1985), **Catchphrase** (1985) And **Wheel of Fortune** coming to define a new generation of game shows.

90s EXTREME THRILLS

The **90s** redefined Play as daring and dramatic. **Who Wants to Be a Millionaire** introduced life-changing money, but the thrill of the game outweighed the cash. Competition bled into daily life, as shows drew inspiration from the everyday. **Playstation's Double Life** captured a rebellious shift—Play became a form of self-expression, not just self-advancement.



1992

Pipex starts providing dial-up Internet access, becoming the **UK's first** public internet provider.

1998

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire becomes the first UK game show to offer a **£1 million** prize.

2000s POWER STRUGGLE

As play and work began to diverge, gameshows like **The Chase** and **The Cube** emphasised pressure, performance, and individual ability. The stakes were psychological as much as financial. Ads like **T-Mobile's Flash Mob** disrupted routine with surprise and spontaneity, reflecting a public torn between structure and freedom, work and play.



2003 - 2006

MySpace (2003), **Facebook** (2004) and **Twitter** (2006) begin the age of social media.

2008

The building society **Northern Rock** collapses, beginning the UK's exposure to the global financial crisis.

2009

The Chase airs on ITV.

2010s PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Play became a tool for self-growth and influence. From **Ninja Warrior** to **Bake Off**, gameshows tested diverse skills, rooted in craft, hobby and professions. The emergence of reality game shows like **Love Island** blurred lines between game and reality, and Play opened up to wider audiences. Campaigns like **This Girl Can** reminded us that Play should be for everyone.



2010

The UK governments' **austerity program** is announced and continues for the remainder of the decade.

2015

Ninja Warrior UK premieres on ITV.

2020s THE FAME GAME

In the **2020s**, play is everywhere, but it's not always fun. Shows like **Fortune Hotel** and **The Traitors** gamified social dynamics, where success meant winning influence, not prizes. With our lives filtered through screens, performance and perception have become the ultimate game...and everyone's playing.



2020

The **Covid-19 pandemic** sends the UK into lockdown.

2022

Inflation reaches a 41-year high of **11.1%** in October 2022 – sparking talk of a **cost of living crisis**.

2023

ITV revives iconic **80s** game shows **Wheel of Fortune**, **Deal or No Deal** and **You Bet!**



IS THAT YOUR FINAL ANSWER?

THE FUTURE OF PLAY

For advertisers, being able to understand how your consumers play, now and in years to come can offer a **powerful insight** into what drives them, how far they're willing to go and how they want to win.

As we look ahead, we've got a few thoughts on the new era we're entering and **what this means for brands...**

PLAY AS PRESSURE RELEASE

As budgets are stretched and over **1/3 of Brits** report feeling burnt out or suffering extreme levels of pressure and stress (YouGov 2025) play is playing an increasingly important role in our day to day as a form of pressure release.

We spoke about play becoming work and work becoming play - but with this blurring comes a need for distinct boundary drawing.

Brits have always had an appetite for gaming and as the world continues to change, the nature of play and the game we play is expanding and evolving. At **ITV** we've seen a growth in appetites for not just new but reworked formats with the launch of the **ITV Quiz channel reflecting this.**



“CLEARLY THIS COUNTRY LOVES A GOOD GAME. WE’VE GOT A VERY LONG ESTABLISHED CONNECTION TO QUIZ AND GAME SHOWS AND SO HAVING A WHOLE CHANNEL DEVOTED TO IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE.”

Joe Mace

ITV Entertainment Commissioner

SO WHAT?

Associating yourself with existing and newer gameshow formats is a great way to feed that appetite Brits have. **ITV Quiz** is our latest offering in gaming, a channel dedicated to quiz and gameshows and a playground for brands to align with beloved gameshow formats.

MICRO-WINS AND 'THAT WINNING FEELING'

We've seen now that play is about chasing after a sense of achievement - more than winning a tangible prize itself. For young adults in particular traditional markers of achievement (home ownership, new cars, promotions) feel out of reach. Instead they are chasing the high of achievement through '**micro wins**' - whether that be beating their personal best in the **5k**, learning a new language or winning at the pub quiz (ITV, What Unites Young Adults, 2023) For brands this presents an interesting opportunity to encourage that winning feeling and find alternative markers or **achievement** and '**wins**'.

SO WHAT?

One way to make your customers feel like winners is by aligning '**winning contexts**' to create those positive brand associations. **ITV's Automated Contextual targeting** tool allows advertisers to identify moments and themes across ITX shows making it easy to show up around those winning moments—**creating those positive associations with your brand**.

TV GAMING COMES TO LIFE

The next era of play is one that is more **immersive**, **accessible** and **participatory** than ever before. Audiences have always been playing along at home when watching their **favourite game shows** but the advent of apps as well as the integration between TV formats and multi-player gaming platforms have enabled them to test themselves even more. Audiences are no longer just viewers but they're players too.

SO WHAT?

At **ITV** we've invested in integrating our landmark formats into the metaverse - crash landing John Lewis into **Fornite's I'm A Celebrity Jungle** and bringing **Hells Kitchen** to life in the world of **Roblox**. MetaVision helps advertisers create interactive, immersive brand experiences—**bringing play into your brand's world**.





Need to phone a friend?

Fancy a bit more of a bespoke look into the world of **play** and **gaming?** – ping us an email if you want to know more, would like ITV to come and present our research or simply have a question...

• **A.** lucy.irving@itv.com

• **B.** mohamed.ahmed@itv.com

