

Why we don't need a CITV Old Skool channel

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Those of us lucky enough to be sentient (but too young to go to the pub) in the 80s and/or 90s will remember the days when 'prime time TV' was a daily occurrence and not a leap year slot for people who hate sport but love prizes (see 'World Cup', and 'Olympics').

Stuff was on when the TV Times said it was on, and if you missed it you would scan the pages desperately hoping for a repeat. Otherwise, you'd have to decide between going back to school not knowing whether Ross and Rachel were still together, or hari-kari.

To anyone whose TV viewing has only ever been arranged at a whim by the red button, I may as well be telling you that we stood to attention around the wireless every week for the national anthem, wearing our Sunday best. But this primitive time had its benefits; I'd be so much more punctual and organised today if we hadn't suddenly got cable when I was a teenager. That red button is nothing but a false sense of security. There is no 'catch-up menu' for life, yeah?

This ritual of curating your teatime viewing by switching between just a few terrestrial channels was such a part of childhood that I still can't eat a potato smile without getting a bit travel sick thinking about Aquila.

A CITV experiment that happened at the weekend now has Twitter begging for a permanent channel devoted to the kind of entertainment that makes Hole in the Wall look like Inception. For one whole weekend, and to mark its 30th birthday, ITV dedicated two solid days on its kids channel to retro programs.

It was called the Old Skool Weekend, and kids across the country were kicked off the sofa in an unprecedented pre-10am weekend waking-up of the nation's adults. It had been so long since we'd seen this stuff, and even then it was through such innocent eyes, that we had no idea exactly what we were in for. It was the closest thing to the childhood Christmas morning feeling that I've known since I started receiving lifestyle criticisms poorly disguised as 'practical' presents.

Before the advancement in production quality and the wealth of viewing options that have

become available during ITV's lifetime, we could all easily reel off a handful of starkly naff shows that were watched by an entire generation, a mere generation ago. And there they were in this weekend's listings: Fun House, Danger Mouse, Rosie and Jim, Button Moon, Art Attack, Sooty, Woof, Press Gang, Children's Ward, Count Duckula, Puddle Lane, Nightmare and more.

Just to make us feel really old, the 'retro' line-up also featured My Parents Are Aliens, a genuinely and knowingly funny series which ran from 1999 to 2006, and disconcertingly featured Dan Miller from The Thick of It in a lead role.

But Fun House was the one everybody really wanted to see. The priceless combination of Pat Sharp, the blonde cheerleading twins and a giant adventure playground is the stuff of dreams for kids and adults alike. I had a massive crush on Pat and modelled previous haircuts on his, but it never occurred to me to wonder whether he'd shagged the twins at the time. TV presenters didn't have genitals as far as we were concerned - we didn't even know they had nostrils until Richard Bacon. But looking for telltale signs of sexual tension between the co-presenters was a huge part of the appeal this time around.

Incredibly, the show ran from 1989 to 1999, and the two episodes chosen this weekend were from the 'passive aggressive' years, when Pat was well overdue an adult show. He'd ditched the mullet and t-shirts for curtains and a waistcoat, and had taken to jogging round the set calling small boys 'male chauvinists', shooting one-liners faster than the audience's little brains could process them, and making the Twins visibly nervous. It was brilliant TV, and a new adult remake hasn't been ruled out.

Finders Keepers was the one where children rifled through a life-sized replica house against the clock, looking for treasure, and trashing the place as they went; basically a training video for aspiring burglars. If this is remade, the kids should have to deal with the consequences of their actions at the end of every show when a family of four come back from their holidays, start screaming, and call the police claiming one of their house walls has been stolen.

Woof and Dramarama showed that mums in the 80s were ice queens, who had no time to listen to their kids talk about the daily problems of childhood, such as turning into a dog or owning a deadly magic mirror. But these women were nothing compared with The Worst Witch's PVC-clad Miss Hardbroom, who now makes a decent living as a dominatrix in the Westminster area.

I remember Nightmare looking shit even back in the day, despite claiming to have 'some of the most advanced computer graphics'; although this was a time when Birdseye could lay claim to 'some of the most advanced cuisine'. The only way Nightmare could claim to have stood the test of time would be as an early precursor for America's Next Top Model, with the main contestant wearing a minging and impractical item of clothing and being told how to walk by three squabbling know-it-alls, before having to justify his or her existence to an angry, giant-headed duck monster. It provided Twitter's favourite moment though, in a conversation

between an over enthusiastic actress a very awkward child: “My calling name is Gwen, three times you must call to bring me, and I will call you in the same manner. And what is your calling name?” “er, Barry”.

The real beauty of the Old Skool Weekend was the way it came alive through Twitter, with people adding their own hilarious running commentary. Pat Sharp might disagree; he bore the brunt of the hassle online because the stars of most other shows were either two dimensional, animal, or otherwise untweetable.

It was a joy to share the laughs, the fails, the previously unseen innuendos and the nostalgia, watching it all together just like we used to (only with more people on Twitter than your parents would ever have allowed you to invite for a sleepover). Together we realised that our ‘ordinary slippers’ were inferior when compared with the Unusual Unicorn Stompeez slippers that tempted us each ad break. Together we mocked know-it-all children from the past who are now probably in charge of the running of the nation. It was magical.

This is why I don’t think a whole channel devoted to retro kids TV would be a good idea. We can have too much of a good thing, and lose the sense of occasion this weekend gave us. But it was SO good that it would be a shame to think it might not happen again.

So, I propose a compromise: if CITV host an Old Skool Weekend once a month – perhaps the weekend before payday – we’d get a regular hit, save some money, and keep it just rare enough that the Twitter and Facebook chatter could continue to make it extra fun. Then maybe CBeebies could oblige with a bit of Bodger and Badger, Maid Marian and Her Merry Men, Aquila, Bananaman, the Demon Headmaster, Fingermouse, Grange Hill, Mysterious Cities of Gold, Pigeon Street, Byker Grove, the Raccoons, Going Live, Round the Twist, Superted...

