



Mr. Wizard: The Last Action Hero

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Topic: Blinded by Science

By Thomas Eldredge

One of humanity's greatest heroes died just over a year ago. On June 12, 2007, at the age of 89, Donald Herbert Kemske passed away. He spent over half his life giving nerdy kids something to look forward to after they got home from getting beat up after school. He was Mr. Wizard, and he taught us that science is all around us, especially in the kitchen.

Mr. Wizard taught children about science, but in doing so, he did an even greater good for humanity. He made vast sums of money for the entertainment industry. From 1951-1965, *Watch Mr. Wizard* aired on NBC and introduced the baby-boom generation to the All-American science teacher. He was intelligent, engaging, charismatic, and Canadian, and he was passionate about science.

In 1971, Canada found out that Mr. Wizard was Canadian and revived the show, but the show's Canadianness proved too confusing to audiences. Finally, in 1983, Nickelodeon aired *Mr. Wizard's World*. The show's seven seasons constitute an archive of cool and reasonably educational activities and experiments tailored for children. Before the internet, I'm not sure where else you could have found such a thing. Okay, the library, fine, but what if the library has snakes in it? Then what? Mr. Wizard, that's what.

Mr. Wizard was teaching me about science before I could even read. Mr. Wizard was the Dumbledore of science teachers, and I was his Harry Potter, or possibly Tom Riddle. He taught me a fundamental lesson about science and about life: You don't have to be a scientist to do science. Science can be performed at any time, on any ground, with anything, and to anyone. Science is mine and I get to play with it any time I want to.

Vinegar and baking soda make science. PVC pipes, compressed air, and potatoes make high-velocity mashed science that's fun for the whole family. Anything that breaks, becomes obsolete, or looks at me funny when I'm bored is liable to become science. Nothing is immune to science, at least not when I'm doing it.

Admittedly, I do not represent legitimate science in any way. I am an amateur, hack, or mad scientist, depending on what I've had for breakfast. I'm okay with that, because it means I am free to ignore the letters of the laws of science and obey them only in spirit. Of course, it also means no one will ever pay me to do science or let me anywhere near hazardous materials, professional labs, expensive equipment, or anything else I'd need to do actual science.

Actual scientists and actual engineers are only distantly related to prehistoric tinkers, inventors, kooks, and crackpots, none of whom knew what they were doing or had very good tools. I am a direct inheritor of this ancient tradition of innovation. Like these original innovators, I don't have very good tools, and I don't know what I'm doing. I think that makes me even more actual than actual scientists.

You may be asking: What makes you so great, Mr. Smarty McNon-Scientist? What have you ever done that's so special? Well, I've got nothing. I do take stuff apart, build stuff, read stuff, but mainly, I just talk about science a lot, so people think of me as a science person. Plus, I've got this column; it says "Science" right at the top. So if enough people think that I know more about science than you, I win. That's the scientific method.

Of course, Mr. Wizard taught a purer approach to science, but you can't believe everything you see on television. Interpretative disagreements aside, Mr. Wizard was a formative figure in my life and many others. In addition to empowering misguided loonies like me, he inspired a new generation of edutainment programming.

Beakman's World aired on TLC in 1992 but was soon picked up by CBS. This show allowed children to learn real science while maintaining their attention by simulating a televised acid trip. Paul Zaloom played a fictional mad scientist, Beakman, who was a cross between Einstein, Albert Hoffman, and Animal from the Muppets. Zaloom himself was not a scientist, but he was, in fact, an actor and puppeteer. Like me, Zaloom is now a political and social satirist, though unlike me, Zaloom teaches cantastoria at elite universities all over the world. Cantastoria is a word I had to look up, but apparently, it is pretty much the opposite of miming.

Bill Nye, the Science Guy originally aired on PBS during the same period and starred Bill Nye, who is an actual science guy with an actual degree in mechanical engineering from Cornell University. This show was not originally as well-rated as *Beakman's World*, but it enjoyed longer-lasting success and is still aired in syndication. Bill Nye never had quite the same flair as Beakman, but his show didn't have the budget for that much cocaine.

Today, the reigning kings of edutainment are the *MythBusters*, Adam Savage and Jamie Hyneman. This show is dedicated to busting urban myths using science, or a suitably appealing alternative. Savage and Hyneman are special-effects experts. They blow things up. The show generally takes some care to explain that it is, in fact, “science” that blows things up, but they make sure science has enough juice to get the job done.

MythBusters is the new inheritor of the edutainment market that was primed by Mr. Wizard. While Mr. Wizard used an entertainment medium as a forum for teaching science, *MythBusters* found out that science is even more entertaining when you remove the emphasis on teaching and replace it with explosives and projectiles. The success of this show is paving the way for even more gratuitous use of extreme forces in edutainment. The new hit show *Smash Lab*, which is pretty self-explanatory, is an attempt to bring NASCAR sensibilities to even the most NASA-minded individuals.

Mr. Wizard paved the way. He taught more science than any science teacher has ever taught in the history of science teachers or in the science of history teachers. That includes Mr. Murrell, my 7th-grade Earth science teacher, who totally rocked, and Mr. Martin, my 11th-grade history teacher, who I still want to be when I grow up. Without Mr. Wizard, there never would have been a Mr. Murrell or a Mr. Martin. Actually, that’s not true at all.

Even with all the science I act like I know, I wasn’t absolutely certain that the earth would keep revolving around the sun after Mr. Wizard died. I’m still not sure we’ll make it two years without him. So far, though, science is holding together pretty well. I think most of that is due to real teachers like Mr. Martin and Mr. Murrell who get up and go to work every morning and deal with snots like me all day. In truth, they deserve all the respect I give to Mr. Wizard in this article, but none of you know who Mr. Martin and Mr. Murrell are...unless you do, in which case you should give them a copy of this article so they will know how much they are appreciated.

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