

Simplified Speech #131 – Squid Game

Episode description

Squid Game on Netflix is a Korean show that has become extremely popular around the world. In this episode, Andrew and Kassy talk about the show, sharing their thoughts on the plot, story, and characters. If you liked Squid Game or are thinking about watching it, you shouldn't miss this Simplified Speech episode!

Simplified Speech episodes feature two native English speakers having clear, natural, and easy-to-understand conversations about interesting topics, like popular TV shows. This helps improve your English listening skills and, by listening, helps you speak English naturally.

Fun fact

The oversized doll from the first episode of the show is real. It now resides in Jincheon County, 3 hours north of Seoul, where it guards the entrance of a horse carriage museum called Macha Land. There is even a smaller, 10-foot replica in Manila, the capital of the Philippines.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Spoilers
- To be invested in [someone]
- Take the world by storm
- Zero-sum game
- Late-stage capitalism
- To have [one's] moment



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew.

Kassy: And I'm Kassy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

Hello, everyone. Welcome back to Culips. You're listening to Simplified Speech, which is the Culips series that features clear, natural, and easy-to-understand English conversations about interesting topics. And today I'm joined by my cohost, Kassy. Hey there, Kassy.

Kassy: Hey there, Andrew and hello, everyone. So, Andrew, what's up? How's it going?

Andrew: Well, Kassy, to be perfectly honest with you, I am feeling a little bit sleepy today.

Kassy: Ah, that's a bummer. Did you get a bad night of sleep last night or something?

Andrew: Well, not exactly that. But I stayed up late last night and marathoned the last few episodes of Squid Game. Kassy, did you watch this TV show, Squid Game?

Kassy: Yeah, it's so good. I actually stayed up late last week watching it.

Andrew: Well, then that's perfect, Kassy, because we got a message from one of our listeners from South Korea and his name is Steve, who left us a review and a five-star rating on Apple Podcasts. And in the review, Steve requested that we talk about Squid Game. And since we've both seen this show, and since it's a #1 hit around the world, it's the most popular series on Netflix at the time that we're recording this episode, Kassy, I thought we could talk about Squid Game here today.

Kassy: Cool. Yeah, let's do it. Sounds like an amazing topic. But before we start our conversation, Andrew, I want to let everyone know that there's a study guide and transcript for this episode. Guys, the study guide is available for all Culips members. It comes in either a PDF format that you can print off, or a mobile-friendly version for studying with your phone, tablet or computer. We make it to teach you about the difficult parts of our episodes and it's a fantastic tool for becoming better at English.

Andrew: Well said, Kassy. So, everyone, just visit our website, [Culips.com](https://www.culips.com), to sign up and become a Culips member so you can get the study guide and transcript for this episode.

So Kassy, let's get into it. Let's talk about Squid Game. And we'll try our best not to give any **spoilers** here, because I think maybe some of our listeners haven't seen this show yet and after hearing our conversation, they might want to check it out. So we'll try our best to have no **spoilers**. But, Kassy, I guess why don't we start by describing the show? How would you describe Squid Game? What kind of TV show is it?

Kassy: You know, that is a good question. You know, it's not dystopian, but it kind of feels like that at some points. It's hard to fit this into a genre. What would you describe it as, Andrew?

Andrew: It's hard to say in one word what kind of genre this show is. I think it's got elements of drama, elements of horror in it, elements of action in it. It's a little bit of a dystopian story. It's a little bit of a sci-fi story and adventure story, a mystery. It's a lot of things combined into one. Maybe that's why it's so popular. But I have to say it's a very unique show. I don't think I've seen any show on TV or Netflix ever before that told this kind of story.

Kassy: Yeah, I think one of the things I loved most about this series were the characters because, you know, a lot of these characters in the show weren't great people. They lived pretty terrible lives. They weren't good to their family members or society. But even though they weren't great, you were rooting for them throughout the show, you **were invested in them** doing well on this show. You were, you know, going through the ups and downs of what they experienced and, really, you know, rooting for the bad guy. It was weird.

Andrew: Yeah, I guess that's one of the things that the director and the production team and the writers did really well is they made you feel sympathetic to some of the characters who are actually not the greatest people, as you mentioned, Kassy. They had troubled backgrounds, to say the least. But maybe before we go into more of the details of the show, we should describe exactly the story of the show so that people know what we're talking about.

So this show, Squid Game, is actually a production of South Korea. But it's been **taking the world by storm**. And I even saw the cast of Squid Game on the Jimmy Fallon show, which is a popular American talk show. So it's popular worldwide. And I know many of my friends have asked me about the show as well, since I'm living here in South Korea, just like you are Kassy. So it's kind of cool that we can talk about a South Korean show that's really popular worldwide. But first, let's give this story synopsis. Without any further ado.

So the show is really about people who have made terrible financial decisions, or for some reason have gotten to a really difficult financial situation in their lives. And they're given an opportunity to get out of debt and to improve their financial situation by partaking in this survival game. It's like a **zero-sum game**, right? It's either, like, you win and you're the champion, or you lose and you die. It's like this very primal game. And to play the game, the contestants who agree to play are drugged and blindfolded and taken to a secret island. And they have to live on this island, in a kind of dormitory facility with all of the other contestants. And the game is operated by these mysterious characters who are wearing masks and uniforms. And they have machines that change the sound of their voice, so you don't really know who they are.

And, yeah, throughout the course of the show, we see these characters competing with each other to try and win the grand prize money, which is millions and millions of dollars. It's a huge prize. But in order to win that money, they have to compete against each other. And, like I said, the cost of losing one of the competitions is death. So you see these characters battling throughout these different contests and games that they have to do. And also, at the same time, we're trying to figure out who is running this game and what is the background story between the organizers of this crazy death game and what exactly is going on. So I think it's that kind of story. Kassy, did I miss anything in my summary? Is there anything you'd like to add to the synopsis of the show?

Kassy: No, I think you did an excellent job. Although that synopsis is already amazing, there are also lots of other side characters and twists and turns along the way that make the show even more exciting on top of that already unique synopsis that Andrew just gave.

Andrew: Yes, because, of course, all of the contestants that are participating in the game, they have, you know, friends and family back home. And we learn about their background stories, how they got into debt or the financial situation that they're in, why they want to win, what their motivations are. So it's really interesting from that perspective. And I can't remember off the top of my head, Kassy, but wasn't it something like 457? Or 456? Maybe is the number of participants in this game?

Kassy: Yeah, 450- or 60-something. I don't remember exactly. We should, since the main character was the last number.

Andrew: Yeah, so in the show, all of the contestants that play the game, they're given a green tracksuit to wear. And on their tracksuit, they have the number which represents when they entered the game. So player #1, he is the first person to start, to agree to play the game. And one of the main characters is the last person to enter the game. And I think, Kassy, if I remember, he is 456. I believe it was 456 on his tracksuit. So there's many, many, many people battling against each other to win the main prize.

Kassy: One thing I thought was really cool about this show, and maybe why viewers around the world like it, is because it kind of represents **late-stage capitalism**, which I think a lot of countries are experiencing now, especially with COVID kind of damaging the economy and then with, you know, the debt crisis is increasing, not just in Korea, but the US and other first-world countries. And the things that happen in this drama seems crazy, but they also seem believable. Like, wow, you know, this could really happen in real life and that's terrifying.

Andrew: Yeah, it is terrifying. And I agree, I think that is a big part of what made the show so relatable to many viewers around the world, especially income inequality, which is the word that we use to describe the phenomena of rich people getting richer and poor people having less buying power with their money. And we're seeing this income inequality happen in many developed countries around the world. So I think a lot of people could grab on to that, and sort of maybe, in a terrible way, kind of almost imagine themselves in that situation and be like, I don't think I would be too different than these characters that are playing the game in this show. And like you said, that's frightening. But I think that's why a lot of people connected with it. They could relate to it in some weird way.

Kassy: Yeah, another thing that I thought was really cool about the show was the cinematics. The background of this show is full of really cute pastel colours. And it looks very innocent and charming. But the whole show is very gruesome and bloody and vicious. So you have this cute background with this horrible things going on within it, which is just so weird to think about in your brain.

Andrew: Yeah, the contrast between the content of the games and the sets and the colours that the director used to tell the story, and the costumes and all of the visual elements. It's a really big contrast, right? And that was one of the things that I loved about the show as well, was just how colourful and beautiful and vivid the show looks. It's really quite stunning visually.

OK, so Kassy, we both live in Korea, and we study the Korean language. I watched the show in Korean. I'm wondering, did you watch it in Korean or did you switch to the English dubbed version?

Kassy: I cannot watch anything dubbed. I think it looks really weird. I did watch with English subtitles because I don't like to miss anything. So I'm usually listening to most of the Korean, but also reading the English just in case.

Andrew: I watched with Korean audio and Korean subtitles. And I actually watched the audio description version, which is an amazing feature of Netflix, where for some Netflix shows, they'll have a narrator that actually describes everything that's happening in every scene. It's intended for people who have visual disabilities and can't see the screen. So it's almost like somebody is telling them what's happening on the screen. It just so happens to benefit me as a language learner that that is a really great feature to have somebody describe everything that's happening on the screen at the same time. So I watched it that way. And what I didn't realize until I finished the show is that there are actually quite a few English speakers on the show, because that part of the show was dubbed over into Korean.

Kassy: Oh really?

Andrew: Yeah, so I didn't know there were English speakers on the show until today, and I was reading some reviews of Squid Game online and people were praising it and saying it's like an original show. It's very addictive. It's very fun to watch. But the English reviews that I read, in them many people criticized the acting and the script for the English parts. So I can't comment on this because I missed that. I'll have to go back and watch it, Kassy, but what are your opinions for the actors who spoke English and the lines that they said? Because they had actually a pretty big role, to be honest.

Kassy: Honestly, all I can say is episode 7. Episode 7 was where the English speakers really **had their moment** and they were just horrible, horrible human beings. The script wasn't exactly natural sounding for a Korean show. I'm gonna say it was pretty good. I don't know if you've watched any other Korean dramas with English speakers as a, you know, guest appearance, but the acting is usually awful. This one, I mean I cringed a little, but I felt like the actors they picked were not bad. But because they were such horrible human beings, the lines they had to say were not fun to listen to.

Andrew: OK, yeah, so maybe I can kind of imagine from watching other Korean TV shows, I kind of think I know what I would expect from those characters, but I'm gonna have to go back and check that part out.

But, Kassy, we should wrap things up here. Before we do, though, I have to ask you: if you had to give the show a score out of 10 points, what would your review be? How many points would you give it?

Kassy: It hooked me from beginning to end. It was really great cinematically, it was a cool story. It concluded itself but left the possibility open for a second season. I think I would give it a solid, maybe, 8.5 or 9.

Andrew: 8.5 to 9, very cool. I think I would give it an 8. That was my initial reaction. It was one of the first shows in years that I've actually stayed up late at night to watch and I binged it. I watched many episodes, one after another after another. I'm also a really big fan of the main actor in the show. His name is Lee Jung-jae. So it was cool to see him, as well. So, yeah, solid 8-point review. And I would recommend it to any of our listeners who maybe want to get an introduction to Korean television. If you don't want to break your English immersion, listeners, and I know that we're an English podcast and it's kind of weird for us to recommend a TV show that's in the Korean language, not the English language, but there is the option for the English dubbing. Kassy, I know you said that that's not too pleasant to watch. But if anybody wants to watch the show, but doesn't want to break their English immersion, then you can watch it dubbed. That's an option for you.

Kassy: Yes, totally agree with Andrew, but even if you watch the Korean language with English subtitles, I think it's still totally worth it. You should check it out.

Andrew: Well, we'll wrap it up here, that was really fun to talk about Squid Game with you, Kassy. And thank you again to our listener Steve, who suggested this topic.

If you enjoy listening to Culips and find us helpful for improving your English skills, then we would love it if you could support us. And there are many different ways that you can do that, such as signing up to become a Culips member on our website, Culips.com, following us on social media, telling your friends who are learning English to check Culips out, or by leaving us a five-star rating and a nice review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

If you have any questions or comments for us, you can reach us by email. Our address is contact@Culips.com. That brings us to the end for today but don't worry, we'll be back soon with a brand-new episode and we will talk to you then. Take care, everyone, and goodbye.

Kassy: See ya.

Detailed Explanations

Spoilers

Noun

Spoilers are details about a book, movie, or show that would ruin the suspense for someone who hasn't read or seen it yet. The details could be about anything that's supposed to be a surprise: the plot, new characters, background details, etc. If the details would spoil someone's enjoyment of the book, movie, or show, they're **spoilers**.

Spoiler alerts often appear at the start of content that discusses a book, movie, or show, to warn people that they might find out some details that could ruin the suspense. For example, at the beginning of this episode, Andrew says, "We'll try our best not to give any **spoilers** here." While Andrew and Kassy don't want to spoil the show for anyone who hasn't seen it, they still warned that it might happen!

Here are a couple more examples with **spoilers**:

Bethany: No! Why?

Lucas: What's wrong?

Bethany: I was watching a music video and when it was done the next video played automatically ... And the first 5 seconds were **spoilers** for the movie we're seeing on the weekend!

Lucas: No! Don't tell me what they were! I'm sorry you know, but I don't want to know!!

Bethany: Why can't these video makers wait at least a month before they make videos with so many **spoilers**?

Ryuuji: Hey, I've got feedback for your article.

Tu: Great! I'm ready. Please share your thoughts.

Ryuuji: Well, it's a good article, well structured and clearly written. My one big suggestion is to put a note at the top of the article saying that the review contains a few **spoilers**. That way, people who haven't read the book but are going to know that they should come back later.

Tu: Oh! Right, I never thought of that. OK, I'll add that note. Thank you!

To be invested in [someone]

Expression

To be invested in [someone] means to care a lot about them. You put a lot of time, energy, and emotion into following their journey and you want them to succeed. This is an emotional investment, not a financial investment. When you're **invested in someone**, you feel happy when they succeed, and it hits your emotions hard when they fail. You could also say you're cheering for them or rooting for them.

In this episode, Kassy says that, even though the characters in Squid Game “weren’t great, you were rooting for them throughout the show, you **were invested in them** doing well on this show.”

Here are a couple more examples with **to be invested in [someone]**:

Chao: Thanks for having today’s study session at your place.

Jonathan: Not a problem! I’m happy to have everyone here.

Chao: Oh, whoa. You have a lot of, er, interesting posters.

Jonathan: Huh? Oh, yeah. I’m a huge fan of this character. I’ve got all the comic books and can’t wait for the movie to come out!

Chao: Yeah, I can tell you’re really **invested in him**, aren’t you? What will you do if the movie is terrible?

Jonathan: I’ll probably be really mad, then go back and reread the comic books.

Gethin: Have you heard the latest gossip about Tom Holland?

Ellis: What? No! What happened? Please don’t tell me he’s in trouble. Whoever says he’s in trouble is lying. That cute boy is an angel and would never do anything wrong.

Gethin: Whoa. I probably don’t know anything you don’t, judging by how **invested in Tom Holland** you are.

Ellis: Oh no, no. You have to tell me what you know now, or I’ll be so upset all afternoon!

Take the world by storm

Idiom

Take the world by storm means to quickly become highly successful or popular. When something or someone **takes the world by storm**, they've made a huge impact in their industry.

In this episode, Andrew says, "So this show, Squid Game, is actually a production of South Korea. But it's been **taking the world by storm**." This is true in two ways. First, Squid Game has become extremely popular very quickly. Second, some say it's changing how Netflix's English-speaking audience thinks about shows and films in other languages. Other Korean shows may become more popular now because of Squid Game. It has had an impact on the industry.

You can also use this idiom for specific places or groups. If you replace "the world" with a group or place, it means someone or something is gaining popularity in that group or area. For example if you say, "A new play is **taking New York City by storm**," you mean that the play is quickly becoming popular in New York City (but not anywhere else).

Here are a couple more examples with **take the world by storm**:

Akira: So, we're doing our presentation on jazz. Do you know anything about jazz?

Sang-Hun: Right, I love jazz, so I know a little bit. Where do you want to start?

Akira: The beginning? When did it, like, become popular or whatever?

Sang-Hun: Well, jazz **took London and Paris by storm** in the 1920s.

Akira: Nope, that's too far back. How about we do our project on the different types of modern jazz?

Jodie: So, that was my idea for a new business. What do you think?

William: I think it's really great and different! I think you'll be the first to do anything like this.

Jodie: Really? You think so? That's great!

William: Oh, yeah. You follow the plan you've got, and I think you'll be **taking the world by storm** in 2, maybe 4 years.

Jodie: Yes, that's my plan! Excellent. I'll start working on the next step!

Zero-sum game

Noun

Zero-sum game is a situation where, when one person or group wins, another person or groups loses the exact same amount. The winner can only win something by causing the others to lose it. If there is a winner and a loser—as in most games or contests such as tennis, chess, arm wrestling, or dominoes—it is a **zero-sum game**. **Zero-sum games** can have just two participants, or they can have millions of participants.

Zero-sum game is a term in game theory and economic theory. It is named “zero-sum” because, when you take the amount won and subtract the amount lost, the answer is zero. It is a mathematical representation of a situation.

Take Squid Game. Each player is worth a set amount of money: X. There were 456 players, each with a value of X. At the start, the game’s total value is X added together 456 times. When a player loses, their X is placed in a pot. When there is only one person left, he or she is the winner and gets the pot. In that pot, the total winnings are equal to the sum of every other player’s losses (so X added together 456 times). When you subtract the amount won from the amount lost, the answer is zero. So it is a **zero-sum game**.

Here are a couple more examples with **zero-sum game**:

Gloria: All right, we have to sit down and get this budget done.

Daniel: Ugh. My least favourite activity.

Gloria: I know, I know. But look, making a budget might feel like a **zero-sum game**, but it’s not! When we make a budget, we’re making sure we can save money. And then at the end of the year we can go on a trip!

Daniel: I do want to go on a trip. OK, let’s budget.

Hikaru: Look, I’m just saying that we need to put more focus on getting people to visit the older studios in town, as well as the new, trendy ones.

Shota: I know, I know. But I can’t think of any good reasons to do so. Either way, one artist group is losing money while the other is making all of it.

Hikaru: It does feel a bit like a **zero-sum game**, doesn’t it?

Shota: Yeah, only it’s not fun, at all.

Late-stage capitalism

Phrase

Late-stage capitalism is the viewpoint that profit and money are more important than people's well-being. In the United States and Canada, the phrase is a criticism of the current capitalist society. At the same time, it expresses that this type of culture cannot last long. **Late-stage capitalism** also refers to all the problems created when businesses get too big and have too much power in society.

These problems include growing income inequality. This is where the poorest people in society earn significantly less than the richest, and corporations make it harder for new businesses to develop. Additional problems include an increase in discrimination, prejudice, and crises, and a poorer quality of life.

In this episode, Kassy explains how Squid Game represents **late-stage capitalism**. "I think a lot of countries are experiencing now, especially with COVID kind of damaging the economy and then with, you know, the debt crisis is increasing, not just in Korea, but the US and other first-world countries. And the things that happen in this drama seems crazy, but they also seem believable. Like, wow, you know, this could really happen in real life and that's terrifying."

Here is one more example with **late-stage capitalism**:

Katashi: I'm so mad about the new commercial from that beer brand.

Shion: Oh, are you talking about the commercial where they talk about donating all their recycling goods or something?

Katashi: Yes! That's the one! It's so frustrating, because they could have just used the money they spent making the video to donate THAT to charity.

Shion: I totally agree. I guess they think they're getting attention with this type of commercial. But really, all they're doing is showing that we're finally in **late-stage capitalism**.

Katashi: Definitely. Maybe next year they'll learn and just donate the cost of the commercial to whatever charity they're partnered with now.

To have [one's] moment

Idiom

To have [one's] moment means to have the chance to show off one's skills or abilities while everyone watches. When you **have your moment**, you succeed at what you're doing, and everyone is paying attention. In this episode, Kassy says, "Episode 7 was where the English speakers really **had their moment** and they were just horrible, horrible human beings." The English speakers were the focus of every scene they were in. They were particularly good at what they were doing, which was being horrible people.

To have [one's] moment is a shortened version of **it's [one's] moment to shine** or **it's [one's] time to shine**." Note, though, that if you **have your moments** (with "moments" being plural), the meaning is slightly different. It means that you have times when you're successful or worthy of praise, but usually you're average or worse.

Here are a couple more examples with **to have [one's] moment**:

Noboru: I saw you at the play last night! What did you think? I really enjoyed it.

Kayleigh: Me too! It was so entertaining. And knowing one of the actors on the stage was so great!

Noboru: I know, right? And Jacob had a solo and everything! He did so well.

Kayleigh: He was fantastic. I'm so happy **he finally had his moment**. He's been working so hard on his lines and hitting the right cues.

Chika: Are you ready for our game tomorrow?

Jackson: No. The coach just told me I'll be the goalkeeper for the first half. I'm so nervous!

Chika: Yay! It's about time **you got your moment**. You've been practicing so hard—you're going to do so well.

Jackson: Ha, thanks. I'm glad one of us is confident in my abilities! I'm not going to sleep tonight, I'll be so nervous.

Chika: Yikes. That nervous, huh? Well, drink some nighttime tea and do a little meditation. That always helps me settle down when I'm nervous.

Quiz

- 1. Which of the following is a situation where the amount someone wins is equal to the amount their opponent loses?**
 - a) zero-sun gain
 - b) zero-sum game
 - c) zero-some gain
 - d) zeros-one game

- 2. If you have your moment, that means you _____.**
 - a) have good qualities that balance the bad
 - b) have not been paying attention for some time
 - c) are making mistakes in front of an audience
 - d) are showing off your skills in front of an audience

- 3. When someone tells you details about a movie you're about to watch for the first time, what are those details called?**
 - a) sparklers
 - b) sponsors
 - c) spoilers
 - d) spoolers

- 4. If your friend is very invested in their favourite character, that means they:**
 - a) care a lot about that character
 - b) don't care at all about the character
 - c) paid someone money to create the character
 - d) spent a lot of time creating that character

- 5. Which of the following is a way to say Susan became popular very quickly?**
 - a) Susan took the world by storm
 - b) Susan is a world-wide storm
 - c) Susan is storming the world
 - d) Susan Storm is taking the world

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. What are some spoilers you've read or seen recently? Were you annoyed that you saw these spoilers?
2. What is something you think is taking the world by storm and why do you think it is so popular?
3. Were you ever invested in a character or person? Who was it and why?
4. Did the person or character you mentioned above ever get to have their moment? If so, describe what happened. If not, why hasn't it happened yet?
5. Have you ever played a zero-sum game or been in a situation that could be called a zero-sum game? What happened?

Quiz Answers

1.b 2.d 3.c 4.a 5.a

Episode credits

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