

4-4-2015

'Valar Dohaeris': Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones

Rebecca L. Willoughby
Susquehanna University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarlycommons.susqu.edu/comm_fac_pubs



Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Willoughby, R. L. (Presenter & Author). Popular Culture Association of America Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA, "'Valar Dohaeris': Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones," (April 4, 2015).

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communications Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact sieczkiewicz@susqu.edu.

'Valar Dohaeris': Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones

More than fifty over five complete seasons. Five books, thousands of pages. Seven kingdoms, seven hells, one Lord of Light, and one true king, and upwards of two hundred characters! Describing the *Game of Thrones* series as “epic” is an understatement.

If you haven't read George R. R. Martin's series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, or if you haven't seen the very successful and critically acclaimed HBO television series, you may not know that each episode of *Game of Thrones*, like those novels, is comprised of a series of vignettes that focus on a particular character, charting each individual's narrative journey in short bursts. While serialized, character-based storytelling is far from new, the epic scale of *Game of Thrones* balloons this method to new levels. The series comes to follow over thirty major characters and include over two hundred minor characters over the five seasons and five books...which are soon to be six and seven books, and who knows how many additional viewing seasons.

While the television program's creators, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, should be lauded for their attention to maintaining Martin's written narrative style in a genre that has seen its share of paltry screen adaptations, the program's storytelling, like the novels, fragments character and plot development. By the time viewers are midway through Season 1, which focuses mainly on the Stark family, there are already too many major characters to get “everyone” into a single, one-hour episode, and this practice continues (and snowballs) as the show progresses and more characters and complexities are added to the narrative.

What are the effects of these fragmentary narrative characteristics for viewers, and what might their purpose be? It's clear that the series strives to emphasize the inter-connectivity of these

various storylines, but the show's expectations are high for viewers attempting to keep up with all of the characters, the various locations, and a wide array of peoples, customs, languages, religions, and cultures. The use of what are called **viewpoint characters** in the novels and in the television series is essentially a lesson in parallel editing, creating a style of storytelling that may be ingenious, but is also exploitative. The series (both the novels and the television adaptation) potentially hooks viewers with its progressive use of genre conventions, but then slows down the narrative, withholding development. To assuage frustration with this practice, and to augment the admitted complexities of the *Game of Thrones* world, readers and viewers are encouraged to use and consume supplemental, and sometimes trans-media para-text, leading to levels of merchandising and advertising that are nearly unprecedented.

Before exploring the fragmentation that the *Game of Thrones* franchise employs to stall and entrap its audience, I'd like to spend a few moments sketching out the organizational assistance viewers get from the format of the series, both in print and on screen, and its effects on viewer engagement. These structures underpin the hyper-textual world I'll discuss later. I'll also warn that the following will contain some spoilers!

Many news outlets have noted that the popularity of *Game of Thrones* series has somewhat redeemed the stereotype of the rabid but perhaps reclusive fantasy-obsessed fan by presenting a highly complex, multifaceted narrative without clear "heroes" and "villains" that a broad swath of the viewing public can latch onto. More progressive than the clear-cut moral values of a series like *Lord of the Rings*, or even *Star Wars*, with which *Game of Thrones* might share the "epic" designation, Martin's world is a somewhat more realistic fantasy narrative where (as in life) it's sometimes pretty impossible to tell who is going to do what next. "Part of the appeal [of the books],"

Rebecca L. Willoughby
Susquehanna University
Popular Culture Association National Conference, 2015
Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones

says essayist Andrew Zimmerman, “is that the characters are complex and multifaceted, with flaws and virtues constantly in conflict” (Andrew Zimmerman Jones, “Of Direwolves and Gods,” in Lowder, 119). *Game of Thrones* appears more self-conscious about its own complexity and ambiguity than these other fantasy models. The series bucks more traditional fantasy trends by its willingness to kill off main characters, for one thing. In Season One, viewers spend most of their time with the Stark clan, getting to know them intimately as patriarch and Lord of Winterfell. Eddard Stark is promoted to the status of Hand of the King. The viewer’s investment in this particular character is also increased by casting a high-profile actor like Sean Bean in the role of Ned, and featuring him on the Season One promotional material, seated on the Iron Throne. Clearly he’s the good guy, and a potential “franchise player,” and yet—he’s beheaded in the ninth episode! We know the inter-webs lit up just after this event, as well as many other events such as the Red Wedding or the Battle for Blackwater Bay, events that undermine more conservative genre expectations. These moments and episodes are especially traumatic for those viewers of the series who have not read the books and therefore base their expectations on familiarity with conventional genre signposts alone.

The structure and production value of the GoT world also assists with comprehension and engagement. The show utilizes a talented, international ensemble cast charged with bringing the viewpoint characters from the novels to life in such a way as to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population of the Seven Kingdoms. Peter Dinklage, for one, has won several awards for his portrayal of Tyrion Lannister. Each of these actors has a substantial task: to be indelible within the rich tapestry of the show’s various characters, to encourage identification (or to possibly become ‘most hated’) in order to be memorable and distinct from others. Viewers become enrapt with individuals as well as dynasties.

Rebecca L. Willoughby
Susquehanna University
Popular Culture Association National Conference, 2015
Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones

Even costume and appearance lend themselves to differentiating between the Tullys and the Targaryans, the Lannisters and the Starks. And, the families, dynasties, and regions that fill the narrative provide additional supplemental fodder for transmedia information sources. In *The World of Ice and Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and the Game of Thrones* (penned by Martin, along with Elio M. Garcia Jr. and Linda Antonsson), a viewer of the show or reader of the novels can enrich their understanding of the epochs that come before the historical period we see in *Game of Thrones*, learning more detailed information about all the Targaryen kings, the Lords of the North, and each of the Seven Kingdoms. Of course this impulse may arise out of a particular affinity for one character, family, or ancient house, but this desire is satisfied by these additional resources.

Finally, each location within the Seven Kingdoms—identified at the outset of each episode in its innovative opening sequences—is also unique and distinct. Qarth does not look like the Iron Islands, Castle Black bears no resemblance to the Vale. Filming locations as various as Northern Ireland, Croatia, and Morocco add to each region’s visual authenticity, maintaining a clear delineation between settings.

In addition to this surfeit of visual and narrative cues the structure of the series provides, tools for assisting with the enormous task of plunging into the world of *Game of Thrones* exist: the Game of Thrones Wiki; message boards; online news outlet synopses; supplemental physical texts such as *The World of Ice and Fire* (a hefty tome), and *Game of Thrones* “for dummies”-style guides recapping each season. For those wishing to truly immerse themselves into Martin’s creation, these trans-media resources, existing in print and online, become somewhat essential for “keeping straight” the epic scale of a series like *Game of Thrones*. And while they are common enough in today’s media-driven world, the GoT franchise benefits from these tertiary supplements in interesting ways.

Yet the style of the storytelling could be said to complicate these efforts: by repeatedly turning away from the storyline of one character in favor of showing what's happening with another (and due in part to the number of personalities populating each episode), whole episodes may elapse before a viewer sees their "champion" again. Fragmentary storytelling gives the effect of advancing several storylines (somewhat) simultaneously, but gives viewers repeated pauses in a single one. Have a personal investment in Arya Stark? She may be absent from one or more episodes. Can't wait to see if Joffrey dies? You may just have to wait a while. The narrative deliberately withholds the progression of each character's journey until some others have also been (partially) explored.

This persistent fragmenting of story, rather than discouraging viewers and potentially leading to their abandonment of the show, seems to have increased the production of and reliance on transmedia and para-text, encouraging viewers to revisit favorite characters while their storylines may be on hold. Perhaps you pick up a copy of the novel you haven't read, or search the GoT Wiki for backstory you might have missed. You enrich your knowledge, perhaps even moving beyond what's been presented in the show thus far. Instead of this practice leading to spoilers or boredom, now you may still watch because you're driven to see what the show changes, what it leaves out, or what it revises from the grand written narrative. "Discussions of this sort," asserts Adam Whitehead, "though sometimes very...lively—increase engagement with the story, allowing the opportunity for active rather than passive participation. It helps create a loyal and enthusiastic fanbase and gives those fans something to talk about during the waits between" (Adam Whitehead, "An Unreliable World," in Lowder, 52).

Rebecca L. Willoughby
Susquehanna University
Popular Culture Association National Conference, 2015
Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones

Whether viewers are satisfied with these shifts in the narrative is nearly inconsequential; they've been cleverly amused while Arya (or whoever) was on hiatus, and when that character returns to the narrative, viewers are piqued to engage with whatever advances to the story they are presented with. The inclusion of and (perhaps) reliance on para-textual and trans-media resources therefore produces a simultaneous effect: viewers can saturate themselves with series-related information NOT included on the program, while dealing with the strategic withholding that comes from the fragmentary narrative style of the written and visual work of *Game of Thrones*.

In a recent review of another HBO series, *The Jinx*, television critic David Bianculli asserted that "what we miss when we binge watch individually is a shared experience, and any sense of when to talk about something we've seen that we really, really liked." Ostensibly quite a number of people "like" *Game of Thrones*, but because the series is still being written, and is presented on a week-by-week basis, we can only "binge" on the show itself up to a point. Therefore bingeing, or saturation, happens in these other areas.

Some might also argue that this level of engagement is actually necessary, that the impressive richness of world and story act as marks of distinction in this series. In James Lowder's essay collection, *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, writer Ned Vizzini asserts—probably rightly—that "*A Song of Ice and Fire* is now vying for a title in fantasy that everyone since the scientific romance must have at least conceived of: 'Most Complex World.' It has hundreds of characters, a daunting and detailed chronology, and, as of this writing, over 4,500 articles on its very own Wiki. Those who read it without jumping out of the text to explore the additional material—without immersing themselves in the paratext—," he tells us, "miss out on what makes it unique" (Ned Vizzini, "Beyond the Ghetto," in Lowder, 216). Vizzini's argument that

no reader or viewer of *Game of Thrones* can (or should) skim over references to Bran the Builder, the War of the Ninepenny Kings, or the events leading up to the birth of Jon Snow means that this new method of storytelling—and the revised features of genre practiced by the series— virtually requires fans to become stereotypical fantasy consumers. Perhaps, then, another surprising aspect of *Game of Thrones*' success is that it has successfully mainstreamed fantasy geekdom, making trendy that label which fans might have initially resisted.

Certainly *Game of Thrones* pushes the envelope of genre, through the complexity of its world and its characters, its broad audience appeal, its fragmented narrative and its supplemental resources. However, beyond those innovations: this is also a brilliant marketing strategy.

Case in point: the release of the Season 5 trailer, featured on a plethora of news outlets. Some teasers were a mere ten seconds long, and the official trailer clocked in at two minutes. The segment told viewers little that they did not already know from the ending of Season 4, and yet generated strings of speculation, tertiary interviews and “fluff” pieces, spinning the wheel of anticipation, and driving the marketing wagon straight into King’s Landing. As the series progresses, increasing prominence of the historical background of the Seven Kingdoms, its religions, its cultures, and its peoples, translates into additional curiosity about the intricacies of those features of the series. Creating a world so rich with its own references and backstory promotes transmedia outlets as resources (and gateways) to other *Game of Thrones*-based paraphernalia: novel tie-in editions, prequel novellas, comic book adaptations, and card games, video games, and board games. Its complexity, along with its arguable moral ambiguity, makes it a richly exploitable resource.

So the effect of fragmented story seems to be—perhaps counter-intuitively—increased engagement with that story (well, multiple stories). But what of the purpose? I can certainly applaud a series so richly conceived, so expertly executed so as to simultaneously utilize the traditional signposts of the fantasy genre and attempt to revise them, opening up such a world for more massive appeal; yet I must also acknowledge that the effect of such withholding serves to drag out the narrative and thereby: make more money. What was initially pitched as a three-book trilogy has expanded beyond twice that length, after its initial success. Is Martin truly a slave to the Muse, or does he—consciously or not, perhaps— refuse to finish what he knows to be a hit? Fragmenting the narratives within *Game of Thrones* both allows for greater complexity and slows down character and plot development. Today's readers and viewers are perhaps more savvy to the strategies of advertisers than ever before; when we say our culture is media-driven, part of what we mean is that we're exposed ever more frequently to the ploys and suggestions of advertisers, businesses, and products. And while *Game of Thrones* is certainly a beautifully produced product, it IS a product, nonetheless: and it is on the back of this product that other advertisers ride like so many ravens perched on the back of a mammoth. Ads litter the WIKIS, eyeballs linger, and clicks are made. All those boxed-set, tie-in, print editions will have to be re-boxed and added to as volumes are produced; each subsequent season wrangles more viewers, leads to more para-textual engagement, and the merchandising dragon perpetuates itself.

From the start, says James Lowder, "Martin announces in just about every way possible, from the books' page counts to the long and name-filled appendixes, that they are going to be hard work. Or at least they will appear to be hard work. One of the most remarkable things about the series is that these short chapters, focused tightly on the various viewpoint characters, make it immediately accessible in ways everything else about them seems to proclaim unlikely" (Lowder 15). That

Rebecca L. Willoughby
Susquehanna University
Popular Culture Association National Conference, 2015
Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones

richness, coupled with that accessibility—in so many different formats—is what makes *Game of Thrones* magnificently innovative and highly manipulative of consumers. Is this a new storytelling form, utilizing the various modes contemporary viewers have at their fingertips, craftily filling each of those outlets with some of the series content? If so, this approach is also a way to use our shortened attention spans and culture of instant gratification against us, *creating* a prominent, obsessive fan culture for the purposes of profit. In high Valyrian, “valar dohaeris” means “all men must serve.” Just who is being served by the fragmented storytelling of *Game of Thrones*?

Rebecca L. Willoughby
Susquehanna University
Popular Culture Association National Conference, 2015
Problems of Transmedia Storytelling in Game of Thrones

Works Cited:

Egner, Jeremy. "Game of Thrones Recap: Slicing and Dicing 'Two Swords.'" *The New York Times*. 6 April 2014.

Lowder, James, ed. *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*. New York: Bella Books, 2012.

Martin, George R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam, 2011.

Martin, George R. R., Elio Garcia and Linda Antonsson. *The World of Ice and Fire: The Untold History of Westeros and the Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam, 2014.

Rackl, Lori. "The 'Game of Thrones' world pulls in another viewer." *The Chicago Sun-Times*. 28 March 2012.

Wells-Lassagne, Shannon. "Purient Pleasures: Adapting Fantasy to HBO." *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*. 6.3 (2013): 415-426.