Game of Thrones
Transmedia Storytelling Analysis

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Introduction

Game of Thrones is an American fantasy drama television series created for HBO by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. It is an adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, George R. R. Martin's series of fantasy novels, the first of which is titled *A Game of Thrones*. The unique transmedia experience was produced by New York based creative marketing agency Campfire.

This paper is a transmedia analysis of the project Game of Thrones, written by Ott Vatter for the course Transmedia Storytelling, taught by Dr. Renira Gambarato. The course is part of the Baltic Film School’s Crossmedia Production Master program.

The paper follows the methodology suggested by Dr. Renira Gambarato in the text “How to Analyze Transmedia Narratives” and the main goal of the analysis is to understand in which way transmedia storytelling strategies were implemented in the project, evaluating its strengths, weaknesses and trying to suggest possible improvements. As the TV series Game of Thrones has been accomplished with major success, it would take far more than 15 pages to analyze every related extension, so I with this essay I am going to discuss what I consider most relevant. I will try to do it as objectively as possible.
Premise and purpose

The purpose of the transmedia project is to promote the adaption of the fantasy novel "A Song of Ice and Fire" written by George R. R. Martin to the TV series Game of Thrones. The fundamental purpose of the TV show is to entertain, which it does very well through morally ambiguous characters. Using the historical prism, it explores the issues relevant in today’s context, for example social hierarchy, religion, loyalty, corruption, sexuality, civil war, crime, and punishment. It is the most recent big-budget work to have contributed to the popularity of the fantasy genre in mainstream media.

The idea behind the transmedia project was to increase the already existing fan base of the book to guarantee a successful launch for the pilot episode. HBO worked together with marketing agency Campfire to bring the world of Westeros to life through a series of interactive experiences based around the 5 senses. The novels already had a passionate and connected fan base, so the strategy was to activate those fans and have them broadcast their excitement to a wider audience. The campaign managed to attract a large audience to the show, which where then surprised by the many unexpected storytelling twists and turns ultimately leading to that audience reading the books. In order to do this, Campfire decided to move the emphasis from storytelling to world-building: they created a multi-sensory experience that incorporated the five senses: sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. The campaign used several platforms: there was a game that incorporated one of the five senses every week (Kingdom of Westeros), a website with puzzles and clues (themaesterspath.com), social media websites and a real-world experience (HBO created scent kits to evoke scents of important locations in Westeros).

It is important to bring out that Campfire was also behind HBO-s previous hit success, the TV show True Blood campaign.
Narrative

The storyline evolves on the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos at the end of a decade-long summer. It interweaves several plot lines. The first follows the members of several noble houses in a civil war for the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms; the second covers the rising threat of the impending winter and the mythical creatures of the North; the third chronicles the attempts of the exiled last scion of the realm's deposed dynasty to reclaim the throne.

Both the novels and the TV series derive settings, characters and plot elements from a broad period of the European history. A principal inspiration for the novels were the English Wars of the Roses (1455–85) between the houses of Lancaster and York, reflected in Martin's houses of Lannister and Stark. Most of Westeros, with its castles and knightly tournaments, is reminiscent of High Medieval Western Europe. The series also combines such varied inspirations as Hadrian's Wall (which became Martin's great Wall), the fall of Rome and the legend of Atlantis (ancient Valyria), Byzantine "Greek fire" ("wildfire"), Icelandic sagas of the Viking Age (the Ironborn) and the Mongol hordes (the Dothraki), as well as elements from the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) and the Italian Renaissance. (Adair 2013)

The series' great popularity has in part been attributed to Martin's skill at fusing these disparate elements into a seamless whole that appears credible on its own terms as an alternative history.

The overall narrative is enticing due to its careful craft of uniting various historical locations, storylines and surprising unforeseen plot developments. It is highly addictive because one never knows what might happen in the next episode. There is plenty of negative capability with functioning migratory clues, there is always a possibility for a turnaround, most of the protagonists are killed or previously negative characters are shown in a more positive light.
Worldbuilding

The world of Game of Thrones has no overall or official name. Characters within the story simply refer to it as "the world". At the time of the series, the known world consists of three discovered continents: Westeros, Essos and Sothoryos. There are also numerous islands and archipelagos, including the Stepstones, Summer Islands and Ibben.

Most of the storyline is centered in the continent of Westeros, thus the worldview given to the audience is only the narrow perspective of the medieval population living there. Their society has not explored and mapped out the entire world. Much of the eastern continent of Essos is known fairly well to them through trade contact, but even so, the edges of their maps are simply blank space waiting to be filled in. Martin has stated that his medieval fantasy world is based on specifically medieval Europe, thus most of the continents and inhabitants are loosely analogous to Europe in the Middle Ages.
The audience shares the perspective of the characters, due to Martin's Third Person
POV narration style, and thus we only know what they know. It's a thematic point that
the lands north of the Wall are unexplored and poorly mapped, just as they would be
to a Roman soldier standing on Hadrian's Wall looking north to the edge of the known
world. Martin has stated that he therefore will never reveal an omniscient map of the
entire world his stories take place in. The storyworld is big and mysterious enough for
expansions as numerous game developments have shown.

Characters

Like the novels Game of Thrones adapts, it is estimated to be the largest cast on
television. During the production of the third season, 257 members were recorded.
The primary characters include Lord Eddard "Ned" Stark (Sean Bean) the head of the
Stark family whose members are involved in most of the series's intertwined plot
lines. He and his wife Catelyn Tully (Michelle Fairley) have five children: the eldest,
Robb (Richard Madden), the dainty Sansa (Sophie Turner), the tomboy Arya (Maisie
Williams), the adventurous Bran (Isaac Hempstead-Wright) and the youngest, Rickon
(Art Parkinson). Ned's hostage and ward Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen) used to live
with the Starks. Robb's wife is the healer Talisa Maegyr (Oona Chaplin), and Arya
has befriended the blacksmith's apprentice Gendry (Joe Dempsie). Ned's bastard son
Jon Snow (Kit Harington) and his friend Samwell Tarly (John Bradley) serve in the
Night's Watch under Lord Commander Jeor Mormont (James Cosmo). The red-haired
Wildling Ygritte (Rose Leslie) is Jon Snow's romantic interest.

Ned's old friend King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy) shares a loveless marriage with
Queen Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), who has taken her twin, the "Kingslayer" Ser
Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) as her secret lover. She loathes her younger
brother, the clever dwarf Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage), who is attended by his
mistress Shae (Sibel Kekilli) and the sellsword Bronn (Jerome Flynn). Cersei's father
is the fabulously wealthy Lord Tywin Lannister (Charles Dance), and her oldest son
Joffrey (Jack Gleeson) is guarded by the scar faced warrior Sandor "the Hound"
Clegane (Rory McCann).
The king's "Small Council" of advisors includes the crafty Master of Coin, Lord Petyr "Littlefinger" Baelish (Aidan Gillen) and the eunuch Master of Whisperers, Lord Varys (Conleth Hill). Robert's brother Stannis Baratheon (Stephen Dillane) is advised by the foreign priestess Melisandre (Carice van Houten) and the former smuggler Ser Davos Seaworth (Liam Cunningham). The wealthy Tyrell family is represented at court by the ambitious Margaery Tyrell (Natalie Dormer).

Across the Narrow Sea, siblings Viserys (Harry Lloyd) and Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) – the exiled children of the king overthrown by Robert Baratheon – are on the run for their lives, trying to win back the throne. Daenerys has been married to Khal Drogo (Jason Momoa), the leader of the nomadic Dothraki, and is guarded by the exiled knight Ser Jorah Mormont (Iain Glen). (HBO 2013)

As there is a lot of bloodshed, the project has multiple spin offs. Characters being killed quite often, making every season focus on the viewpoint of different protagonists. For example in season one the characters Tyrion Lannister is quite marginal but on seasons 2 and 3 he rises up to be one of the protagonists.

Extensions

With the development of the TV series, the transmedia experience started. Since then it has been adapted as board games, a tabletop wargame, collectible card game, two tabletop roleplaying games and numerous ARG-s and computer games. This list is probably incomplete because due to the popularity of the show, extensions are being developed and released as we speak.

While the most notable extension being the sensory transmedia experience used to market the pilot episode, a few others can be brought to attention. For example Game of Thrones Ascent video game, a strategy game developed by Disruptor Beam, which won the Frindie Award and became Facebook Game of the Year in 2013.

Game of Thrones The Game role-playing game created by Focus Home interactive for PC, Xbox and Playstation 3. Through the gameplay experience you will travel to mythical locations from the series and meet famous characters. A different experience
of the world of Westeros is created for the VUP when playing the game, immersing the fan and player in a whole new way.

*My Watch Begins* is an interactive user experience where the VUP can record taking the Night's Watch oath, which will then be added to the multitude of others, creating a massive fan oath taking soundscape.

The extensions are mostly expansions of the narrative through various media as they canonically contribute to enriching the story. All of them maintain original characteristics of the world as it is the core.

Extensions open up new possibilities for additional expansion for example unforeseen new outcomes of storyline affected by previous actions. Of course the extensions serve a purpose of marketing, to keep the fans engaged and spreading the news. But it also has a higher purpose to explore the narrative in-depth, to provide a platform for the true fans to fully grasp the context of the story and the nature of the characters.

**Media platforms and genres**

The initial platform for the story is the book, which was adapted to a TV-series, which in turn has been developed to various online and offline gaming platforms and real life experiences. Depending on the extension, the project entitles the digital availability to either a computer, tablet or smartphone.

Each platform serves the main purpose of marketing the TV show but also aforementioned secondary goals of being an entry point into the storyworld and deepening the engagement. The function is to convey various valuable content to the VUP. Every platform is unique in the sense that the content it carries may be similar but methods used are different.

The roll-out strategy of the platforms was in the following order. The book was the first, then came the adaptation to a TV series, then followed the ensory experience and extensions.
Most prominent genre in this project is fantasy but also action, adventure could be mentioned.

**Audience and market**

Game of Thrones is classified under adult fantasy television. The content mainly being about war and medieval type fantasy, one could presume that target audiences for this show are probably males, aged from 18-30. A little research from IMDB, that shows us the age groups and genders of those who have rated the show. Males aged 18-19 have rated it higher than females of the same age group. This reinforces the idea of how the show's many different elements have been catered for a specific audience. The overwhelming presence of violence and nudity has been a subject of constant criticism for the show, to be more precise the objectification of female characters is far more prominent than of male ones. Simple logic tells us who is intended as the main VUP.

Although this is true, the show has since gained popularity, and so more people are watching the show, and responding positively to the elements in the show.
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Arithmetic mean = 9.4. Median = 10

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Engagement

Modernity requires fantasy to be rational at some level (Jenkins, 2013).

This is exactly how Campfire approached the marketing campaign to gain maximum engagement for the launch of the pilot. People understand and show more interest if the storyworld is presented together with real life experiences.

The Game of Thrones transmedia marketing campaign existed of 5-steps, all based on our 5 senses. The goal of this 5-step model was to create awareness, revitalize the show/brand, and increase consumer advocacy. The goal for this business model was clear, which is an important aspect in creating a transmedia advertising campaign: the book fans had to be kept satisfied and new fans had to be generated (Kapoor, 2012). This was done by including the “opinion leaders”, who are considered to be hard-core fans of Game of Thrones, they would spread news about the “scent kit”. These fans talked about the scent kit through their own channels on social media, which was free publicity for the show and attracted 186,000 fans to the website themaesterspath.com (Beltrone, n.d.). On the website, fans could experience the other two senses; sound and sight. They could listen to conspiracies that were brewing in the tavern of Westeros, and see the wall that protects the Kingdom. On their mobile phones, fans could download an application that would take you to a place in Westeros, where the weather coincided with your own local weather. Fans were additionally given the opportunity to share these experiences through their social media.

The last sense “taste” was aimed to attract an audience that had no knowledge of the book or the story. This was done by celebrity chef Tom Colicchio, who cooked dishes inspired by Game of Thrones.

The TV series presents the world through third-person viewpoint while various extensions include mixtures of first- and second-person point of views to deepen the user experience. If we look at the Campfire transmedia sensory project, then the VUP (viewer, user, player) plays different roles with the purpose of deeper engagement with the story.

The project keeps the VUP is engaged through ARG The Maester's Path puzzle of
experiencing the story through 5 senses and eventually solving the puzzle through completing the sensory experiences to unlock secret preview content of the show. That is the goal and reward to keep up the tension and fan base active. The project works as a cultural activator with the help of opinion leaders through social networks and word-of-mouth advertising.

There is a wide spread of memes used with the serious characters of the show, that use the context of the series to convey a parody message. There are literally thousands of mash-ups, recaps and parodies of the show, most popular fan communities include winteriscoming.net, where information, photos and rumors about the show are discussed.
The campaign was a huge success, being the third most watched show on HBO. It was accessible and simple enough to enjoy and it spoke to various people on different levels. The campaign was, additionally, unique in its way because it was built around our senses, and the way that they divided it by addressing one sense per week gave the campaign a good structure. The business model was prosperous as it raised awareness among existing and new fans, made the target group collaborate with the franchise and share experiences through social media.

However, on a more critical note, the possible downside to this campaign is that the user is still preferred to have prior knowledge of the story. The question could be asked, if people who aren't familiar with the series will go and “look” for the point of entry – without the knowledge, new consumers would not know about the Game of Thrones. This can be considered a negative aspect as there could have been an easier point of entry.

It is a retroactive TS project being adapted from the book "A Song of Ice and Fire." Though the project is an adaption, in my opinion this could be considered as a complex transmedia experience because it has a series of individual stories pertaining to a bigger pervasive storyworld, which characterizes a transmedia franchise, and is structured around a complicated sequence of puzzles that leads audience into solving a mystery, which distinguishes a portmanteau transmedia. (Gambarato 2013)
Aesthetics

The visual environment of the project is immensely profound. All extensions carry weight on well executed design, sound and video production. The overall atmosphere is clearly fantasy but due to the budget of the show the look is very realistic. One could recognize the medieval looking font used in all of the extensions.

GAME OF THRONES

Conclusion

Looking at the amount of work put under creating these projects it is safe to say that it paid off, Campfire and HBO managed to bring the fantasy world in to real life. The Maester’s Path did not add anything new to Martin’s world of Westeros. All of the information conveyed throughout the experience was familiar material to fans of the series. What sets the experience apart was the lavish attention to detail taken in transforming words on a page into each of the five modular sensory experiences that comprised HBO’s interpretation of the story. On a more critical note, one could claim that the project could have entailed more entry points for VUP-s who were not familiar with the story beforehand. But as it turned out from the analysis was intended so that the fans would spread the news in their communities. All in all it was a great innovative approach and a professional execution of transmedia storytelling.


