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Fantasy, Adaptation, Media:
From *A Song of Ice and Fire* to the Speculative Universe

Thesis booklet

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I. Preliminaries to the Research, Topic and Objectives

George R. R. Martin's epic fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–)
has been well-known in the speculative fiction fandom in the early 21st
century, since before publishing his saga, Martin has already been an
established science fiction writer. The first volume titled *A Game of
Thrones* (1996) gained positive reception, however, the story only became
an international success after its adaptation (created by David Benioff and
D. B. Weiss) debuted on HBO in 2011. After the premiere, the fifth volume
of the saga, *A Dance with Dragons* was also published on July 12, 2011,
and soon became a bestseller – however, the showrunners had to face an
issue that is still unresolved. According to Martin's plans, the saga is going
to have seven volumes, but the last two are still not published. Thus, once
the showrunners did not have a source material to work from, they had to
finish the adaptation based on the outline provided by the author, and the
series outpaced the books. While even up until this point, the *Game of
Thrones* universe was a transmedial experience, since the story appeared on
different platforms, I argue that this particular event made the franchise a
peculiar case of transmedia storytelling, which will be further complicated
once (or *if*, since fans have been waiting for these books for more than a
decade) the last two volumes, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*
will be published.

   This thesis focuses on the transmedial universe of the *Game of
Thrones* franchise. By looking at how the different media incarnations in
this narrative universe relate to each other, the main aim of the thesis is to
understand how *Game of Thrones* impacted the way we should look at
adaptation theory and transmediality. In order to understand the nature of
this universe, this thesis focuses on the fields adaptation theory, the theory

of transmedia storytelling, television studies, the logic of streaming platforms, and literary analysis as well, since contemporary narrative universes cannot be fully understood by solely focusing on their literary version. Like in the case of *Game of Thrones*, contemporary speculative storyworlds are usually made up of different media texts, that complement their "source material" (i.e. the first incarnation of the narrative) by providing new information or simply adding something new to the experience (like in the case of video games, where players can become their own characters in the narrative). The transmedial nature of these storyworlds, however, is not only motivated by the needs and wishes of the audiences, but also relies heavily on market logic, since media industries are interested in selling their works to as wide an audience as possible, in order to benefit from profit.

While several scholarly works have been written about the main themes of the saga, and the analysis of the television show, the transmediality of the narrative universe has only been studied in a few articles, which focus on certain elements of the franchise. In order to fill this theoretical gap, this thesis focuses on the narrative transmedia universe of *Game of Thrones.* By looking at the text of the literary series and the different media incarnations that were created in the franchise, this thesis has three main objectives. Firstly, I look at the factors that made *Game of Thrones* such a popular narrative, and analyze how it fits into the fantasy genre in general. While fantasy narratives have been famous internationally before the 21st century as well, *Game of Thrones* became a great sensation all over the world, and its impact is undeniable. Counting on average more

than 25 million viewers per episode,[1] it became one of the most successful series in the world, influencing other fantasy series to come. The overall consensus tends to be that Martin's world is "different" than the "traditional" fantasy narratives, because it does not shy away from the depiction of violence, brutality, and sexuality, and it introduces incredibly complex characters instead of the traditional opposition between more black and white characters, who are either good or bad. This makes the story a good fit for a quality television series, which may have supported HBO's decision to accept Benioff's and Weiss's idea of filming the novels.

Secondly, I look into the question of transmediality: I argue that the fact that the televisual adaptation outpaced the "original" books should change the way we think about the questions of adaptation theory and transmedia storytelling. The technological advancements of the last few decades contributed a lot to the constant evolution of media convergence, of which *Game of Thrones* is a great example; however, the narrative serves as an interesting case since it was the adaptation that continued the storyline of the adapted text, given that the novels still have not yet been finished. Thus, the borders between the concepts of adaptation and transmedia story become even blurrier. In 2019, when I first started to work on this research, I was also interested in how the upcoming publication of the sixth (and possibly seventh) volume will influence the reception and the evolution of the narrative, however, due to the fact that the books are still not published, this research question will be left unanswered for a while.

Lastly, I am also interested in how Martin's past career as a screenwriter influenced his writings and *A Song of Ice and Fire* in general,

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[1] Sarah Hughes, "Game of Thrones: How It Dominated the Decade – Then Lost Its Way," *The Guardian*, December 30, 2019, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/dec/30/game-of-thrones-best-tv-2010s.

since while reading his other works (mostly focusing on his short stories), eager readers can instantly feel the televisual influences that had an impact on his poetics. The fact that the author claimed several times that the adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is something that could never happen, and *Game of Thrones* still became an incredibly successful adaptation, is also worth looking into – thus, after the discussion of Martin's poetics, the penultimate chapter of this thesis analyzes the relationship between Martin's original Westeros narratives and their adaptations, namely *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon* (HBO, 2022–). The last chapter of this dissertation is linked to the impact of the series, and how *Game of Thrones* inspired the creation of other fantasy shows as well.

The general aim of this dissertation is to give an overarching analysis of the *Game of Thrones* storyworld, while also describing how the evolution of this franchise changed the way we think about adaptation theory, transmedia storytelling, and fantasy. While this thesis is wide in scope, I believe that it is important that when we are talking about this immense transmedia universe, we take all of the aforementioned concepts in mind, in order to better understand the underlying processes that shape the evolution of the narrative.

II. Approach and Methodology

This dissertation is focusing on the transmedial nature of *Game of Thrones*, thus, in order to understand how the different media entries of the franchise interact with each other, I had to conduct interdisciplinary research by looking at the theories of different interrelated fields. While thinking about the nature of the narrative universe, I delved into adaptation theory, the theory of transmedia storytelling, television studies, the logic of streaming

platforms, and of course literary analysis as well. As the list of these different fields shows, contemporary narrative universes cannot be fully understood by solely focusing on their literary versions – as Simone Murray suggests, we should realize that literature does not exist in a vacuum anymore.[2] Modern narratives are heavily influenced by the phenomenon of media convergence, since once a certain text (be it literature, film, television, or even a video or role-playing game) becomes popular, new media incarnations are soon to be introduced that are set in the same storyworld or are based on the "original" narrative. We can see how the market logic heavily influences the creation of popular narratives, since all the media industries are heavily interested in selling their works to as wide an audience as possible. Following the same logic, as the television adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire* was created, *Game of Thrones* as a franchise was born, and thus the evolution of Martin's narrative became even more complex. Thus, in order to understand the complex narrative universe of the *Game of Thrones* franchise, I combined the theories of adaptation studies (Linda Hutcheon[3], Douglas Lanier[4], Thomas Leitch[5], Simone Murray[6]), transmedia storytelling (Henry Jenkins[7], Marie-Laure

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[2] Simone Murray, "Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2008): 4–20.
[3] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[4] Douglas Lanier, "Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value," in *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, ed. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 21–40, doi:10.1057/9781137375773_2.
[5] Thomas Leitch, "Adaptation, the Genre," *Adaptation* 1, no. 2 (September 1, 2008): 106–20, doi:10.1093/adaptation/apn018; Thomas M. Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," *Criticism* 45, no. 2 (2003): 149–71, doi:10.1353/crt.2004.0001.
[6] Murray, "Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry."
[7] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Updated and with a new afterword (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006).

Ryan[8], Lisbeth Klastrup, Susanna Tosca[9]), media convergence and deconvergence (Henry Jenkins[10], Lothar Mikos[11]), fantasy (J. R. R. Tolkien[12], Tzvetan Todorov[13], Rosemary Jackson[14], Brian Attebery[15], Farah Mendlesohn[16]), and television studies (Jason Mittell[17], Catherine Johnson[18],

[8] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality," *Poetics Today* 34, no. 3 (0 1, 2013): 361–88, doi:10.1215/03335372-2325250; Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, eds., *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Frontiers of Narrative (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

[9] Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, "Game of Thrones. Transmedial Worlds, Fandom, and Social Gaming," in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, Frontiers of Narrative (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 295–314.

[10] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

[11] Lothar Mikos, "Transmedia Storytelling and Mega-Narration: Audiovisual Production in Converged Media Environments," in *Media Convergence and Deconvergence*, ed. Sergio Sparviero, Corinna Peil, and Gabriele Balbi, Global Transformations in Media and Communication Research - A Palgrave and IAMCR Series (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 358.

[12] J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, Expanded ed., with commentary and notes (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 27–84.

[13] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, A Volume in the CWRU Press Translations (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973).

[14] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009).

[15] Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Brian Attebery, *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2014).

[16] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

[17] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York; London: NYU Press, 2015).

[18] Catherine Johnson, "Quality/Cult Television. The X-Files and Buffy the Vampire Slayer in US Television of the 1990s," in *Telefantasy*, by Catherine Johnson (London: BFI Publ, 2005), 95–124.

Andrew Lynch[19], Mareike Jenner[20], Robert J. Thompson[21], Sarah Cardwell[22]).

III. Results

The purpose of this research was to introduce how the different elements of the *Game of Thrones* franchise work together, and to show the diverse ways in which it influenced contemporary culture. In order to understand this complex relationship, Chapter 2 laid down the theoretical background for the upcoming chapters that are focusing on the transmediality of *Game of Thrones*. I argued that in order to understand adaptations, we should focus on how these works are embedded into the industry and the economy. On the other hand, we should also focus on their rhizomatic nature, since the different media incarnations are not secondary to their source material, but are horizontally connected. However, from the perspective of the fandom, the different adaptations and spin-offs can still be seen as inferior to the "original" text. Fans tend to compare the source material to its adaptation in terms of fidelity and authenticity; thus, in order to understand how they

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[19] Andrew Lynch, *Quality Telefantasy: How US Quality TV Brought Zombies, Dragons and Androids into the Mainstream* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

[20] Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* (New York, NY: Springer International Publishing - Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[21] Robert J. Thompson, "From 'The Golden Age of Television' to 'Quality TV,'" in *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER: Hill Street Blues, Thirtysomething, St. Elsewhere, China Beach, Cagney & Lacey, Twin Peaks, Moonlighting, Northern Exposure, L.A. Law, Picket Fences, with Brief Reflections on Homicide, NYPD Blue & Chicago Hope, and Other Quality Dramas*, by Robert J. Thompson, 1st Syracuse University Press ed, The Television Series (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

[22] Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgment," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, First edition (London [England]: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2019).

approach these texts, I offered two definitions for these concepts. I argued that the issue of *fidelity* refers to how faithfully and accurately an adaptation follows the storyline of its source material, while *authenticity* refers to the new elements that are introduced, and how genuinely they fit the narrative world of the "original" work. At the end of the chapter, I argued that the borders between the concepts of adaptation and transmedia storytelling are incredibly blurry; however, using a label for *Game of Thrones* would not lead us closer to the understanding of the complexity of the narrative universe – still, comprehending these definitions is crucial if we want to see how the different elements of the storyworld are connected to each other.

Chapter 3 ("Transmedia Storytelling and Fantasy") focuses on the definition of the genre, and it also discusses how *A Song of Ice and Fire* fits into the traditional concept of fantasy. I argued that although the academic consensus has been following Jackson's idea of calling fantasy a mode, talking about fantasy as a *genre* and the fantastic as a *mode* would be more useful, since it would help us think about the fantasy works of the 20th and 21st centuries in a much clearer and precise way. Thus, by the *fantastic* I understand all the elements that are unrealistic and non-mimetic, while fantasy should be used as a genre. I would define fantasy as a story which breaks with reality, and focuses on the fantastic instead of science (like in the case of science fiction) or the feelings of horror and dread (like in the case of horror). Fantasy narratives are also comic in nature, as they propose a problem that is solved by the end (which is usually connected to the problem of *thinning*[23]), and they also have a rich mythical lore that can be expanded.

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[23] John Clute and John Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London: Orbit, 1999), 942.

By describing the differences between Tolkien's and Martin's epic fantasy sagas, the last section of this chapter argued that the reason why a vast number of transmedia stories belong to the category of speculative fiction (mostly fantasy and science fiction) is because this genre has all the qualities that a transmedia story can fully exploit: being encyclopedic and immersive, having a detailed mythical lore, and enumerating several characters, stories of speculative fiction can serve as great source materials for transmedia narratives.

In Chapter 4, I have attempted to list all of the media entries that exist in this storyworld, however, due to the limitations of space, I have omitted works that were created by fans. While *A Song of Ice and Fire* contained all of the features that make it a great source material for a transmedia project (detailed worldbuilding and history, rich lore, numerous interesting characters), the series only added new elements to the already existing material once it started to depart from Martin's storyline and added a new ending that has not existed before. By building on Michael Graves' idea about how the borderline between adaptations and transmedia stories are porous,[24] I argued that while the series began as an adaptation, the franchise became a case of transmedia storytelling once it outpaced the books: not only can any of the listed media entries serve as an entry point to the narrative universe, the items are also self-contained and are on the same level, but by consuming more of them, the whole will be worth more than the sum of its parts. However, since this case was not systematically

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[24] Michael Graves, "Transmedia Storytelling, Adaptation, and the Reversing of Justified," *Adaptation* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 1–17, doi:10.1093/adaptation/apw039.

planned, I argued that Lothar Mikos's term of *meganarration*[25] is more useful if we want to describe the incredibly rich narrative universe of *Game of Thrones*.

With the creation of *House of the Dragon*, HBO also complicated the narrative web of the franchise, since it included several allusions in both of its currently existing seasons that serve as thematic echoes of *Game of Thrones* (Aegon's Prophecy, the Catspaw dagger, Daemon's vision in Season 2, the title sequence, or even the soundtrack and the composer). When it comes to the video games, they do not necessarily add something new to the already existing information, but being immersive in nature, they definitely contribute to the fan experience, while also support the marketing of the franchise, by piggybacking on its success and still attracting new audiences.

Chapter 5 paints an authorial portrait of Martin and discusses the adaptation process of *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon*. I have argued that the themes he introduced in his writings before *A Song of Ice and Fire* are also present in the fantasy saga, however, his experience in Hollywood also had an impact on the series. All of his texts have detailed and immersive worldbuilding, which is also present in his other fictional universe, called "Thousand Worlds." Just like Westeros, this universe is also characterized by chaos, and furthermore, both of these worlds employ morally complex and gray characters. Martin's oeuvre in general is made up of generic hybrids, while his *ars poetica* can be described as "the human heart in conflict with itself."

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[25] Mikos, "Transmedia Storytelling and Mega-Narration: Audiovisual Production in Converged Media Environments."

After describing Martin's take on adaptations and the adaptation processes of *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon*, I concluded that one of the most influential features that made the story such a good source material is its seriality: although the books are written from the perspective of different point-of-view characters, thus being episodic in nature, these characters could serve as great starting points in finding out the main directions of the narrative, and creating an ensemble cast, instead of focusing on a small number of characters. The immersive nature of the story, the rich lore, the generic hybridity, and the fact that the saga breaks the rules of what has been seen previously also helped the saga fit the features of quality television drama, thus being an excellent source material for the television show.

In the last subchapter, I have elaborated on the issue of authorship by building on the theories of Michel Foucault,[26] Jason Mittell,[27] and Matthew Freeman.[28] I argued that in the case of transmedia narratives that are the products of the snowball effect, the concept of the author is especially problematic, since these narrative franchises are mostly controlled by a company – thus, I argued that in the case of these stories we should talk about authorship by branding, where these franchises are not controlled by a

[26] Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, by Michel Foucault, Donald F. Bouchard, and Sherry Simon, 1. printing, Cornell paperbacks, [Nachdr.], Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 20), 113–38.

[27] Jason Mittell, "Authorship," in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, by Jason Mittell (New York; London: NYU Press, 2015), 86–117.

[28] Matthew Freeman, "Characterising Transmedia Storytelling. Character-Building, World-Building, Authorship," in *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling: Early Twentieth-Century Transmedia Story Worlds*, by Matthew Freeman, Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies 99 (New York London: Routledge, 2017), 21–42, doi:10.4324/9781315439525.

single author but rather a company, who decides which media entries are official, and which not. Authorship by branding also highlights the commercial nature of these transmedial storyworlds, while allowing the presence of several different authors as well.

The last chapter of the dissertation, "Fantasy, Streaming Platforms and Transmediality" discussed the features of the adaptation industry in the late 20th and early 21st-centuries, and highlighted the impact of *Game of Thrones* on television, and how it set an example for future fantasy series to come. After discussing the main reasons why adaptations have been so popular in the last few years, I looked into the concept of fantasy television. Although the word *telefantasy* is used in academic scholarship to denote programs in which magical elements are used to depict a world that differs from our reality, I argued that academic research should also focus on the narrower category of fantasy television, a genre in which magic and the fantastic play an essential role, but the focus is not on the technological advancements, a possible future or the feeling of fear, but on the fantastic itself. These series also have an incredibly rich mythology and history, and they also tend to focus on the questions of ethics, morality, and human nature, respectively. I have also referred to Andrew Lynch's theory of how there is a close relationship between US quality television and telefantasy,[29] and came to the conclusion that the narrower category of fantasy television is also worth looking into – thus, the next section focuses on the relationship between quality television, streaming platforms, and fantasy. I argued that the reason why streaming platforms have turned towards the creation of fantasy adaptations is that they are trying to position themselves as quality brands,

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[29] Lynch, *Quality Telefantasy: How US Quality TV Brought Zombies, Dragons and Androids into the Mainstream.*

for which fantasy serves as a great source material, as there is a close fit between the features of the genre and those of quality television.

IV. Relevant Publications

Journal articles

Sipos, Nikolett. "Médiumok Harca: A *Trónok Harca* és a Transzmedialitás." *Apertúra* 17, no. 2 (2022): 1–17. doi:10.31176/apertura.2022.17.2.6.

Sipos, Nikolett. "Prequels, Sequels and Everything Else: Transmedia Storytelling and the *Game of Thrones* Universe." *AMERICANA E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 20, no. 1 (December 19, 2024): 93–102. doi:10.14232/americana.2024.1.93-102.

Book chapters

Sipos, Nikolett. "Történetképzés és Perspektíva George R. R. Martin *Trónok Harca* Című Regényében." In *Pannon Tanulmányok VI.: A Modern Filológiai És Társadalomtudományi Kar Tudományos Diákköri Dolgozatai 2018-2019*, edited by Gábor Kovács, 69–90. Veszprém: Pannon Egyetem Modern Filológiai és Társadalomtudományi Kar, 2019.

Sipos, Nikolett. "Bran Remembers: The Narrative Process of *A Game of Thrones*." In *Diversity in Narration and Writing: The Novel*, edited by Kornélia Horváth, Judit Mudriczki, and Sarolta Osztroluczky, 154–66. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022.

Sipos, Nikolett. "One Does Not Simply Teach Fantasy: How Students of English and American Studies in Hungary View the Genre and Tolkien's Legacy." In *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe*, by Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus, 150–60, 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2023. doi:10.4324/9781003407171-12.

Book reviews

Sipos, Nikolett. "Joseph Rex Young: *George R.R. Martin and the Fantasy Form*, New York: Routledge, 2019." *Pázmány Papers – Journal of Languages and Cultures* 2, no. 1 (December 31, 2024): 155–58. doi:10.69706/PP.2024.2.1.10.