

# Conceptual Analysis Of Game Of Thrones

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*Abstract: We live in the golden age of television drama driven by complex narratives. Storytelling is no longer about linear storylines that follow a single protagonist or force the protagonist into a culturally formulated design, such as the Hero's Journey archetype. Since the past two decades the model of television storytelling is distinct for its use of narrative complexity as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that typified most American television since the beginning. HBO, a subscription channel aims to offer 'complex post soaps' which are fast paced, ambitious and portrays themes never talked about prior in the industry. To call something complex is to highlight its sophistication and nuance, suggesting that it grants a vision of the world that escapes being reductive or artificially one-dimensional, but that grows richer through sustained engagement and value in the eyes of public.*

*Game of Thrones, a fantastical genre is a product of HBO. It is an adaption of George R. R Martin's imaginative historical narrative book series called 'A Song of Ice and Fire'. This TV series represents the recent scenario of 'Quality Television' through a complex hyper serial narrative and an excellent visual translation. This paper offers an in-depth study of the Game of Thrones from the perspective of Communication Studies. It takes from various theorists like Cadwell, Collins and Jenkins and their take on the 'Modern audience,' 'Quality TV' and 'Media convergence'. It aims to study the conceptual framework of the series and how it has affected the media consumption by the modern audience.*

## I. THE EVOLUTION OF TELEVISION

This era is known for its technological transformations. We live in the 'post network' (Jaramillo, 2012) age of television that is highly dominated by cable network programming and access to multimedia channels. In the digital culture that people are in at present, the audience demand for content as per their liking and convenience. There has been an evident transformation from the audience in the 1960s till modern audiences of today. 'Modern audience' as we call the viewers today is a phenomenon that is deeply studied and analyzed by theorists. Writer and producers in their autonomy and in their attempt to please these 'modern audience' write scripts talking about controversial themes of intense violence, sexuality and other mature content.

## II. MEDIA CONVERGENCE AND MODERN AUDIENCE

Content is no longer distributed to the audience but the audience selects the content from various digital platforms, (Collins, 2013). 'Transmedia' has only enhanced the ways of

consumption by the audience. The ability to access episodes on demand and on numerous electronic devices has also allowed for the transformation of the conventional television into more convoluted or rather complex narratives. Prior to on demand and the digital technology revolution content was aimed for mass audiences who may or may not be watching television on a regular basis. Episodes, then, needed to be accessible to a viewer with no knowledge of the show's themes or plot, which therefore called for static characters and simplified plots, or unsophisticated descriptions (Collins, 2013). In addition to having to write for a range of audiences, television creators were under compulsion to abide by network regulations that limited content.

Henry Jenkins further elaborates the concept of transmedia in his book called, Convergence Culture (2006). He offers us with the concept of 'media convergence' to describe and explain the transition that occurred in the contemporary entertainment industry. According to Jenkins, convergence 'represents a shift – a change from one medium content to content that floats across many media platforms'. (p. 243). Throughout the late 1980s, media houses started to offer entertainment experience to their audiences that was

unique and never witnessed before. Television programs – TV series in particular - began to develop into ‘multi— cross— and transmedia projects’ (Caldwell, 2007) with narrative structures going past the boundaries of the traditional medium. They no longer confined the content to television that aired the show at a particular time slot bound by various network regulations and timely advertisements. The practice of watching television, therefore, gradually turned into a complex set of intertwined experiences that included a variety of roles for the participants, who find themselves absorbed - sometimes even lost - in a continuous flow of media content and mediated encounters. Such audiences are categorized as ‘modern’ in their consumption practices.

HBO is often credited as the first non-network game changer in the entertainment industry. By rejecting the norms prevalent in the media houses, it made a leap forward by creating a new space that provided content developers ‘creative freedom’ outside network cable regulations and censorship while offering to its audiences a different world filled with complexity and unpredictability which further led complete submersion of the audience (Jaramillo, 2012)

USA is the biggest exporter of television and movies in the world. The rise in the prominence of a new form of ‘quality television’ since the 1990s has created new opportunities for ‘cinematic’ television. Television that demands an active audience interested in formally and narratively challenging programs as mentioned above. Regardless the US controls over 70 per cent of the entertainment market. It is governed by the six major companies: Warner Bros, Disney, NBC Universal, Sony, Twentieth Century Fox and CBS Paramount. These same media giants own the major cable broadcasters like HBO, TNT and Showtime.

### III. HBO: PREMIUM CABLE TV NETWORK

Every major cable broadcaster claims to exceed the expectations of existing television structure and genres to attract its audience. This is exemplified by the 90s HBO marketing slogan which showed the audience how HBO was better than the TV. The apparent difference of HBO was only partly about heightened production value (Fuller, 2013). This American premium cable and satellite television network is owned by Time Warner through its leading company Home Box Office, Inc. Content on this network largely consists of theatrically released motion pictures and original television series. Movies only for cable, documentaries and sports related programs are also put up.

Most of the shows like ‘The left overs’ and ‘The Game of Thrones’ cater to adults often featuring high amounts of profanity, violence, sexual themes and politics which is difficult to get on basic cable or over-the-air broadcast channels, out of fear of losing sponsors. Viewers, by paying for their subscriptions, do not have to deal with paid advertisements, conventional and censored content, and censored content. DeFino (2013) calls this the HBO Effect and discusses the ways in which HBO has influenced television and culture through “programs [that] challenge the conventional notions of “pragmatism” and “political

prejudice” as there is no pressure on HBO to please sponsors or advertisers (DeFino, 2013).

But it is not about ‘violence’ and ‘profanity’ as thought by some that makes HBO stand different and unique. It is about storytelling and inventiveness, something that entertains and surprises people’ (quoted in Longworth 2000: 34). This suggests that the freedom granted at HBO goes beyond writing brutal violence and lurid language. ‘It [is], says Chase (the man who arguably started the new golden age of TV with “The Sopranos), ‘being able to tell the story in an atypical way’ (Monroe 1999: 3). It is indeed about the freedom to tell stories otherwise combined with the creatives given the autonomy to work with minimal interference from the advertisers and without having to compromise that have become the HBO trademark: how they endlessly speak about and sell themselves, how the media talk about them and how their customers have come to understand what they are paying for.

At the end this notion of autonomy is all about a continual struggle for institutional survival and market leadership. It is in a way creating a distinct brand identity aimed at niche audiences. By offering controversial and edgy scripts containing adult themes, HBO is straining broadcasting limits. Through each show it breaks the rules in terms of language, content and representation. Pushing the limits of respectability, of daring to produce esoteric, groundbreaking and risk-taking content that has never been produced before.

As of July 2015, HBO is the second largest premium channel in the United States. In addition to its USA subscriber base, HBO distributes content in at least 151 countries, covering approximately 122 million subscribers across globe.

### IV. CONTENT CREATION BY HBO

HBO creates content as widely regarded as ‘complex’ for churning out quality serials since the 1990s starting with the Sopranos. For most times, the terms; complex and quality are used interchangeably. Historically in the U.S, quality television was rhetorically seen in opposition of lowbrow, popular formulaic programming. Shows like Hill St. Blues and Cagney & Lacey were celebrated as quality shows. The American scholar, Robert Thompson understands Quality TV as relational. He says, ‘it is best defined by what it is not’. It is not ‘regular TV’. Under this framework, quality television refers to shows that stand in opposition to the most typical programming.

HBO by creating transgressive content largely appreciated by the audiences is at the lead at this moment. It defines the style and the narrative technique, and creates the most talked about series then be mindlessly copied by the network channels. HBO launched a number of series such as Sex and The City, OZ, Six Feet Under and The Sopranos, which were then copied by the other network cables. The network channels have to follow guidelines as prescribed by the owner. They are not allowed to produce sexually explicit content as opposed to the cable channels, which are given autonomy to do almost anything because they function on as per the likes and demands of consumers. The channel tries to appeal to individuals from 18-49 years of age who are willing to spend

and know how to differentiate between a conventional plot and complex plot.

#### V. COMPLEX TV: “THE QUALITY OF COMPLEXITY (AND THE COMPLEXITY OF QUALITY)”

We live in the Golden age of television. One of the most notable characteristics of this age is the emergence of highly complex and convoluted forms of serial narrative. Complex TV programming at its most foundational level rejects the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form as found in many soaps. The narrative complexity moves outside the conventional and formulaic narrative attached to soap operas—many (although certainly not all) Complex programs narrate their stories serially while downplaying the melodramatic style with major focus on character development and relationships over plots of soap operas. This distances modern programs from the cultural connotations of the soap genre.

Therefore, “*Quality/complex television*” consists of certain programs that are viewed as superior in terms of content and viewers. It is not all about quality content creation by the producers but it is also the ‘modern audience’ that acknowledges and appreciates the ‘not so mainstream content’ and distinguish themselves from people just watching television. Arguably, the satisfaction gained from the complex narratives are richer and more multilayered than conventional programming, but value judgments should be tied to individual programs rather than claiming the superiority of entire genre. The goal of the analysis is not to argue that contemporary television is somehow better than it was in the 1970s but rather to explore the narrative strategies through close analyses of a key program, Game of thrones.

The series has attracted diverse range of audience. These audience are accessing the content from all the digital platforms. There are fan clubs, blogs, video games and websites just to comment, criticism and predict the events in the show. The ever increasing online engagement and participation of audience has further inspired the writers and producers of the show to offer narrative structures extend beyond the boundaries of the traditional structure to create a new fictional experience, truly engaging and varied in its several options.

#### VI. AUDIENCE OF THE GAME OF THRONES

The audiences of The Game of Thrones series are not necessarily the readers of the book on which it is based or perhaps the fans of The Lord of the Rings. While the marketing campaign made good use of the novel’s readership as online ‘influencers’ whose extensive use of social media provided traction to the first season but eventually the promotional materials focused on the show’s complexity, its maturity, and its novelty.

The audience watching the show is ‘Quality audience’. The audience who are perceived to be more literate and stylistically complex. Johnson reconstructed the definitions of quality television. He said the financial gains of television was

not based on the number of viewers but were necessarily based on assessments of “the type of viewer watching” (Fuller, 2013). Indeed, for subscription channels, their imagined viewer is core marketing.

Paradoxically, the series’ respectability came to rely on familiar ‘Quality TV’ ingredients like its jarring violence, its firm cynicism, and its frank portrayal of sexual acts. The class-based prejudice that has legitimized this practice implies that pay cable audience can take sexually explicit content with violence in a more thoughtful and productive way than ‘normal’ viewers of television. The series has re-articulated that the premium cable appeals to its core viewers as it reduced the value of typified television programming.

The development of Quality TV is also an intensely gendered form of cultural discourse:

‘If TV feminizes all who watch it, and this very feminization is linked to a loss of power and status brought about through the act of consumption, then HBO’s brand offers to “re-mark” subscribers as “masculine,” thus getting its audience in the right position as powerful bearers of cultural capital that is unrestricted from the commercialized trappings of regular television’ - (Avi Santo, op. cit., p. 34).

This makes gender irrelevant. The dispositif that defines the viewer’s relationship to the medium has been changed from ‘passive,’ ‘feminine’ spectatorship to that of an ‘active,’ and therefore ‘masculine’ maven. The following section of the paper deals with narrative of the Game of Thrones while talking about adopting topo-focal story telling. It then narrows down to studying themes like ‘the death of old breed’ and ‘the hero journey’ specifically focusing on the first season and the ‘unexpected events’ that glue the audiences to the show. Combining these elements makes Game of Thrones widely appreciated and watched across globe.

#### VII. NARRATIVE

“Game of Thrones lies between fun and serious,” says Alyssa Rosenberg, culture writer for the Washington Post. It has fantastical elements like dragons along with mass killing, but it is also clear-eyed about politics, gender and sexual identities, and the vicious inequalities prevalent in their world that iterates its uniqueness as a show. The series offers a political insight into the society that so many prestige dramas claim but fail to do so.

The storyline evolves on the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos at the end of a decade-long summer. It interweaves several plot lines. There are mentions about members from several noble houses in a civil war for the Iron Throne. It deals with rising threat of the impending winter and the mythical creatures of the North. There is literature on the attempts of the exiled last scion of the realm’s deposed dynasty to reclaim the throne and so on. The plot and the storyline depend largely on the period of the European history. A predominant inspiration for the novels was the English Wars of the Roses (1455–85) between the houses of Lancaster and York.

The series’ great popularity has in part been attributed to Martin’s skill at blending these disparate elements into a seamless whole that appears credible to stand as an alternative

history that appeals to the audience. The overall narrative is engaging due to its careful craft of uniting various historical locations, storylines and surprising unpredictable plot developments. It is highly addictive because one never knows what might happen in the next episode. There are a plenty of unexpected turnaround as most of the protagonists are killed or previously negative characters are shown in a more positive light.

#### VIII. TOPO FOCAL STORY TELLING

One of the features of the fantasy genre that has been left intact both in Martin's novels and in the TV series which is an adaptation is the strong emphasis on geography. The mapping of imaginary geographical spaces, as is so often the case with 'secondary worlds'. Set in the fictional world of Westeros, the audience is forced to know the geography of the place so as to follow the narrative and follow the characters' trajectories through this fictitious world. In many fantastical shows dealing with the development of imaginary worlds, there is an evident emphasis on mapping out the environment that shifts the audience's focus from the narrative's causal chain of events to the complex environment that sustains it, something Stefan Ekman refers to as a 'topo focal' – or place-centric – approach, in which setting is as important as the character and plot.

#### IX. DEATH OF THE OLD BREED

The first season revolves around 'survival of the fittest' and showcases that one who survives does not necessarily need to be 'devoted and loyal' instead should know how to play the 'Game of Thrones'. The death of the conventional hero sets the show in pace embarking that this show is not what we (audience) are expecting it to be. It is all about themes that are generally not talked about on other shows and platforms.

It is on how the old breed of male authority being replaced by the new. The old breed fits into what he has defined as the traditional medieval hero archetype as mentioned in the above paragraph. The concept of new breed is epitomized by the deaths of Jon Arryn, Robert Baratheon, and lastly Eddard (Ned) Stark, who come to represent the old breed; characterized as righteous and chivalrous. Holding a powerful place in the ruling class of Westeros where the action takes place, all these three characters have an intertwined relationship with one another: Robert Baratheon and Ned Stark sharing the bond of friendship were inseparable since childhood, and Jon Arryn was their mentor and father figure. Together they dethroned King Aerys II Targaryen, whom is referred to as the "Mad King." Their role in the rebellion fits with Campbell's (2008) explanation of the role of the archetypal hero, which is to overthrow the oppressive leader of the status quo. The Targaryens had been ruling for generations before the revolt, termed "Robert's Rebellion" ("The Kingsroad")

Together, these three characters won the battle and took power; Robert Baratheon acquired the throne and Jon Arryn

the right hand advisor. Ned returned to his pavilion in the North and continued to manage that part of the kingdom as his family has done for decades. Though these three characters are successful male leaders and rulers, they lack one important skill; the ability to play the game of thrones. The "game of thrones" refers to the power struggle between the ruling houses and leading heroes in Westeros. Considering the HBO series takes its name from this game, its importance to the plot of the narrative is blatant. Cerise Lannister's encapsulates the degree in which competency in the game matters: "When you play the game of thrones you win, or you lose your life. There is no middle ground". This means fighting, looting, betrayal, and manipulation are qualities inherent to success; the chivalrous has no room. Though Jon Arryn, Ned Stark, and Robert Baratheon had righteous intentions for leading the rebellion against the "Mad King," their idealism was unrealistic and proved to be the sole reason to their killing.

Their deaths are also symbolic, in that they crush audience's expectations that this narrative follow the traditional archetype of knightly tales of chivalry where goodness always triumphs evil.

#### X. START OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

The first season showcases number of characters displaying the characteristics of an archetypal hero. So as the season begins, the audience follows the trajectories of multiple heroes on their multiple journeys. The shifting nature of the structure and that the season has just begun, there is an uncertainty as to who will develop into the lead character and who will not. The audiences are left in bewilderment when the 'expected hero' is killed off at the end of the season. The most striking example of the ambiguity of this narrative is the death of the cookie cutter hero Ned Stark in the second the last episode of the season, "Baelo".

Of the characters who get by in season one, there is a sharp contrast between the individuals who apparently fit and the individuals who really fit the hero archetype. This difference is isolated between two components: (1) Those that have the outward or outside legitimization to be a legendary hero and (2) those that have the intrinsic characteristics of a hero archetype. These two elements are mutually exclusive in the season one. The individuals who have the outward legitimization to be a traditional archetypal hero meets the expectations in terms of lineage, social acceptance, appearance, yet do not have the internal qualities required. While, the individuals who display the inward qualities, which means they are both brave and honorable while having the capacity to play the game, for the most parts do not have the outward ones generally seen in an archetypal hero.

There is only one character that almost matches the glory and idealizes the hero archetype, 266he contains both the legitimate background and inner qualities to meet all of the elements of a hero defined though the traditional hero archetype outlined by Campbell (2008) and the contemporary popular culture depictions/expectations. This would be Robert (Robb) Stark, eldest son of Ned Stark. In regard to the traditional hero archetype, Robb accepts his call to action and begins his Hero's Journey by leading the Northern men to war

against the Lannisters to avenge his father's death at the end of the first season. He is later victorious on the battlefield, he exhibits himself to be a strong leader of men, and is intended on overthrowing the tyrannical rule of the king Joffrey Baratheon, Robert Baratheon, false heir. Considering the elements of contemporary popular culture hero, Robb fits these expectations as well. He is classically handsome with his dark curls, blue eyes, and enough facial hair to give him the rugged American sex appeal. Robb ultimately chooses true love over duty, a storyline that is inherent popular to narratives in Western culture. Though Robb fits perfectly into the hero archetype, like his father, his fatal flaw was his trust in the old ways of honor and loyalty. This leads to the murder of his wife, their unborn child, and himself in the infamous Red Wedding episode ("The Rains of Castamere," Season 3) as discussed above in the paper. Though Robb makes it more than halfway through the series, his death counts him out of the running as a lasting hero or truly recognized hero in the Game of Thrones narrative.

Regardless of all the enchantment and legendary animals; Game of Thrones is a tale about individuals. The thing the show does best is, highlight the absolute best and the exceedingly awful of people. Audience are presented with radiant heroes in shining armor and strong women who battle for their place in the Society.

At exactly that point they discover that these heroes are not all they appear as though; they are regularly presumptuous, vain, vicious or basically coldhearted and uninformed to the lives of those they claim to serve. The crowds likewise observe the turnaround where even the most terrible characters in the arrangement have their reclamations. The appeal is that Game Of Thrones has realistic 'grey' characters, which is a great deal all the more difficult and fortifying for audience to watch from a moral point of view instead of indiscriminately loving or hating clear cut heroes and villains.

## XI. CHARACTERS

The show has rich characters who are brilliant embodiments of their world and are tested by plot time and again. The most important, and strangely uncommon, practice of Martin writing his characters and the same applied in the show is creating a core wound and moral weakness and using plot to heal both.

The complex characters in the show are scarred by the world they live in. Tyrion and Jon, though privileged men, are at all times reminded of their exterior blemish, while Daenerys, Sansa and Arya are continuously taken too lightly for being women. They are oppressed into their role. As an audience you empathize with the characters for you have no idea what it is like to swing a sword but you know what it is like to feel left out or mocked or different from the rest.

Characters show resilience in the show. For instance, Cersei's society demands her to be a submissive wife with no power, and she is does as of expected from her to a certain extent while tricking everyone into thinking she does as she's supposed to.

Daenerys starts out being sold off as a slave and one expects the death of her character instead she takes it upon herself to execute power within that role.

The plot and character are considered to be equal in the conventional narrative. In Game of Thrones, the plot is subservient and chosen to enhance a character's development.

For instance, Tyrion yearning approval from his father, his ultimate core wound/ flaw is not his restricted physical development but that his lover was a prostitute his father disapproved of.

The core wound is a direct result from his own action/ flaw (affection for prostitutes) and into his weakness of trying to get his father's love.

Character development takes place throughout the season. Life lessons are taught to characters. Jon, for instance, in order to become the leader, must at first attain the required traits and qualities to lead. In the narrative therefore he loses his entitlement (The Night's Watch), imparted with scholarly knowledge (Sam), learns the inevitability of love (Ygritte) and understands the importance of empathy (learning Wildlings are humans too). Tyrion in his quest to help the entire kingdom has to fall out of love for Shae. He has to imbibe ruling skills, grow respect for women (being married to Sansa) and ultimately grow out of his father's love and affection (the murder of Tywin).

There is a learning taking place in all the characters, for instance Sansa while going through many failed marriages and dealings with all sorts of men. Arya learning physical skills (The House of Black and White) and losing love are all in purpose of her goal for revenge. Daenerys's impulsivity is tested at every turn as she tries to rule the kingdom.

The show thereby is tasteful to the bourgeois viewers. It plays with high-culture categories of authorship, unique narrative complexity, psychological realism, highly erotic scenes and violence to connect to a larger discourse of quality television that is innovative and 'edgy'. It is because of shows like Game of Thrones that other shows are taking inspiration from and following its lead.

## XII. UNPREDICTABILITY AND VIOLENCE IN GAME OF THRONES

'The Red Wedding' scene is rated as one of the most shocking and controversial scenes of the series. As the name suggests, it has in fact adapted the most violent and controversial moments from the novels by making them more extreme than the already established source texts. For instance, the mass murder that takes place onscreen involves not only the dreadful deaths of the leading characters Robb and Catelyn Stark, but also that of Robb's pregnant fiancée, whose belly is graphically stabbed numerous times before her throat is finally cut. The show runners thus made the scene not only as graphically violent as possible, but a great deal, more upsetting and controversial, resulting in a getting traction on media that once again emphasized the show's 'gritty' and 'uncompromising' authenticity. This moment and others like it demonstrates clearly that Game of Thrones goes against the traditional formulaic TV narratives, in which the most offensive elements are either removed or softened.

Parr says, "Game of Thrones is engaging" because it continues to disrupt audience's expectations. Important characters are killed off unexpectedly and often brutally as described above. This character carnage violates expectations for a continuing television series.

A typical series keeps both the protagonist and the villain intact from episode to episode and season to season, making drastic changes only rarely. Often, no change occurs until an actor cannot, or will not, continue in a role. Game of Thrones, in contrast, frequently sacrifices the leading hero for the sake of the plot. It is the 'unpredictability' as exclaimed by Los Angeles Irish actor Liam Cunningham that keeps the audiences glued.

### XIII. HBO AND THE FUTURE OF CABLE TV

Netflix and Hulu are predicted to fully take over the business of HBO. As per the statistics from the Business Insider 2015 reports, the annual subscription revenue of Netflix is accounted for 6.1 billion\$ as opposed to 4.7 billion\$ by HBO. These two are currently the dominant companies in the relatively young and hugely expensive on-demand entertainment industry. By providing on-demand content, creating compelling original shows, using user data to better satisfy customers and letting customers consume content in the way that they prefer, Netflix is changing the game altogether. In the long-run, Netflix's success may be viewed as the first step in the unbundling of cable.

Netflix has content that comprise of movies, documentaries, TV shows and educational programs. Customers pay a monthly fee and can consume content as per their likes and availability of time; further more from whichever platform they choose. In a sense, it is the first major disruption of television, which has become the dominant medium since its foundation in the middle of the 20th century.

HBO and other cable subscribers are worried that an increasing percentage of viewers are opting for streaming services from Netflix and Hulu. In coming years, these streaming services will continue to double down on original content. According to a recent Forrester Research study cited by The Wall Street Journal states only 50% of all TV viewers by 2025 will consume content via traditional cable TV. The

statistics demonstrates how cable subscriptions will gradually trend downwards over the past few years while Netflix subscriptions will skyrocket.

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