Re(a)d Wedding: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of Fan Responses to Game of Thrones

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It is no exaggeration to say that HBO's *Game of Thrones* is more than just a television series or a successful brand: it is a transmedia system in the sense first used by Marsha Kinder (1991) and popularized by Henry Jenkins (2006), in which media-hopping networks of intertextualities extend the "storyworld" of an original production. Now spanning six seasons and 60 episodes, with an average global viewership (from its most recent season) of 25.1 million viewers per episode (Shepherd, 2016), it has spawned five video games, a graphic novel adaptation, several companion books, two rap albums, a 28-city orchestral tour, a wide variety of tabletop games, toys, merchandise and mobile apps, and countless podcasts, fanfics and other fan-based creations. Given the volume of content this represents, it is easy to forget that the television series itself is an adaptation of a book series with a pre-existing fandom. As such, the *Game of Thrones* storyworld represents a remarkably rich and challenging environment for fans old and new, who must negotiate an increasingly complex network of paratexts and intertexts in order to fully engage with its narratives.

In this sense, fans of the series represent an emerging model for cultural consumption that should be carefully explored. Transmedia systems, like that exemplified by *Game of Thrones*, are becoming increasingly prevalent (e.g., *Star Wars, Harry Potter, The Walking Dead,* the Marvel Cinematic Universe, etc); these systems demonstrate, in microcosm, the global challenge of managing the fire-hose flow of information in contemporary postdigital society. The study of how people, as fans, access and manage information within a transmedia system provides valuable insight that contributes not only to practitioners and scholars of the media industry, but to the wider context of cultural studies, by offering findings on this new model of the fan as consumer and information-user. For us, as digital humanists, defining the "transmedia fan" is of particular relevance as we seek to understand contemporary social and cultural transformations engendered by digital technologies.

Methodology

As a first step in defining the "transmedia fan", the current project undertakes a comparative discourse analysis of online conversations of *Game of Thrones* fans. One of the most dramatic plot developments in the source material (Martin, 2000) was adapted to the screen in the penultimate episode of the third season, "The Rains of Castamere" (Benioff & Weiss, 2013). Readers of the book series had long anticipated and dreaded the events of the "Red Wedding", while fans of the show unfamiliar with Martin's narrative were largely taken unawares by the pivotal episode.

Since the television series' inception, writers at *The AV Club* have written two critical reviews for each episode: one for viewers familiar with the books (i.e., "Experts") and one for viewers unfamiliar with the books and averse to "spoilers" (i.e., "Newbies"). What results are two completely separate reviews of "The Rains of Castamere" which in turn document the fans' reactions to the episode in the form of user comment threads: one comment thread where fans were expected to be shocked by the outcome of the episode and one comment thread where fans had hotly anticipated it.

As a pilot project, the current work takes the content of both comment threads—a corpus of approximately 5,600 comments—and analyzes each thread separately using a qualitative coding method aligned with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Through this analysis, a categorization of themes emerges illustrating tactics for negotiating intertexts and paratexts unique to each group of fans. These themes fall under two broad categories: sentimental negotiation (i.e., emotional responses) and tactical negotiation (i.e., cognitive, or reasoned responses). A comparison of categories and sub-categories between both groups provides preliminary findings to support an emergent model, or models, of the "transmedia fan".

Conclusion

The present research represents a first step in exploring the impact of transmedia systems, as exemplified by *Game of Thrones*, through the study of fans. The question posed by this research is, fundamentally, an examination of how the problem of "access" is framed

in postdigital society from the perspective of the consumer. Future research should explore the negotiation tactics observed in transmedia fans using the principles of De Certeau's (1984) everyday life practice, in order to extend its application to the broader context of modern-day consumers. The current study will contribute to the development of further qualitative and quantitative research that will more clearly define the information behaviors of the transmedia fan. This project is of relevance to researchers in media studies, fan studies, information studies and digital humanities

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