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Parasitical Stories, Narrative Viruses and Hybrid Storytelling in Fantasy Cinema and Culture

Abstract:

The main argument of the paper is that recent cinema is abandoning the traditional linearity of narrations and the “classical” storytelling forms, and is cultivating new hybrid narrative structures, under the influence of games and online structures. Starting from the fact that narratives are forms of order making, by which humanity intends to make sense of the world, we have reached a moment in our cultural history when storytelling has become a machine of meaningless meanings. Using *Game of Thrones* as an example of storytelling transformations, the main aim of this study is to discuss how a combination of cartoonish characters, graphic novels and comic book strategies, soap opera and TV series drama structures has created a *narrative of uncertainty*. The narratives of G.R.R. Martin are heavily influenced by the fantasy worlds of MMORPG and of online gaming – the argument being that the continuously morphing and growing nature of storytelling, together with the unstable character of the universe and the improbable traits of the characters, are part of a phenomenon which can be called *Massive Multiple-Options Relations of People and Culture*. Using the concept put forward by Buckland, that of puzzle plots in contemporary cinema, and the concept of convergence culture, an idea developed by Jenkins, the author interprets the narrative “entanglement” in the *Game of Thrones* saga as emblematic for the disorienting imaginaries of humanity today. With an apparent limitless evolution of the storytelling lines, where the fantasy experience continues to develop incessantly, we witness the development of a global *hodgepodge saga*, manifesting as a true pathology of narrative monstrosity. Re-mixing ice demons, zombie slaves and fire dragons, witches and evil priestesses, chivalrous heroes and monsters with no humanity, heraldry and criminal nomads, the HBO television series has generated a fictional world populated with hybrid themes and parasitical story lines and cultural viruses.

Keywords: Game of Thrones, storytelling, digital narratives, fantasy, MMORPG, online games story-lines, media and multimedia.

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The cultural impact of the unreliability principle

The fantasy novels published by George R. R. Martin (GRRM) are often hailed as the greatest epics of modern times; some authors even describe them as having all the necessary ingredients for “great literature” (Lowder, xviii).

This flood-like saga, generically called “The Game of Thrones” (GoT), is reaching today global audiences and is influencing hundreds of millions of readers and viewers, generating what Johnston and Battis have identified as “the Martinverse”. Books, television series, graphic novels, wild cards and video games, social games and special anthologies of quotes and, of course, various merchandise like mock-up weapons and toys are based on these fantastic stories about wars, kings and strange beings. There are fans who speak the Dothraki conlanguage of the Martinverse while other GoT devotees even started naming their babies after some of the strangest characters, like Khaleesi or Arya and even Tyrion (Bologna 2015). GoT even has several cookbooks, which offer the possibility to eat “Westeros foods”. Various narrative offshoots like *The Wits and Wisdom of Tyrion Lannister* (2013) provide behavioral advice for society. The question is how the Martiverse is functioning and what are the influences that allowed its development.

One thing is clear, this imaginary universe created by GRMM is constantly multiplying and is now an undeniable cultural phenomenon – most recently integrated in intellectual and academic discourses. Oxford University has announced a special course on GoT, after Northern Illinois University was among the first to offer such an academic recognition to GRRM (ABC News), while the University of Virginia introduced the HBO series spin-off in their curriculum (The Telegraph 2014). Since the publishing of *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASoIaF), the first GoT novel issued in 1996, the American author has written about 2 million words, the double of those in the Bible! In an unexpected turn of events, after the books began to be adapted for the homonymous HBO TV series, Martin had to speed up his writing process, since the cinematic production moved faster than the writing process (Martin interview 2011). The production of the two directors, David Benioff and DB Weiss, added to the popularity generated by 25 million books sold worldwide (2014 data), with three million viewers per episode in season one, growing to over 3.8 million in season two, reaching 4.97 million in season three and 6.85 million in season four, in an ever increasing appetite for GRMM’s characters and plots.

There is clear argument to be made that GoT is part of a wider phenomenon, a new media culture which is increasingly dominating our creative interchanges. If there is a cultural trend, this can be defined as the *emergence* of the *convergence* culture – using the concept frame put forward by Henry Jenkins when interpreting other global cult products like *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix* or *The Sims*. We live in a culture in which monolithic and traditional media are replaced by de-centered, ever growing, trans-media environments, where every content is created so that it can cross multiple platforms. This, in turn, is transforming not only our cultural experiences, but also our storytelling practices. Now layers upon layers of narratives and characters are transferred freely from one medium into another, from one source to another, finally creating a *synergistic* way of storytelling (Jenkins, 101) or, I would rather say, a *massively morphing* narrative machine.

There is a side-effect to this process, one which the optimistic view of the widely democratized technologies is often ignoring – that of the general convergence (and confusion) of contents. These new forms of narration, which are discarding the “classical” storytelling structures, are in the meantime abandoning not only the traditional linearity of narrations, but are also rejecting the building blocks of what Lowe calls the “Western narrative” (Lowe 2000). This type of narrativity, which has dominated our cultures for millennia, based on unity and linearity, governed by clarity and stability, is no longer central to the build-up of our “media converging” imaginaries. Again, following Lowe, who has linked the “classical plotting” to Aristotle’s structural perspective, a unity which was inherent to almost all Western narrative forms, from tragedies to comedies, from short stories to short films, is now substituted with more “complex” and definitely more uncertain formulas.

The “old” storytelling forms, based on the economy of resources and the deep inclination for order, have gradually been replaced by *unreliable* narration forms (Booth 1961). This means that the values of “order and closure” have step-by-step been converted into “chaotic openness”, into the amorphous and perpetually changeable attributes of the new media. This turn can be seen expressed in the numerous manifestations of the new narrativity in our cinema and media culture. We can describe this dislocation from coherence to instability, from harmonious and balanced representations to the predilection for the disconnected and the disturbed, as a “narrative turn”. As Landow plausibly points out, the change from *order* to *disorientation* is a characteristic of the hypermedia world (Landow 2006). Originality, authority and stability are replaced by multiplicity, fluidity and discontinuity. The traditional texts have become hypertexts, and due to the multiplicity of contexts in which information is transmitted, any textual referencing loses stability. The *hyper-world* has no more sense of limitation, nor does it have boundaries, every content being just the appurtenance of an indistinct conveyor, one which can be agglutinated into newer and newer messages. GoT is such a *convergent narration*, a fantasy world perfectly adapted for all media, from reading to television and video gaming – it is a manifestation of a storytelling practice that is so massive and diverse that it can easily be transformed by simplification and repackaged into its diminutive form.

Even if the main narrative theories that are trying to explain this movement find correspondent occurrences in works like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or in authors like Beckett, where there is an explicit fascination for the displacement of authority, it is in contemporary graphic novels and cartoons, in cross-media environments, in recent cinema and especially in online narratives that the most important descriptors for these changes come about. There is a “pleasure of disorientation”, one that Landow proposes as trait of the hypertext, one which is practically necessary since online resources are so vast that only by accepting disorientation does any positioning become possible. This predisposition is particularly visible in some recent cinematic narrations, an excellent example of how the device works being Christopher Nolan’s film

Memento (2000). When Warren Buckland put forward the concept of *puzzle films*, in order to theorize on the transformations happening in contemporary cinema (Buckland 2009), the question was how and why some of the latest narratives had been distancing from the classical structures. Clearly, more and more movie plots are simply becoming “entangled” (Buckland, 3) and storytellers are taking the path of uncertainty. As another major film critic has put it, storytellers actually play mind-games with their viewers with the purpose of disturbing their certainties in order to generate “delight” (Elsaesser 2009, 15).

Even if for some other authors, like Kristin Thompson, there is no post-classical cinema (9), and the classical narrations continue to be told in their traditional way – with unity, clarity and causal development (10) still functioning – the signs of this transformation are everywhere. However, even when discussing the most recent movies, which seem to be based on a “clarity of comprehension”, qualifying them as “modern classicism or an “enduring classicism” (44), Kristin Thomson’s assumptions accept that adding new twists to old stories is the fundamental ingredient of contemporary moviemaking. What is the source of this change? As noted by Elsaesser, under the pressure of computer and video games narratives, the Hollywood narratives and, as I will try to prove further, those of contemporary literature are progressively governed by a *multimodal* logic (Elsaesser 2009, 22).

Of course, just like in the other, more “traditional” forms of narration, in game development there is the option between two basic types of storytelling progression: linear and non-linear. Games like Tetris do not need anything else but a stable playing environment. Yet, as many game designers have realized, computer games are omnipresent spaces, oriented toward interaction (Adams, 221-222). More importantly, game designers use storytelling as “narrative blocks” (Adams, 215), a model that allows for an ever-growing and branching structure of the central narrative. There is an apparent “complexity” of these new narratives, yet their inherent inclination for confusion is altering our perception of human relationships and of reality.

MMORPG narrations and game-like storytelling

In the following discussion, the central hypothesis would be that the narratives created by GRRM display a clear influence from the fantasy worlds of online gaming and especially of the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game) subcultures. Of course, *GoT* is massive in sheer terms of size – a single volume wrote by GRMM is equivalent to all three of the already grandiose *Lord of the Rings* saga. The author himself is conscious of the massive nature of his work – as GRRM told the producers of HBO, his *Song of Ice and Fire* was “too big... too complicated... too expensive” to produce (Cogman 2012) to become a TV series (or a single movie, for that matter). Still, this massive narration shares the philosophy of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game and has generated a fictional world populated with copies the real-world as it was easily transformed into the fascinating HBO series. Actually

the HBO adaptations and their subsequent success have shown the true possibilities of the limitless evolution of these narratives. The fantasy experience continues to grow incessantly, in a constant complication of interactions and of characteristics. Just like the many worlds of the MMORPG, GoT it is continuously morphing and growing, swallowing hybrid themes and storytelling elements. We can describe this as a new *pathology of narrative monstrosity*, which, beyond the apparent sophistication, is a suitable deception for perpetuating promiscuous combinations. The final result is a *mélange* of half-digested psychoanalytical instances, re-agglutinated fantasy creatures, re-mixing legends and myths in a totally freakish storytelling form.

The argument here is that GoT is heavily influenced by the MMORPG narrative mechanisms, one that can be witnessed in the way the elements are combined through the continuous morphing of familiar stories and the ever growing nature of the storytelling. Together with the unstable character of the narrative worlds and the improbable traits of the characters, the Martinverse should be related to a broader phenomenon which I would call *Massive Multiple-Options Relations of People and Cultures* (MMORPC). These hybrid cultures and manifestations mark the similarity between GoT and World of Warcraft (WoW), as one of the most important Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games today, where the creation of a universe with multiple versions, populated with different groups and various improbable cultures is a final goal – that works exactly the same in MMORPC.

MMORPC functions like a microcosm populated with parasitical mythological formations. MMORPC works like a virtual social environment, where politics and social dynamics are mimicked to such an extent that they become more than real. Just like in the role-playing games, where we are exposed to behaviors which seem to be human – intrigues, conspiracies and goals that are almost tangible – the Martinverse generates a more-than-real world due to its ability to enact interactions that imitate life-like situations. Yet the mechanisms of the GoT world are governed by an exaggeration that is specific to “role playing” – something that Fine (1983) described as engrossment through theatricality. In a role-playing universe where the designer controls the dimensions and the complexity of the relationships, the reality is disconcertingly twisted by maintaining the illusion of reality. In GoT we are witnessing this unnatural enhancement through exaggerated incestuous sexual dynamics, gratuitous brutality and a certain degree of moral and mythological promiscuity, presented in attractive circumstances.

Another trait of the basic “role playing” environment is the special selection of positioning; in the game world one can choose an identity from a finite preset of options – and most of the times the players are opting, at different times, for several identities online. For example WoW has two main factions (the Alliance and the Horde), each with six different races, thus WoW has 12 races (or factions) Humans, Dwarfs, Draenei, Night Elves and Worgen opposed to Orcs, Undead, Trolls, Tauren, Goblins and Blood Elves. The same amalgamated ethnicities are apparent in GoT where the

ethnic traits follow primitive manifestations, borrowed from an undifferentiated humanity. For example the Baratheons are dark haired and blue eyed, while their enemies – the Lannisters – are blonde with green eyes. The Starks have black hair and grey eyes while the Targaryens are white haired, pale skinned and have purple eyes. This fragmentation of the factions and of social traits allows the reader to assume a game-like experience, one in which he can take several sides. The author of GoT is basically writing as if he were constructing a role-playing structure in a video game.

Kendall Walton (1990) has used the term “make-believe” in order to describe the ability of fiction and of any fictional games to generate a connection of our brain with a world that is only apparently real. In this seemingly real existence the promiscuous nature of narrations becomes useful, since a player can act as a character, belonging to a certain identity or a group for a while, and then, sometimes immediately afterwards, can choose to play with the opposing group or hero. Tavinor took this idea and described its role in *interactive fictions* (Tavinor 2009). These forms of fictionality function totally different from the “traditional” interactivity, mostly due to the connection between the characters and the players in game-worlds. And this is where GRMM’s narratives function from the very beginning like a role-playing game, the Martinverse is base on this conceptualization. It is explicit as early as the first book of the saga, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (AsoIaF) where GRRM purposefully chooses to change the voice of each character with each new chapter, generating a disconcerting connection between the reader and the story. Role playing was taken to another level.

More so, just like in the game developed by Blizzard, where there are hundreds of characters made possible by the dispersion of sub-races, GoT proliferates numerous ethnicities and, through inter-changeable characteristics, allows multiple connectivity. From kings and princes to slave traders and prostitutes, from eunuchs and eunuch soldiers (the Unsullied) to bastards and orphans who are roaming the land, there are numerous possible connections that we can make within this pretense reality. The more disconcerting, the better. Just like the wargs and other animistic mind controllers are taking possession of the minds of animals, GRRM is seducing us with ice demons, zombie slaves and fire dragons, witches and priestesses, chivalrous heroes and monsters with no humanity, in a multifaceted, multi-optional connectedness. Just as the religions in Martinverse are multifaceted – the Sept, the Westeros official religion is dominated by seven god, three female and three male, with one of indistinct gender – this game-like universe provides vast possibilities of immersion.

The game-like inspiration is transparent everywhere, yet it is in the external structure of the GoT universe that it is explicit – this is not only apparently simplistic, but it is also purposefully childish. Martin basically builds upon unsophisticated – even naïve – elements. Just as with ethnicities, GRRM often plays with colors in order to capture our attention – we have the Red Wedding and a Blackwater Bay – color attribution being a technique often used in games. Another tool is the “development” around basic and natural elements – here we have the elementary contraction between ice and

fire, with iron and sand as secondary materials. But the Martinverse seems even more childish when it is de-constructed at its core, where we can clearly see the constant accumulations of numbers, just like in the old children's song: Nine great houses, Seven Kingdoms, Five Kings and so on and so on.

The typifications continue at the level of geographic identifications; just like in WoW, where there is a mainland (Azeroth) and a secondary world (Draenor), GoT is basically composed of two opposing spaces. Unlike J.R.R. Tolkien's complex Middle-earth, the World of Westeros is a transparent version of the Mediterranean basin, where the North is similar to Scotland, Sothoryos is Africa and Essos is Asia. Yet it is essentially a clash between the North and the South, since The Seven Kingdoms are obviously built just like the British Islands, we even have in the North the The Wall, which is transparently mimicking by exaggeration Hadrian's wall in Northern England.

Fantasy epidemics, parasitical story-lines

Another characteristic of the GoT universe, which makes it similar to the WoW world, is its ability to constantly expand, in a viral manner. This can be described as the *expansion principle* of the digital narratives, which in turn becomes the viral expansion of storytelling. Even in physical terms, the GoT saga is growing just like a cancerous outbreak. Just like WoW, now having millions of subscribers, with 4 expansion packs, all spreading out from the initial storyline, GoT spread out into a promised seven installments, from what was initially announced as a trilogy then GRRM promised a five books pack.

How is this narrative viral epidemic functioning, what is the contagion principle of the infection? To simply put it, the diagnostic is similar to any pathological transmission of bacteria or any other parasitical microorganisms. A healthy body, in this case a familiar story, is contaminated then transformed into a new form of life. In the digital imaginaries of contemporary culture this has become a widespread "disease". It is an indicator of the "cut-copy-paste" culture (Sonvilla-Weiss 2014), a culture of free substitutions, of possible transmutations by replacement and imitation, all made possible by the "free sharing" of contents.

The GoT universe is essentially a re-digested version of multiple, "healthy" narratives. These are "borrowed stories", from various and incongruent sources such as the Egyptian family feuds and promiscuous relations, to the revival of the barbarian migrations (Jones 2013). As properly noted by Jessica Walker (2015), many stories from Westeros plainly re-enact situations from the War of Roses and other historical events. The Lannisters are more or less similar to the Lancastrians while the Baratheons are Yorks. Other critics link the conflict between the houses with the One Hundred War between the Capetian and the Plantagenets, and, as GRRM himself acknowledged, a major source of his parasitical inspiration is the French epic of Maurice Druon, who wrote the story of the "accursed kings", *Les Rois Maudits* (Druon 2013). Just as the Druon, GRRM at his turn uses this source of literary guidance borrowing freely from the lives

of the last Capetian kings. Relevantly enough, the first book of the French saga is entitled *The Iron King*, with a clear connection to the Iron Throne is GRRM's vision – the author of *GoT* even signed the introduction to the English version of *Druon*, published in 2013.

As many fans and critics noticed – one of the best resources is Jamie Adair, who collected some of the most striking similarities in her blog <http://history-behind-game-of-thrones.com> – some links to classical narratives are overt and explicit referenced. In fact *King's Landing* is a *mélange* of *Beowulf* and the Nordic Sagas, the story follows a mythological architecture which is part of many ancient stories. Some authors have called this process *neomedievalism*, the fascination of contemporary creators with the Medieval time. Again, I would attribute this *mélange* of elements from various medieval sources to the simple necessity of the *cut-copy-paste culture*, that is the ability to use resources which are free from copyright. The further the parasitical referencing goes in time, the easier is to freely agglutinate elements. This is why mythological figures, legendary characters and narrative practices are based on multiple narrative environments, and this is why these narratives tend to limitlessly expand into many other narrative spaces. Not only that the Mad King of the House of Targaryen was morphed after Shakespeare's crazy kings, but the menacing "white walkers" are merely zombies re-coalesced with the wizards from *Dungeons and Dragons*, the Eunuch warriors (the Unullied) are clearly morphed after the Ottoman Janissary, and the Dothraki are nothing but Mongolians mingled with the Huns.

Some authors have described this as the eternal return of narratives in popular culture, where the subsequent recycling is part of the postmodern practices (Dika 2003). I believe we should oppose these parasitical forms of storytelling to classical narrative practices to a perplexing state of mind that goes beyond postmodernity. If classical narrations were forms of order-making – the cognitive assumption being that we listen and tell stories because we want to make sense of the world – this new type of "game narration" is governed by the *improvisational* dimension of the first-person player's universe (Pearce 2004). As David Herman convincingly has puts it, narratives are "instruments of our minds" (Herman 2003) – for the cognitive narratology there is a deep human desire for fiction based on the need to immerse in the behaviors of other. The huge change happens when the immersion is virtual, removed from our experience of life as chronologically linear.

In this respect GRRM operates like a digital storyteller, one that has abandoned the "classical" narrative in order to develop a "metastory" similar to role-playing games where, even if there is a storyline, a central narrative frame, this is designed to allow the spread of "interactive narratives", where the players are exposed to multiple, non-linear paths. This is a vast narration without a main character – and the absence of the Protagonist is even more puzzling, since even those characters that manage to develop, such as Snow, end up dead. In the multiple-characters worlds that provide multiple-perspectives the stability is unimportant. As noted before, *AsoIaF* is narrat-

ed from the perspective of eight characters (Arya, Bran, Catelyn, Daenerys, Eddard, Jon, Sansa and Tyrion), and even if there are no first-person voices, the possibility of the constant shift in viewpoints makes the reader's position unstable. Although this is not an innovative way of telling stories, as Rick Altman identified the "multiple-focus narrative" in many other instances there is a relevant difference from the wonderful *Alexandria Quartet*, where Durrell uses this technique of shifting perspectives, or, as in the classical example from the history of cinema, where Akira Kurosawa uses in *Rashomon* several points of view in order to generate a puzzled narrative, the gaming storyteller follows another nonlinearity.

I would call this the *incoherent coherence* – where predictability is replaced by unpredictability and the mixing of genres and elements reaches paroxysmal horizons, with the multiplication of plot lines growing exponentially. Just like in the online and the virtual worlds today multiple choices are privileged, opposed to the univocal perspective of the "traditional" media, GoT is a manifestation of a moment in our cultural history when fictionalization has become a machine of meaningless mutations. GRRM is bringing together elements of horror, sexual drama, romance and thriller, action and adventure, in a total "narrative hopscotch". GRRM builds fictions societies and characters that are mashed-up psychological, sociological and political artifacts. In the Martinverse Roman histories and Medieval legends are re-mixed, zombies and ghouls are combining in the White Forrest and produces a degraded storytelling by the dilution of narrative substance.

Even though GRRM is applauded as the master of the unpredictable plots, the changeable nature of his stories, with plots constantly moving and and with characters shifting and disappearing make the GoT saga an example of how the *culture of online games* has deeply influenced our imaginaries. Heralded as a global tale, with the support of a popular TV series – which is produced while the books are still written – proves to be nothing but a story written as it goes, which makes it a product of uncertainty, one which is subject to any whimsical transformation. Even if some critics, like Adam Whitehead, identified this uncertainty with a positive effect, where producing an "unreliable world" is part of its attraction (Whitehead in Lowder), the problems presented by this unreliability still come forth as by-products of a massive mélange of elements. At the end, Game of Thrones is nothing but a heavy combination of cartoons, graphic novels and comic books, soap opera and dramatic elements from serialized television dramas, which does nothing more than retelling the classics.

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