

Branding *Game of Thrones* Across Media: HBO's Visual Creation of a Brand Identity

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Abstract

Starting as a series of fantasy novels by George R. R. Martin in 1996 and adapted as a television drama series by HBO in 2011, *Game of Thrones* is one of the most popular examples of what is sometimes referred to as transmedia narratology. Its storyworld has, namely, expanded across a range of HBO official and licenced products and platforms, from board games to video games, dedicated websites and collectibles. With the series, the network has developed a particular visual identity for the franchise. The aim of this chapter is to uncover the various elements of this visual identity and to discover if the storytelling across the various media platforms matches the visual universe established by the television show, that is to say if the visual elements characteristic of the series can be found across the different media. In other words, is there a coherent identity in all the products associated with HBO's *Game of Thrones* or can we find visual discrepancies in the individual media iterations? To do so, this study will attempt to distinguish the visual features that characterise *Game of Thrones* as a brand. Building on Barthes' semiotic approach (1957), on studies of transmedia narratology (Ryan, 2004; Jenkins, 2008; Mittell, 2015) and on research exploring the relationship between marketing and transmedia storytelling (Bourdaa, 2014), this study offers an in-depth analysis of the series' visual identity as it is created on different media sites.

Keywords Game of Thrones; Transmedia; Storyworld; Merchandizing; HBO

1. Transmediality in Game of Thrones

“The 21st century has seen the rise of innovative narrative extensions grouped under the term transmedia storytelling, significantly expanding the scope of a television series into an array of other media, from books to blogs, videogames to jigsaw puzzles” (Mittell, 2015: 180). This is how Jason Mittell starts his chapter on transmedia storytelling in *Complex TV*. Discussing the notion of transmedia storytelling as described by Jenkins (2008), he redefines the term in order to adapt it to the current media situation. And indeed, many of today’s media franchises, whether they are television series, video games or movies, extend beyond the narrow scope of their “original” medium to reach out to other media and platforms. For Henry Jenkins, who coined the term “transmedia storytelling”, this situation is no surprise, for it is very much in the commercial interests of entertainment industries to create transmedia franchises. As Jenkins observes: “There is a strong interest in integrating entertainment and marketing, to create strong emotional attachments and use them to make additional sales” (2008: 104). Jenkins calls this integration “synergy” (Jenkins, 2008: 104) and considers it to be a visible trend in today’s entertainment industry. *Game of Thrones* is no exception to this rule.

Game of Thrones started life in 1996 as a series of fantasy novels written by George R. R. Martin under the title *A song of ice and fire*. It was adapted as a television show by HBO in 2011. Since then, it has expanded its storyworld across a range of products and platforms and has acquired the status of a transmedia franchise. *Game of Thrones* is more than an example of complex TV. With *Game of Thrones*, we have what Jenkins calls “complex stories” that expand “the range of narrative possibility rather than pursuing a single path with a beginning, middle, and end” (2008: 119). These stories take on an additional life beyond that of the original manifestation and extend to products and platforms created by and under the management of the HBO network. They are therefore an example of transmedia narratology, which Irina Rajewsky describes as “the appearance of a certain motive, aesthetic, or discourse across a variety of different media” (Rajewsky, 2005). *Game of Thrones* is also a case of adaptation, which has been described by Kamilla Elliott as “incarnational”, allowing a more material access to the franchise. Indeed, for Kamilla Elliott, the incarnational aspect of adaptation “makes adaptation a process of incarnation from more abstract to less abstract signs. The words, which merely hint at sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell, tantalize readers into longing for their incarnation in signs offering more direct access to these phenomenological experiences” (Elliott, 2004: 235). However, the recurrent appearances of a feature across media are accompanied by discrepancies in the way they appear. As a matter of fact, different media use different modes of narration. A story such as *Cinderella* is different according to whether it is presented

in book form, is told orally or is recounted in a movie. Hence, for Jan Noel Thon, “*transmedial narratology should focus on the examination of various transmedia phenomena and strategies of narrative representation across a range of narrative media, acknowledging both similarities and differences in the ways these media narrate*” (Thon, 2004: 26). This is the perspective this work intends to take. Through looking closely at *Game of Thrones*, we will examine the recurrence of certain visual motifs across a variety of media and platforms, paying particular attention to the differences in the narrative strategies employed in each. Nevertheless, we will bear in mind that, despite these discrepancies, all these transmedia phenomena are essentially involved in telling the same story. Indeed, for Claude Bremond, we should clearly differentiate the story from the medium in which it is being articulated:

[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow. And it could be the same story (Bremond in Ryan, 2004: 1).

This study of a transmedia franchise will focus on the transmedial aspect but still observe how the features of transmedia narratology fit into the whole story. Contrary to views expressed by many contemporary observers, we believe that even practices apparently as trivial as merchandizing can be considered to be parts of a story and, potentially, enriching elements for both the franchise and its fans. According to Marie-Laure Ryan: “*the study of narrative across media [...] focuses on the embodiment, that is to say, the particular semiotic substance and the technological mode of transmission of narrative. Its categories are language, image, sound, gesture, and further, spoken language, writing cinema, radio, television, and computers*” (Ryan, 2004: 1). In the present work, we will add two more components to these categories: products and platforms.

In order to spread the narrative across diverse media forms, HBO had to create recognizable features that would anchor the different media products and platforms within the same storyworld. To do so, HBO-*Game of Thrones* has developed a particular visual identity for the franchise. The aim of this chapter is to uncover what this visual identity is and to establish whether the storytelling devices and techniques across the various media platforms are consistent with the visual universe established by the television show. Is there a coherent visual identity in all the products associated with HBO’s *Game of Thrones* or can we find semiotic breaches in the storytelling when we compare the respective media presentations?

2. Game of Thrones' storyworld

In order to answer this question, we first need to determine the various elements that combine to make up the franchise's "visual universe" and to establish what we mean by "HBO-*Game of Thrones*' products and platforms". So far, we have distinguished three main types of merchandizing associated with *Game of Thrones*: 1) HBO official merchandizing, the type that is produced by the network and sold on its official website;¹ 2) HBO-*Game of Thrones* licensed artefacts, items made by third parties but recognized by HBO as official products and primarily offered for sale on the official website; 3) unofficial merchandizing, including *Game of Thrones*' products not made by HBO and sold on other platforms, and fans' own creations. To these, we shall also add the various official and fan-made websites, forums and social media pages.

These cross-media developments have proved to be necessary in order to respond to the demands of fans and to those of the market. As Matt Hills claims in *Fan cultures* (2002), fans, in spite of their resistance to rampant commercialism, are never really able to distance themselves from the commodifying practices that surround their object of fandom. Transmediality is thus required to improve fans' experience through their deeper immersion in the world that has been created by HBO. In addition, these objects and platforms serve another purpose: they help advertise the forthcoming release of the next season of the show while keeping the fans immersed in the *Games of Thrones*' storyworld. It can be argued that the products and platforms that HBO has developed round *Games of Thrones* provide proof of fans' engagement with regard to the fandom universe, reinforcing Hill's claim that fans are "commodity-completists" (Hills, 2002: 19), that is to say, they are always looking to possess as much as they can of their object of fandom.

We are using here the word "immersion", and not "expansion", contrary to what is generally used for other objects of fandom. HBO-*Game of Thrones* indeed presents an experience of transmedia narratology, but its narrative is classically constructed. This means that the official transmedia experience of HBO-*Game of Thrones* does not develop the storyworld, nor does it expand the fans' knowledge of it. The world of *Game of Thrones* does not expand further than what the series shows on screen. *Game of Thrones*' official universe (we are here setting aside the fan-made creations which are the subject of another chapter) allows fans to immerse themselves in it, particularly through the various official platforms, media and products. However, it doesn't allow fans to either discover an expansion of it nor to expand it themselves, for nothing in these products and platforms is new to the storyworld. Everything in the official universe is drawn from the show and it

1 <https://www.hboshopeco.com/fr/fr/emissions/game-of-thrones.html?rel=1>.

is thus already known by the fans. The only exception to this assertion is *Game of Thrones*' video games, which are both expansions of the storyworld and immersions into it. As a matter of fact, the video games allow fans to dive into the fictional world of *Game of Thrones* while creating new stories for the player to discover. They create minor side stories linked to the major narrative strands of the series. However, gamers cannot set out on their own journeys to discover more about the world of *Game of Thrones*. They need to stay on the path created by the developers, which narrows down their freedom and thus the expansion of the universe.

We need, then, to clarify what we should include in HBO-*Game of Thrones*' products and platforms. In this analysis, we will only look at HBO official, licensed products and platforms, in other words *Game of Thrones*' official merchandizing and websites. The products include the 25 pages and 386 articles of merchandizing that can be found on the HBO European online shop.² This comprises both HBO-produced items and the HBO-licensed products that can be purchased from the HBO store. These licensed products are the Funko and Dark Horse collectibles³ and the Risk and Monopoly board games.⁴ Since the *Game of Thrones* video games have been made by different companies and they are sold on various platforms but not on the HBO website, they will not be included in this study. The platforms studied are the official HBO-*Game of Thrones*' websites, composed of the *Game of Thrones*' website on HBO platform⁵ and the *Game of Thrones*' Viewer's Guide website.⁶

3. Transmedia extensions and paratexts

Promotional websites and merchandizing products are described as “transmedia extensions” by Mittell (Mittell, 2015: 180). These “extensions” of the universe are also examples of paratexts, in the sense proposed by Genette and Gray. A paratext is any media that surrounds a text. Hence, websites, products, images, videos, sounds can be regarded as paratexts. According to this definition, HBO-*Game*

2 On September 8th, 2016, there were 25 pages and 386 articles of official and licensed merchandizing on the HBO EU website: <https://www.hboshopeu.com/fr/fr/emissions/game-of-thrones.html?rel=1>.

3 The collectibles used to comprise both Funko and Dark Horse items, but Dark Horse collectibles are currently disappearing from the HBO store in favour of new Funko artefacts.

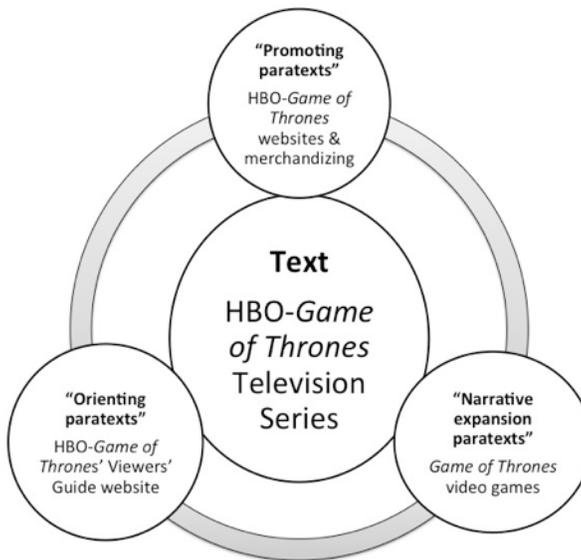
4 There is now also a Clue board game, but it is not available yet on the European HBO shop.

5 *Game of Thrones* on the HBO platform: <http://www.hbo.com/game-of-thrones>.

6 *Game of Thrones* Viewer's Guide: <http://viewers-guide.hbo.com/game-of-thrones/season-6/episode-10#>.

of *Thrones*' products and platforms are indeed both "transmedia extensions" and paratexts, for they are media texts encircling the television series while also extending its storyworld beyond the television screen. Mittell distinguishes three types of paratext: the ones that "promote, introduce and discuss a text"; the "orienting paratexts that serve to help the viewers make sense of a narrative"; and the paratexts that are "sites of narrative expansions", which is to say paratexts that "expand the storyworld and extend narrative engagement with the series" (Gray, 2010: 181). To clarify the notion of paratext, we have produced a graphic that helps make sense of what are the 'official' paratexts surrounding the *Game of Thrones* series:

Figure 1: the "official" paratexts encircling the *Game of Thrones*' television series



If, as we have seen, *Game of Thrones*' video games work as "sites of narrative expansions", the merchandizing and platforms fall into the two additional categories. HBO websites can be considered "orienting paratexts", for they help viewers better understand the series and the most recent episodes. They evolve and change alongside the series to keep the viewers updated on what has happened in the show. As Ryan states: "digital media do not simply place us in front of a static text; they situate us inside a system that continually produces a dynamic object" (Ryan, 2004: 330). *Games of Thrones*' websites embody these digital dynamic objects. HBO merchandizing, which is a type of commodified artefact in its

own right, works as a paratext that promotes the series. But this kind of promotion is not just an attempt to provide an illustration of the series: it also adds a further narrational dimension. For Kamilla Elliott, “*the commercials are themselves narratives: narratives of appliances that create desire, solve problems, and persuade consumption through echoing narrative threads in the adaptation*” (Elliott, 2004: 229). *Game of Thrones*’ official merchandizing material tells a story to create desire. This story echoes the one being told in the show. It makes references to characters and storylines that resonate with fans, hence using affective marketing to sell products. Moreover, it refers to the show through visual elements that provide further reinforcement of HBO-*Game of Thrones*’ identity. Furthermore, both websites and merchandizing work in support of HBO’s own branding strategy, for they reinforce it at the same time as they promote the series (see Bourdaa, 2014: 1). Transmedia narratology is thus a way for HBO to develop *Game of Thrones*’ storyworld but also to reinforce the branding strategy of the network through “*the display of its logo, its motto, its colours*” (ibid.: 3), that are indeed a feature of HBO-*Game of Thrones*’ products and platforms. However, this is not new. Transmedia strategies are becoming an inherent part of many televisual productions, be they HBO or not. What HBO has achieved, even if it was ahead of its time in so doing, must still be regarded as a form of marketing. If HBO benefits from the transmediality of *Game of Thrones*, the main identity that is displayed across media is the one of the show. This is why it is so important to discover the constituent features of this identity if we want to come to a better understanding of how this transmedia universe is created.

4. HBO-*Game of Thrones*’ visual identity

In order to see if there is coherence between the series’ storyworld and the products and platforms developed by HBO, we first had to analyze the aforementioned items and compare them to the series so we could distinguish HBO-*Game of Thrones*’ visual identity. So far, we have identified six features that characterize this identity.

The first one is the use of a specific, highly recognizable font for the title of the show. The series also creates a medieval atmosphere that is evidenced by the presence of heraldry, swords, castles, period clothing and grooming as well as the appearance of person occupying special social positions (king, queen, lord, lady, knight...). In addition, the show’s directors make a constant attempt to create a specific ambience by the frequent use of dark colours such as black, grey and brown. However, these colours are not the only ones employed. Brighter colours are used in the landscapes, the gowns and the families’ coats of arms. Nonetheless, some colours come up more often than others, particularly gold, red and

blue. In the show, the colours of the family coats of arms often seem dirty, as if covered in dust, mud or darkened by the night. Moreover, the names, symbols and colours of the great Houses are unique and recognizable. Finally, the names of the characters have now become household names (Stark, Lannister, Tyrell, Targaryen...). These names are associated with the actors' voices and faces, because the latter are the first visual and physical embodiment of George R. R. Martin's fictional characters.

As previously mentioned, there are obviously similarities and differences in the way individual media narrate. Some visual and narrative features will be used on certain objects and platforms and not on others. As David Herman observes: "*Medium-specific differences between narratives are nontrivial but only more or less firmly anchored in their respective media; intertranslation between story media will be more or less possible, depending on the particular formats involved*" (Herman, 2004: 51). Nevertheless, despite medium-specific differences, there should be enough recognizable features in each medium so that audiences can associate the right medium with the right storyworld. Taking the example of *The Matrix*, Jenkins claims that "*the [Wachowski] brothers had to envision the world of The Matrix with sufficient consistency that each instalment is recognizably part of the whole and enough flexibility that it can be rendered in all of these different styles of representation. [...] No given work will reproduce every element, but each must use enough that we recognize at a glance that these works belong to the same fictional realm*" (Jenkins, 2008: 113). This claim, then aimed at *The Matrix*, still resonates for current transmedia franchises, including *Game of Thrones*. Let us then have a look at *Game of Thrones*' products and platforms and analyse their use of these visual identity features.

5. Visual identity, official merchandizing and online platforms

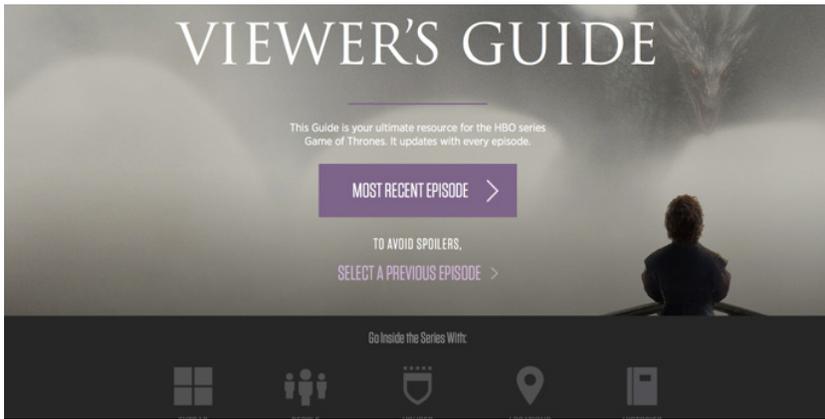
At first glance, we noticed that all HBO-*Game of Thrones*' products and platforms, with the exception of the HBO website, use the specific font characteristic of the title of the show. The HBO website keeps using the by-default font of HBO.⁷ The title's font becomes a key feature in the visual identity of *Game of Thrones*. However, it is worth noting that this characteristic is so representative of this series that it is even used by unofficial products and platforms, thus blurring the line between official and non-official transmedia extensions.

Most official merchandizing and platforms also make use of the dark colour theme: for instance, one can find grey and black tee shirts and black and dark red

⁷ HBO website: <http://www.hbo.com/game-of-thrones>.

mugs in the HBO shop.⁸ The Viewer's Guide website makes particular use of this dark atmosphere by employing black, grey and snow white colours for its background, pictures and graphics.⁹

Figure 2: HBO *Game of Thrones*' Viewer's Guide website (screenshot by Julie Escurignan)



When dealing with Houses and characters, products and platforms use the heraldry found in the show. Heraldry often goes hand in hand with the use of House colours. These features can be considered the signifiers that help audiences understand which House is being referenced. Hence, combined together, they create a sign in the Barthesian sense, that refers to a specific House. Indeed, in *Game of Thrones*, a House is a sign represented by its name and its visual signifier: logo and colour (Barthes, 1957). For example, the House Tyrell is represented by a yellow rose on a green background. The combination of the two colours makes an instant visual reference to this House. A golden lion on a red background is associated by fans with House Lannister. To these, we can add the various mottos of individual houses, which complete the signs: House Tyrell is linked to the motto “Growing strong”, while House Stark makes reference to the saying “Winter is coming”.

Merchandizing and platforms also use visual representations of *Game of Thrones*' actors: collectibles representing characters use the picture of actors in the packaging. The objects themselves are made to closely resemble the actors of the

8 HBO-Game of Thrones' mugs: <https://www.hboshopecu.com/fr/fr/emissions/game-of-thrones/tasses.html>.

9 Viewer's Guide front page: <http://viewers-guide.hbo.com/game-of-thrones/season-6/episode-10>

show; other artefacts such as magnets show actors' pictures on them; platforms like the Viewer's Guide provide pictures and videos of the actors-characters.

Therefore, HBO-*Game of Thrones*' merchandizing succeeds in conveying some key features of the show's visual identity. These features are of course visible in the objects themselves but they appear even more strikingly in the artefacts' packaging. As the first point of visual and physical contact that the buyer has with the object, it seems logical that so much creative attention is paid to the design of the packaging. It has to stand out on a shelf and clearly signify to the buyer what the product is about, while at the same time immersing him or her in the show's universe. *Game of Thrones*' packaging is the paratext that displays the most features of the series' identity: the title's font, the atmosphere, the specific colours, and often the names, blazons and colours of the Houses as well as the name and picture of the actors when needed.

Regarding the online platforms, it is worth noting that they display the visual characteristics of the show. They do so principally through pictures from the series, the re-creation of the harsh atmosphere and the use of the title's font. This is a way to directly link the visual text (the series) with its on-screen paratexts (the websites). There is visually a straight connexion between what the audience sees on television and what it finds in the paratexts surrounding the show. However, the HBO-*Game of Thrones*' website is hosted on the same platform as the other HBO shows, which makes the re-creation of the atmosphere less all-enveloping. This is particularly noticeable with the online shop that allows moving from shopping for this series to shopping for other HBO shows with a click.

Figure 3: HBO Game of Thrones' shop website (screenshot by Julie Escurignan)



Game of Thrones' atmosphere has not been reproduced on the European website (in contrast to the new HBO-*Game of Thrones*' American website), where only the name of the show, a background image at the top of the page and a dark background remind the buyer of where he or she is. The online shop does not immerse the buyer in the show's storyworld. This may constitute a problem in terms of mar-

keting strategy. Indeed, the attempt to involve potential buyers in the world they wish to purchase can lead to more transactions. If no offline shops can include the purchasing audience in an on-site environment, it could be considered the online shop's duty to do so. To offer a comparison, the *Harry Potter* franchise has an immersive online shop that re-creates the atmosphere of the movies,¹⁰ while providing an on-site experience in places such as the Shop on Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ at King's Cross, or the Warner Bros Studios. On the contrary, the Viewer's Guide website¹¹ fully re-creates the *Game of Thrones*' atmosphere through the use of the well-known font, colours, pictures and videos from the show as well as the display of interactive maps of Westeros that follow the evolution of the series. The attention to detail is pushed so far that it is possible to change the website's language from English or Spanish to Hodor,¹² [spoiler] even if the character no longer exists. This is a wink to fans showing that if the industry wants to make the effort, it can create a fully immersive and interactive entertainment product that enhances fans' experience.

6. Visual identity and licensed products

Game of Thrones' licensed merchandizing visual coherence is more questionable. Board games mix two identities: the one of the original product derived from the game franchise, and the visual characteristics of HBO-*Game of Thrones*. The latter is displayed through the use of the series' name, title's font, logos, colours and Houses. This creates a product that not only immerses the user in the *Game of Thrones*' storyworld but also offers a combination of two worlds. This situation is particularly obvious for the two *Game of Thrones*' licensed board games: Monopoly and Risk.¹³

The Funko collectibles raise even more questions: the figures do not resemble the show's actors at all. They only use certain major physical features of the characters to allow people to recognize them: white hair for Daenaerys Targaryen,

10 Harry Potter official online shop: <http://www.harrypottershop.com>.

11 Game of Thrones' Viewer's Guide website: <http://viewers-guide.hbo.com/game-of-thrones/season-6/episode-10#>.

12 Hodor is one of the secondary characters that stirred the most emotion amongst fans. A servant of House Stark, Hodor becomes simpleminded as a child after a trauma that leaves him unable to say anything but the word "Hodor". He dies in Season 6, while at the service of Bran Stark. The Viewer's Guide platform offers the possibility to change the whole website with the word "Hodor".

13 A third licensed board game has come out: Game of Thrones Clue. It is however only available on the US HBO Game of Thrones' online store.

dark clothes for Jon Snow, metal hand for Jaime Lannister. The packaging itself is quite simple, with minimal visual features that make a link with the HBO series: the dark background, the use of the title's font and the name of the character are the only ones. The packaging's purpose here is just to provide a pointer towards the right fictional universe.

Nevertheless, this situation should not come as a surprise for Jenkins. Indeed, as he claims:

Current licensing arrangements ensure that most of these products are peripheral to what drew us to the original story in the first place. Under licensing, the central media company sells the rights to manufacture products using its assets to an often unaffiliated third party; the license limits what can be done with the characters or concepts to protect the original property (Jenkins, 2008: 105).

As we have seen with Monopoly, Risk and the Funko collectibles, only some features of *Game of Thrones*' identity are used in licensed products, corroborating Jenkins' idea. He is critical of the current licensing system and observes:

The current licensing system typically generates works that are redundant, watered down, or riddled with sloppy contradictions. These failures account for why sequels and franchises have a bad reputation. Franchise products are governed too much by economic logic and not enough by artistic vision (ibid.: 105).

In this work, we have not looked at redundancy or contradictions but at the appearance of visual features that would anchor licensed products but also official merchandizing and platforms within the same *Game of Thrones*' storyworld. What we have noticed, though, is indeed the prevalence of economic logic in the creation of this commodified universe, where packaging and marketing strategies play a crucial part. Arguing for co-creation in *Convergence culture* (2008), Henry Jenkins may be on the right track. So far, co-creation only implicates creators working with other artists, an equation from which fans are ruled out despite their obvious creativity across different media sites. If economic logic truly belongs in media industries, maybe artistic vision is more to be looked for in fans' creations.

7. Conclusion

So, is there a coherent visual identity in HBO's *Game of Thrones*' products and platforms? There is no doubt that HBO recognised the importance of some visual coherence existing in all of the official *Game of Thrones*' paratexts. Even if each

media displays the visual characteristics differently, these features anchor the products and platforms in the *Game of Thrones*' storyworld, allowing audiences to know where they stand. However, it is yet to be determined if *Game of Thrones*' transmedia extensions can be considered to be transmedia storytelling, turning *Game of Thrones* into a transmedia storytelling franchise, or if they are rather a mere itemization of the series' identity, allowing only fans' immersion into it. In any case, there is still room for improvement in order to reach full visual coherence in all of *Game of Thrones*' manifestations. There is even more work to be done to achieve a complete immersion of the fans in the franchise's universe. Indeed, as HBO's website has shown, the network still has trouble immersing its fans in the world put on screen. However, with the advent of privately owned immersive experiences of *Game of Thrones*, it is in HBO's best interest to start its move on this battlefield. Because when you play the Game of Thrones, you win or you die.

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Biography

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