Audience engagement with multi-level fictional universes: The case of *Game of Thrones* and its Italian fans

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Abstract:

In the current multi-modal environment rich in on-demand content, audiences operate as active users of media content by exercising control over their viewing schedules, and by integrating media texts into their lives according to new patterns of consumption.

My analysis focuses on the relationship between Italian fans and the transmedia structure of the popular television series *Game of Thrones.* The show's imaginary universe has been conceived in a way that allows complex and diverse forms of audience engagement. Indeed, *Game of Thrones*' transmedia narratives constitute a 'world-building experience, unfolding content and generating the possibilities for the story to evolve with new and pertinent content' (Gambarato 2012, p.4). The complexity of the experience(s) is determined by the existence of sub-worlds within the *Game of Thrones*' universe: the literary one, the one recreated on screen and one that is built on the media extensions that enrich and deepen the storylines and the characters' profiles. This multi-level architecture offers audience members different venues of consumption as well as the possibility to appropriate original media content in order to produce and distribute new content as a result of individuals' free labor; this means that convergence (Jenkins, 2006) can become a 'field of struggle' between media conglomerates and empowered consumers. The investigation of Italian fans' immersion into *Game of Thrones'* transmedia framework, therefore, aims at identifying the concrete practices that fans engage in as determined by their exploitation of the universe of the text and their ability to re-work/re-use original material from that universe in alternative ways, outside of the established paths provided by traditional media producers in the first place.

Keywords: Cultural Convergence/Media Convergence, Transmedia Storytelling, *Game of Thrones,* Fan Practices, Audience Engagement, World-building, Media Producers

'If you want total control of your work – write a novel.
If you wanna control the whole thing – write a novel.
If you go multiplatform it's essential you work with a lot of people,
with a lot of ideas – you'll never have that same control'
(Matt Costello)

Introduction

Television as a traditional medium has been changing for a number of years due to the development of a complex scenario characterized by the growing proliferation of platforms in which multiple media forms are deeply interconnected. In *Convergence Culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins refers to the concept of 'media convergence' to describe and explain the transformations that have been taking place in the contemporary media environment. According to Jenkins, convergence 'represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels' (p. 243).

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, media companies have started to provide a new entertainment experience to their audiences. Television programs – TV series in particular - began to develop into 'multi-, cross-, and transmedia projects' (Caldwell, 2007 pp. 50-53) with narrative structures extending beyond the boundaries of the traditional medium. This mobility of content destabilizes the idea of television as a discrete object: its programs have become available on myriad platforms and in a wide range of narrative forms. The practice of watching television has, therefore, gradually turned into a complex set of intertwined experiences that include a variety of roles for the participants, who find themselves absorbed - sometimes even lost - in a continuous flow of media content and mediated encounters.

In this multi-modal environment, rich in on-demand content, 'the construction of textual boundaries has shifted from producers to media consumers' (Sandvoss, 2011, p. 246). *In Television 2.0: Reconceptualizing TV as an Engagement Medium* (2007), Ian Askwith explains the transformations that have been affecting the television industry, hence the change in the power relationships between official producers and consumers, by referring to the two main concepts of 'active medium' and 'viewer engagement'. According to the first point, 'television's future now relies on the industry's success recasting it as an active medium, capable of capturing and holding the audience's attention, and effective at generating emotional investment' (Askwith, 2007), while the idea of 'viewer engagement' – referred to as 'the range of opportunities and activities that become possible when drawing upon an expanded, multi-platform conception of the modern television text' (Askwith, 2007)[1] – is seen as a necessary condition for emotional investment to be obtained. On the basis of these considerations, audiences operate as active users of media content by exercising control over their viewing schedules, and by integrating the media texts they are interested in into their lives according to new patterns of consumption. These patterns often go beyond viewership, extending their reach to ancillary texts, associated

merchandising, online discussions, game sessions, and the writing of fictional material as a user-generated initiative, especially for those media texts in which audiences become particularly invested. Such media texts represent a useful tool for exploring the dynamics of today's audience practices, in part because they invite engagement with the concept of transmedia storytelling 'in which reception practices of a text within one medium need to be analyzed in relation to the inter-textual and inter-medial contexts of such a text' (Sandvoss, 2011 p. 246).

The popular American TV series *Game of Thrones* – a HBO adaptation of George R.R. Martin's fantasy saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* by showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss – is a key exemplar of media projects whose narrative structures extend beyond the boundaries of the traditional medium to create a new fictional experience, deeply immersive and varied in its multiple options. *Game of Thrones* originates from a series of novels that belongs to the fantasy genre and prominent examples of TV series that have been turned into transmedia universes are: *Lost, 24, The Walking Dead, Buffy The Vampire Slayer.* All these narratives have in common the representation of complex worlds populated by a wide variety of characters, in which multiple and intertwined events occur, and new and unexpected ones are always about to happen. Furthermore, the geographical and spatial structure of these universes is never entirely revealed at the very beginning of the story; as events unfold, audiences realize that these virtual worlds are more complex than what they had imagined since they develop as places filled with surprises and twists: 'Indeed, many cult television shows like *Star Trek, Babylon 5, Farscape, The X-Files,* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* present fantastic worlds not just as a backdrop for a narrative timeline, but also as a diverse and vivid geographical domain, ripe for new adventures and discoveries'.[2] These characteristics are peculiar to specific genres like sci-fi, fantasy, action/drama in which the 'detection-game' strategy is central to keep audiences' interest alive; it nurtures a passion that can, and hopefully will, translate into loyalty to the series. As Sara Gwenllian-Jones notes in her essay *Virtual Reality and Cult Television*: '[…] Successful fictional worlds are a matter not only of textual surface but also environmental texture; they create an impression of spatial presence and of solid geography, of gravity, height, distance, terrain, climate, and so on'.[3]

In order to investigate how audiences interact with this type of fictional experience, it is necessary not only to track their practices of engagement, but also to gather data about how audiences reflect on these practices. It is also important to keep in mind that transmedia practices are necessarily culturally specific, and that not all viewers who consume American media products are situated within the geographical or media context of the United States. Little work has been done so far on understanding how audiences in culturally mixed-media climates engage with transmedia storytelling from a geographical position outside its point of origin.

In this article, I aim to address this gap by examining Italian fans' practices and habits in watching and consuming the American TV program *Game of Thrones* with reference to the socio-cultural context to which fans belong. The analysis of audience engagement with

transmedia texts can disclose important information on the various ways people organize their lives around media as well as on how these activities help them to make sense of the world they live in.

The level of audiences' engagement with media texts has been scrutinized by researchers and analysed by scholars[4] in an attempt to understand the nature of the affection that ties the subject to his/her object of interest (or, in some cases, of obsession), and that tends to become a meaningful activity in the person's life. The intensification of branding across platforms demands that the notion of audience involvement with media texts is reassessed from the perspective of media convergence (Jenkins 2006, Dwyer 2010, Evans 2011, Clarke 2013). For this reason, the evolution in the concepts of 'fan' and 'fan labour' are crucial to better frame the new dynamics that come into play in the relationship between traditional producers and audience members.

The word 'fan' originates from the term 'fanatics' and, for quite a long time, it had a negative meaning. In 1992, in his book *Textual Poachers,* Henry Jenkins offered *Star Trek* fans the opportunity to speak for themselves, to explain in their own words the reasons for their passion and habits. Jenkins was able to demonstrate that the nature of fan involvement revealed an evident capacity for critical analysis[5]. More than a matter of passion for a media object or a practice simplistically ascribed to the category of the favourite hobbies, fandom reveals its relevance as a powerful tool in the building of identity and 'in the positioning of one's self in the modern world' (Sandvoss, 2005 p. 165). Fan engagement is characterized by 'a particular emotional investment in a given popular text' (Sandvoss, 2005 p. 7) that refers to specific patterns of consumption, and also by a strong and articulated capacity for analytical thinking: fans are more than just consumers. Fandom is the term utilized to indicate 'the social roles that [fans] inhabit' (Duffett, 2013 p. 18), and it also refers to a group of people

> who work together, online and off-line, not only to interpret, create, and extend the mass media, but also to make the game itself. Mass media is not simply a game we *play* together; fandom itself, the name of that game, is a game we *make* together. So the primary creative activity of fandom is *fandom,* which is made collaboratively on and with new media tools, and never finished (Booth, 2010).

Fandom identifies the set of practices through which fans express their tastes and passions, their sense of belonging to the fan community (Pearson, 2010) and their capacity to be self-reflexive about their identities and the ways they are affected by their consumption habits.

To investigate fan audiences, therefore, can help scholars and researchers to understand the basic mechanisms according to which people think and behave in today's mediated environment because 'fan audiences [...] tell us something about the way in which we relate to those around us, as well as the way we read the mediated texts that constitute

an ever larger part of our horizon of experience' (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007 p. 10).

My analysis draws on the results that emerged during the data collection phase of the research that I conducted in May and June 2015, both online (survey) and offline (focus groups).

In particular, this study shows that Italian fans of *Game of Thrones* tend to engage in limited ways with the official transmedia universe of the series. This aspect is significant because it allows us to assess the relation between the success of media franchises and the active participation of fans in a socio-cultural context that is located 'outside' of the Anglo-American experience. Indeed, Italian fans revealed a significant preference for fan-made websites and videos instead of those that are linked to, and/or provided by, the official sources (like HBO) of the program. The exploration of Italian fans' practices also called attention to the meaning of fan role as a concept prone to a spectrum of definitions, and from the perspective of those who are directly involved[6].

Methods: Learning from Audiences

The larger project from which data is extracted focuses on the examination of audiences' consumption practices of transmedia texts as a comparative study between two distinct countries: Italy and New Zealand. National audiences represent strategic markets for the circulation of international fiction; in investigating the consumption modes that characterize the distribution of North American television programs in these cultural contexts, the aim is to provide insights into the culturally specific dis/similarities that distinct audiences disclose in consuming the same texts.

The choice of Italy as the media market under investigation was determined by a set of facts and considerations. In Italy, the development of the technological infrastructure and the improvement of users' computer literacy have been happening at a different speed than the one of other European countries as well as of the United States, hence it is reasonable to to assume that the target audience of the TV show engages in practices that differ significantly under various aspects. In this scenario, the aspect that is worth investigating is precisely the role and the attitude of the Italian fans in approaching the media content they are interested in, so as to understand to what extent issues related to the development and the use of technology affect their choices in consuming the media extensions from the show's fictional universes. All foreign media products are dubbed in Italy. This process requires time and implies a delay in the broadcasting of films and series on the official TV channels. This aspect has consequences on fans' behaviors with regards to the alternative sources they decide to look for in order to find the media content they desire. The qualitative studies of Scaglioni (2006) and Benecchi and Richeri (2013) have explored the attitude of Italian fans in terms of devotion to specific cultural objects as well as the significant presence of active online fan communities (Benecchi 2015). My investigation of the Italian audience of *Game of Thrones,* on the other hand, focuses on the actual success of transmedia texts as a media corporate strategy for the production and distribution of TV

products, and explores the dynamics of consumers' involvement with these programs as the result of a level of literacy in using media devices that is peculiar to the context under examination.

The methods employed for the data production were both quantitative and qualitative. For reasons of limited scope, the research presented in this article will involve only data gathered from Italian fans of *Game of Thrones*. The first phase of data gathering consisted in an online survey, which was implemented on the website SurveyMonkey.com and launched in late May 2015. In order to distribute the survey, I contacted many Italian websites dedicated to the show: the *Game of Thrones* Italian Facebook page; the site of movie and TV series reviews website *Mediacritica*; the Facebook page of Rai4, the national network channel that airs the series in Italy; the well-known website Cinefilos; and a popular site of Italian subtitles that allows viewers to watch the series' episodes online in English with subtitles. The managers of these sites expressed their interest in the research and agreed to post the links to the online survey. The Appendix section includes examples of the questions that were used in the survey[7]. The questionnaire received a significant number of responses: 863 people in total participated from all over Italy. In terms of gender, 70% of the respondents were females and 30% males[8]. As for the reference age, 60% of the participants were between 20 and 29 years old, 20% between 30 and 39 years old, 10% 19 years old and younger, the rest 40 years old and older. About 45% of the respondents belonged to the category 'high school student', while another 45% stated to have a university degree. The survey provided initial insights into audience practices and it was instrumental to identify suitable participants for the qualitative phase of the study, that is, the focus groups discussions.

Focus groups have been traditionally used to identify consumer behaviors and motivations: 'The primary aim of a focus group is to describe and understand meanings and interpretations of a select group of people to gain an understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of the participants of the group' (Liamputtong, 2011 p. 3). For my purposes here, focus groups contributed valuable qualitative data about both fans' practices and the way they reflect on what it is they do with transmedia texts. I ran two focus groups in Italy with fans of *Game of Thrones* in the month of June 2015 in Milan; each group consisted of 8 participants and lasted for about an hour and a half. During the moderation of the groups, I asked participants questions ranging from their viewing practices to activities related to the series (such as the production and/or distribution of both original and re-worked media content), as well as their opinions on the show's content (plot and characters) and whether or not they considered themselves as fans of the TV show; the group dynamics allowed for interactions among the participants, who engaged in discussions on the proposed topics.

The analysis of the focus group findings, presented as specific to the geographical and socio-cultural context of Italy, will allow to provide first insights on the peculiar traits and attitudes – i.e.: the difference between reception and engaged consumption, the effectiveness of transmedia narratives in providing users with immersive experiences, the

concept of 'being a fan' - that distinguish national audiences in consuming international media texts that are exemplary products of the contemporary era.

Transmedia storytelling and the exemplary case of *Game of Thrones*

In the current highly competitive and overcrowded media markets, spectators have started to engage in alternative viewing practices that have partly followed the consumption paths designed for them by media producers. This freedom in the modes of consumption is considered a natural outcome of the possibilities offered by transmedia storytelling. The expression identifies a particular 'narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.)' (Scolari, 2009 p. 587). Elizabeth Evans carried out a study on audience engagement with the online and mobile phone content regarding the TV shows *Spooks* and *24,* defines the same concept as 'the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information concerning a single fictional world through a range of textual forms' (Evans, 2011 p. 1). Transmedia is one of the most diffuse strategies of media companies today because it is employed to transform imaginary worlds into expanded narrative brands.

Brands as virtual realities, in which individuals can immerse themselves, represent 'complex discourse universes with a strong narrative imprint' (Scolari, 2009 p. 599). The conglomerates' aim is to build a solid relationship between the brand and the consumers by matching the brand's values with consumers' lifestyles in order to generate 'emotional investment' (Askwith, 2007). Transmedia storytelling plays a substantial role in the achievement of this task since it 'introduces a mutation in this scenario in which the brand is no longer inside the fiction, but rather the fiction *is* the brand' (Scolari, 2009 p. 599). It represents the ideal aesthetic form for the era of participatory culture: viewers become eager to talk about and share opinions, as well as to look for ways to garner extra information about the programs they are watching. Characters, topics, aesthetic style, costumes, settings: all these fictional attributes contribute to the foundation of enhanced narratives whose specific traits can be transported across multiple platforms with the intent to offer a wide set of experiences. Audiences become actively involved in the exploration of these universes, mainly because they feel more free to select the best options – in terms of timeframe, contexts and device choices – through which to consume media texts. To argue that the audiences have become an essential part of the media production system means that their actions might be taken into account by media companies. Indeed, audience members are offered different opportunities to manage their time in relation to the consumption of TV products, as well as to distribute their own creative productions.

However, it is important to keep in mind that old media forms still exist and have not been removed from the actual contexts in which both producers and consumers operate:

> A vast number of media products are still produced by media corporations, which are old top-down systems based on capitalist logics and not always in

favor of the maximalist approaches toward participation and democracy (Carpentier, 2011)

This means that media convergence becomes a field of struggle between old media conglomerates and empowered consumers whose freedom in participating in and creatively managing the media texts they come in contact with, is not totally free from hindrances and restraints. These limitations help media companies to exert a significant amount of control on the ways their products can be used and appropriated by industrious consumers, and they also represent the lens through which the ongoing shift in audience role has to be valued and understood. In the balance between the embrace and exploitation of cultural products that originate from audiences' labor of consumption lies the complexity of the current media landscape[9].

The importance of audience media practices is also represented by the influence that they have on the development of people's identity. As a condition constantly subject to change, human identity is affected by the daily experiences that encourage people to make choices in conducting their lives and, at the same time, to reflect on their own actions. TV shows - particularly in the form of TV series - play a substantial role in the process of re-assessment of personal and social identities, and in the various ways in which people choose to organize their daily existence on the basis of the entertaining experiences they decide to pursue.

The American TV series *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) is a relevant example of a convoluted media text that integrates different media technologies to build a fictional world of multiple characters and themes. *GoT* is considered a vibrant illustration of cutting-edge, multilayered narration, highly realistic and engaging, with supernatural elements to embellish the plot alongside impressive production values. The series, in its 'attempt to tell the story not of a family, or even a country, but a world' (Robert Colvile, *The Telegraph*, 2012), has been succeeding in generating audience enthusiasm despite the intricacy of its storylines - or, more likely, because of it. The basic idea that underlies the serialized narrative of *GoT* is that of the game: characters are continually involved in dangerous confrontations and strategic fights for the conquest of power.

The series' fictional framework has been conceived accordingly: the main features, apps and board games available online and on mobile devices are structured as interactive games for the purpose of involving audiences in a system of competitions that reinforce the brand image of the product.

In the enlarged universe of *GoT,* the multiple media extensions offer specific examples of 'multi-', 'cross-' and 'transmedia' features[10] that allow followers of the series to live an immersive experience. With reference to *Game of Thrones*' media apparatus, specific games, videos and features available on the official website constitute examples of both multi- and crossmedia extensions, since they present media material that offers specific information on, for instance, the making of the episodes and the cast and crew, without developing the series' narrative any further:

- *Game of Thrones Join The Realm:* directly from HBO, *Join The Realm* allows fans to pick their own house, customize their own sigil and eventually, through the Twitter hashtag #JoinTheRealm, share their creations with other fans
- *Game of Thrones* Pinterest: an official *GoT* Pinterest profile where is possible to find a variety of Westerosi fashion, recipes, quotes and more.
- The Italian game *FantaGot[11],* created for the fans of the show by the TV review website *Seriangolo.*The HBO official website of *Game of Thrones* comprises official trailers, previews, an interactive viewer's guide, recaps from the previous seasons, interviews with the cast and crew, actors and characters' bios, behind-the-scene clips and an anatomy of a scene video collection. In the 'News and Events' section of the site, audience members can read the show's reviews, the latest news about the awards won by the series and other bizarre stories or comments posted with the intent to intrigue and amuse them. From the 'Full Episodes' section, HBO subscribers can watch all the episodes of the first four seasons[12].

On the other hand, other games, interactive features and applications represent examples of transmedia extensions, since they provide fans with the possibility to interact with each other, produce creative pieces of work and to explore the series' world more in depth, so as to discover new elements instrumental in enriching its narrative:

- *Game of Thrones Ascent:* this videogame was developed by Disruptor Beam and was awarded Facebook Game of the Year 2013. The game allows players to become a noble during the times described both in the books and the series. Players will experience a new type of game that unites both story and strategy by having the chance to immerse into the world of Westeros
- *Game of Thrones* Tumblr: fans can express their personal creativity and see a wide collection of fanart pieces from their favourite series on the multimedia content platform
- *Game of Thrones The Game:* a 'role-playing game created by Focus Home interactive for PC, Xbox and Playstation 3. The gameplay experience allows to travel to the locations from the series and meet famous characters'[13];
- *GoT* applications for iPhones and smartphones are numerous – i.e., 'Game of Thrones Companion', 'Game of Thrones Wiki', 'Game of Thrones Trivia With Friends', 'A Game of Thrones Reference', 'News For GoT', 'IQuiz For Game of Thrones', 'Ice & Fire' - and keep viewers updated on 'what-is-new' about the production of the TV show, allowing one to engage in games with friends and to test their own knowledge of the universe created by George Martin. Furthermore, HBO has launched HBO GO, a geo-specific application for Android and Apple devices through which is possible to watch the series

episodes at any moment during the day. In addition, HBO NOW is a new standalone streaming service that requires internet-only subscription to watch all the series, movies, documentaries and sport events that are part of the HBO programming. HBO GO and HBO NOW represent one of the most important transmedia strategies adopted by the network since the final intent is to saturate viewers' time with a product available anytime, anywhere.

It is important to keep in mind that 'multimedia, crossmedia and transmedia are points on a fluid spectrum that blend from one to the next'[14], therefore some media content 'dwells' on the border of what can be strictly be classified as multi-, cross- and transmedia, since it does not develop the storylines or the characters' profiles but it creates the conditions for a deeper engagement with the show in the forms, for instance, of group discussions and the appropriation of items that resemble elements from the fictional universe of *Game of Thrones*:

- The 'Join the Conversation' section from the HBO official website is dedicated to viewers who want to leave comments on different topics and/or actively engage in discussions with other followers.
- The 'Featured' section from the same website is multi-functional: it consists of promotional videos and direct links to the official series' Facebook page, to the HBO online shop and to the series' official interactive video game 'Join the Realm'. From the online shop, potential buyers can choose among books, dolls, figurines, accessories, mugs and glasses, posters and maps, t-shirts, cards, lunchboxes, exercise books, bookends, paperweights and magnet sets. The 'Inside' section includes interviews, short inside-the-episode clips and a variety of extras. Among these, there are the direct links to the social network pages of *GoT* (Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr), an assortment of wallpapers for iPhones and desktops, the official *GoT* Instagram and Pinterest profiles, an array of downloadable pictures to be used by fans as images of the corresponding online personalities.

The fundamental goal of this sophisticated network of videos, news, apps, interactive games, written texts, pictures, social network affiliations and extensions is to give audiences the excitement of detection, to provide a multi-path context where they can act as 'hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels' (Jenkins, 2006 p. 21) for the purpose of a 'richer entertainment experience' (Jenkins, 2006 p. 21). The 'world-building experience' [15] (Gambarato, 2012) is due to the employment of transmedia storytelling within the structure of the show. According to Henry Jenkins, as expounded in his talk at the *Futures of Entertainment Conference* at MIT in 2009, these core concepts are spreadability, drillability, multiplicity, seriality, immersion, extractability, world-building, and

performance. Multiplicity 'allows fans to have access to alternate versions of characters or parallel universe versions of the story' (Gambarato, 2012 p. 6), whereas seriality involves 'the notion of breaking up a narrative arc into multiple distinctive parts or installments not simply within a single medium, but rather spread out across multiple media systems' (Gambarato, 2012 p. 7). Similarly, *GoT* presents multiple entry points (via different media technologies) for its followers, and this circuit of extensive content allows them to actively engage in a process of re-connection of the events and stories through which they can also manage to detect gaps and excesses in the narrative. The function of these discursive strategies is to keep the audiences' thirst for more content and more explanations always alive, and at the same time to involve them into an endless captivating discovery game. The opportunity that the show gives 'to explore, in depth, the content of narrative extensions offered by a transmedia story' (Gambarato, 2012 p. 6) is defined in terms of 'drillability': 'a vertical descent into a text's complexities' implies the 'immersion' (Gambarato, 2012 p. 6) into the fictional universe generated by the story: apps, books, videogames, interactive features and online discussions populate *GoT's* transmedia apparatus and are all means to this end. On the other hand, 'extractability' 'refers to the possibility fans may have to take away with them aspects of the story, incorporating it in their everyday lives (e.g., memorabilia)' (Gambarato, 2012 p. 6). *GoT's* extensive merchandise performs this function.

In addition, 'a transmedia story is … a story-world capable to support multiple characters and multiple narratives across multiple media. Transmedia extensions often lead to fan behavior of capturing as many elements of the story as possible' (Gambarato, 2012 p. 7). In accordance with this concept, the world-building process is a collaborative construction of 'charts, maps and concordances' (Jenkins, 2009), partly provided by producers (like *GoT* genealogy lists), and partly created by fans themselves. The production of user-generated content by fans is outlined as 'the ability of transmedia extensions to stimulate fans to produce their own performances that can become part of the transmedia narrative itself' (Gambarato, 2012 p. 7). The so-called 'cosplay' phenomenon[16] is an interesting example of the creative activities in which viewers engage by taking inspiration from the setting, the costumes and the accessories of their favorite TV program.

The spread of transmedia storytelling as a tool for creating an interactive 'hyper-diegesis' (Hills, 2002) for audiences to deal with necessitates the diffusion of content through different media: in choosing distinct venues of consumption, individuals align with and take advantage of the options created for them by media producers. But to what extent? And is it reasonable to assume that fans, during their exploratory journeys of these narrative universes, actually find the opportunities to appropriate and re-work original media material that subsequently becomes part of the extended structure of the texts?

Results and Discussion

The trends that emerged from the focus groups concentrated on: a) Italian fans' specific habits in watching the show; b) their general knowledge of the fictional architecture of the series and its media extensions; and c) their preference regarding alternative content

available on fan-made sites as opposed to the official HBO website; d) their sense of 'being fans' of the show as linked to specific attitudes and activities that belong to a spectrum of engagement with the series through which the concept of fan is being defined.

Participants in my study revealed a sense of autonomy in the organization of their viewing schedule, reinforced by the awareness that this form of freedom is now inherent to the process of media consumption. Italian fans who have a SKY subscription either watch the episodes live on SKY Atlantic or record them; the others use the internet (both streaming and downloading services) to retrieve the episodes. In both cases, viewers decide to watch the episodes at a time and place of their own choice (usually, at home during the evening/at night).

Despite the widespread Italian habit of watching foreign media programs dubbed, the majority of the Italian fans admitted their clear preference to watch *GoT* in the original language with Italian subtitles. Fans revealed themselves to be quite critical of the dubbed version of the series, it is perceived as a limitation to the full appreciation of the series' narrative because, according to fans, the Italian translations of characters' dialogues and lines are not faithful to the original:[17]

> In the dubbed version they *[the Italian distributors]* cut or modify some parts, and usually not in a proper way.

> We watch the episodes in original language on SKY Atlantic.

> We watch it together… Sometimes I watch it a first time by myself because I just can't wait, then I watch it again with him [the boyfriend], often in English with Italian subtitles.

> The problem with the dubbed version is that the Italian voices change the characters.

This choice has a high impact on making the viewing process a focused activity, due to the work that goes into watching a program in a foreign language and following along with the subtitles. Immediately after the US premiere, Italian fans use streaming and/or downloading services (mainly illegal) to look for the episodes in the original language. Even the cable channel that airs the series in Italy, SKY Atlantic, offers the possibility of a second viewing round in English with Italian subtitles. People who have a SKY subscription tend to record either these episodes or the dubbed ones, but this practice involves the minority of viewers whereas the others prefer to stream or download the episodes, and in doing so they select the English version with the provided Italian subtitles.

In the domestic context of Italian media consumption, the medium of television is certainly not dead. The majority of Italian fans refer to the traditional platform as their first option to watch the series' episodes, while second for this purpose is the laptop. The

viewing activity is, in the first place, a moment of relaxation and a form of entertainment: television represents the best way to fully enjoy the high quality production of a cinematic TV series like *GoT.* The spectacularity of the series – defined in terms of cinematic style and complexity of the narrative – is an element of profound appeal to fans and they want to have it preserved during the viewing process. For this reason, the attitude towards technological devices like mobile phones to be used for watching the full episodes is generally marked by a feeling of unreliability in terms of quality of the viewing experience that they can provide. According to the majority of fans, indeed, both sound and music appear to be very important elements of *Game of Thrones'* representation, therefore the show cannot be fully appreciated unless it is watched on a screen sufficiently large as part of an adequate technological equipment:

> The series makes a great viewing on the television screen... You enjoy it much more.

> *Game of Thrones* looks like a movie, it is a series that has to be seen in a specific context that allows to get the best out of its viewing!

> I stream the episodes, and I usually watch them by myself on the computer.

> No, on the mobile definitely no, it is too small!

However, in this regard, two participants out of the totality of the focus group participants admitted that they employed the mobile phone to watch the episodes but, in the end, only one fan clearly stated that he does it because he actually enjoys that specific modality of viewing since it allows him to feel more 'immersed' into the viewing :[18]

> I prefer the mobile device because I feel more immersed in the viewing... Even more than watching it on the computer. I watch it on the iPhone even when I am not at home; on trams and buses, in the subway, or at my friends' places... It is a personal thing but I find a better quality in the viewing when I use the iPhone rather than when I watch it on the computer... The colors are brighter... But it is also a matter of being more comfortable, especially when I am on the move.

On the other hand, smaller screens are more willingly employed by the majority of fans to watch other media material related to the series, like trailers or short clips (even when 'on the move' in outdoor contexts) but not the original core content that deserves fans' full attention and a high-definition technology.

The viewing process is described as a focused activity by essentially the totality of fans. The series is very complex in terms of the development of the storylines, there are

many intertwined characters and subplots, therefore it is essential to pay attention while the episode is running:

More than half of the participants admitted that they follow the online posts and comments about the series on the social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) but do not post personal comments. What emerged from the focus groups was that they prefer to comment in person or via technological devices (i.e., WhatsApp messages) with friends and/or close relatives once the viewing of the episode is terminated:

> My sister, some friends and I have created a WhatsApp group and we use it to share comments on the episodes

> To discuss about it with friends is the most important thing.

> I prefer the direct interaction, face to face.

> I discuss about it a lot with my friends, both face to face and over the phone'.

> I usually watch the episodes by myself on the computer and then I comment with my friends the following day.

Only few participants during the focus group sessions stated that they actively participate in the online discussions by posting their own comments, sometimes also in the form of spoilers:

> I do share comments with people I don't know on Twitter.

> I do participate in the online discussions – on the Facebook page of *Game of Thrones* and on the Instagram page as well.

This desire to share thoughts and personal opinions on the episodes, and on the overall development of the stories, represents a unifying force within the communities of fans: people feel this sense of belonging to a group whose members share the same passion and can provide useful information to each other. It also impacts the management of the viewing schedule: even if Italian fans are aware that they can watch the episodes whenever they want, waiting for too long is not a real option. Staying up-to-date is the best antidote against spoilers which means that, if it happens that fans miss a few episodes, they feel the necessity to fill the gap as soon as possible[19]. *GoT* is so full of twists and cliffhangers that these elements of the narrative usually represent the center of online fans' conversations. The only way to avoid them, and being part of the discussion, is to be up to date with the viewing; in this regard, the practice of binge-watching is extremely useful to catch up with the episodes.

The 'spoiler issue'[20] is connected to the activity of watching the episodes on a regular basis. As a general tendency[21], fans respect the online etiquette that prevents people from 'spoilering' (unless they give a warning that they are about to do it), but forums and Facebook pages present discussions among viewers who mainly comment on the episodes that they have watched. This means that, in order to participate and avoid spoilers, people need to share the same knowledge of the development of the plot. For this reason, Italian fans underlined the necessity to watch the new episodes as soon as possible in order to participate in the discussions.

Italian fans' attitude toward HBO turned out to be negative and marked by skepticism. This attitude can be considered as a common denominator since it not only emerged from the responses to the question regarding the HBO website as a basic tool through which gathering extra information on *GoT,* but also because participants to the focus groups pointed out this trend as a general attitude of their distancing towards the official website. Indeed, HBO's policy is perceived as strategically oriented to sell products (marketing-oriented campaigns), and fans are not very interested in the extra material that is made available to them on the official website for this main purpose:

> I have never visited the HBO website... I don't like HBO... It appears to be too closed, you never really get to know anything....

> No, I have never visited the official website... I prefer the online interaction with other fans.

> I do prefer Wikipedia for the extra information on the story and the characters.

> I think that the decline of the official websites is due to the Internet and to what is possible to find online, especially when on the official website the basic content [i.e.: the full episodes] is not available.

This aspect shines a light on the sentiment of Italian fans toward American media companies: fans admitted their disapproval of HBO's policy about making media content available to spectators and addressing their audiences. The perception that these fans have is essentially negative since they know that producers have their own agenda: the intent is to persuade people into buying more and more things, to consume their products, while denying the access to the content that really matters to them in the first place (the full episodes on the official HBO website are not outside the USA). For this reason, the HBO website is not included in the list of favorites by the Italian fans, who replace the transmedia experience offered by producers with forms of consumption and engagement that mainly refer to bottom-up initiatives, perceived as more authentic, interesting and entertaining. This freedom to choose alternative venues for the exploration of *Game of Thrones'* world aligns with fans' awareness of their role in the contemporary system of media production. In

opposition to the official world-builders of the series, Italian fans choose to construct their own pathways through the narrative sub-worlds and media extensions of the enlarged universe of *GoT*: this aspect sheds a significant light on fans' behavior as independent 'world-explorers' of a fictional universe that they decide to penetrate through unofficial entry points, and by following venues that are often built by other fans as members of a community which shares similar passions and interests.

Further sources of interest to the Italian fans that can provide entertainment and information related to the series are also positioned outside the official producers' venues of distribution. YouTube and Wikipedia are the websites of choice when fans decide to look for extra material to deepen their knowledge of the show or to explore 'what is new' in the fan-made production – i.e.: detailed information on the storylines and the characters, trailers, interviews with the cast and crew of the show, backstage on the production, fan-made videos such as mash-ups and video clips.

Peculiar to the Italian context*,* the ironic blog *L'Antro Atomico del Dottor Manhattan (The Atomic Cavern of Doctor Manhattan),* the website of TV series review *Serialmente* and the online game *FantaGot* represent alternative resources that better respond to the Italian fans' idea of entertainment and knowledge, since they know how to combine elements that are culturally specific – the passion for football, a culturally ingrained ear for irony and sarcastic tone, and an interest in American programs – with the appeal of *Game of Thrones'* plot.

The Italian blog called *L'Antro Atomico del Dottor Manhattan ('The Atomic Cavern of Doctor Manhattan')* helps to better appreciate the series and to approach it from an ironic, and yet intelligent, perspective since it offers hilarious summaries of the show's episodes and trailers (see below).

http://docmanhattan.blogspot.co.nz/2015/07/game-of-thrones-s01e03-il-riassuntone.html#more

The Italian review website *Serialmente:* http://www.serialmente.com is another valuable source of information since it is structured as an archive: it is possible to find the review of each episode of each season of all the most important TV series (especially North American), and for *GoT* the set of reviews is divided into two groups: those for readers of the books who are also spectators and those for the 'only' viewers of the TV show.

Among the various games related to the series, the *FantaGot*[22] appears to be well-known and appreciated. The game has been created by the website *Seriangolo,* an Italian review website of TV series, with no affiliations to HBO. The popularity of the game is related to its structure, very similar to that of the *FantaCalcio,* an online football game extremely popular in Italy that consists in organizing and managing virtual football teams of real football players, who are to be chosen from those who play the real football tournament. In a similar way, participants in the *FantaGot* have to pick one of the houses (teams) among Lannister, Martell, Stark and Targaryen to which belong to as the initial step of the game. After this, participants will have 500 dragons at their disposal to use in order to buy 10 characters, from a pool of 45 characters in total. Every week, 4 characters from the chosen 10 will have to be deployed and they will bring points to the team on the basis of the characters' actions in the series. This means that players, in order to deploy the strongest characters, will have to make predictions on how events in the storylines will unfold. The winners also get official awards like DVDs of the series.

From the wide range of items (merchandise) related to *GoT*, Italian fans revealed interest primarily in the collection of: 1) George R.R. Martin's books (80%); the series' T-shirts (35%); and 3) the series' DVD box sets (25%).

The cosplay phenomenon is not very popular in Italy at the moment, but the popularity of *GoT* seems to be changing this aspect to some extent, as reported by some Italian fans during the focus groups:

Yes, we do know what the cosplay is.

The cosplay is becoming more popular in Italy at the moment.

I think that it is more popular in the US… In New York, I saw people in costumes during the Halloween night… Those people are really crazy about this type of things… In Italy is different!

Maybe it is not that popular at the moment but it represents a new opportunity for fans to gather together, in a real way and not just in a virtual space.

Italian fans demonstrated a general agreement regarding the reasons why they are proud to think of themselves as fans of the series and what they like it so much:

- They are aware of the existence of different levels of engagement with the TV show[23] and even those who declared themselves to be 'less active' in exploring the universe of the series claim to be fans of *GoT* because a) they watch the episodes in a consistent way, b) they discuss them with friends and/or relatives, and c) they are knowledgeable about the events in the story.
- Storylines and characters from the series appeal to the Italian fans because they are complex and different. *GoT's* plot is filled with suspense, cliffhangers and twists; unexpected things occur all the time and this generates excitement and a sense of 'newness'.
- Characters, in particular, are multi-faceted; they undergo substantial changes and appear to be profoundly realistic in the development of their personalities. These elements foster feelings of identification and empathy among fans.
- Identification in the projective form – especially with strong personalities who have to struggle and overcome obstacles to achieve their tasks and/or being accepted by others (i.e.: Tyrion Lannister, Arya Stark, Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen) – entails a process of self-reflexivity that encourages people to reflect on themselves and their own behaviours in comparison to those of the characters:

This profound sense of closeness and admiration, as well as the critical interpretation, are key elements to the appeal that *GoT* has on its audience. In particular, for the Italian viewers, this level of emotional involvement is something that they cannot easily find in the typical Italian TV dramas[24], which present more predictable stories and characters whose personalities are less nuanced.

Italian fans explained that the peculiar fascination of the show lies in the nuanced depecitions of a world where good and evil are not easily demarcated into binary, Manichean categories. For this reason, fans refer to *GoT* as a series capable of portraying the complexity of the humankind in such an appealing way that the show stands as something entirely different from all the other series:

> The characters are interesting because they are complex, even from a psychological point of view... There are many that I like.

> I have noticed that many characters go through a deep change during the development of the plot....

> In my opinion, the characters symbolize all the different human traits... At least once in our lives, each of us has been Cersei or Arya or Ser Davoss...

> The series knows how to touch your emotions... You find this whole new world in front of you and you feel like you are in it... Even the characters make you

> think: what would I do if i were in the same situation?... It is really engaging and fascinating... No other series is like *Game of Thrones* at the moment!

> *Game of Thrones* creates this strong empathy with the characters... It is not like any other TV series and I do watch many... But with *Game of Thrones* you develop a real feeling of affection for the single character... He/she becomes one of us.

GoT appeals to the Italian fans in ways that are even different from the majority of all the other American dramas that appear on the Italian television screen. In providing answers to the question: 'Why do you like this TV series so much?', some participants stated:

> I'd recommend it because it is very fascinating and engaging, and also because it is very well made... It presents the right mix of love, hate and power... It is amazing!

> It is a non-original story told in an original way.

> It is fascinating, engaging, unusual.

> The series presents many elements of modernity.

> In my opinion, *Game of Thrones* is an accurate analysis of the traits that characterize each human being and of the dynamics that regulate the human events.

> *Game of Thrones* is an innovative series, it is shot very well, and then there is the politics and the intrigue...

> Even if it is American it is not the typical American production... Also because many actors are British, and even from a linguistic point of view, the accents display a remarkable appeal, especially those from the North... It is not the typical American TV series!

> This series is everything and its opposite at the same time.

> I'll say only this: there are boobs, fights and dragons... What else do we need?!

The fantasy genre to which the series belongs provides the frame for a reality that transcends the idea of normality and ordinariness but, at the same time, delves into feelings and actions that are entirely human.[25] Fantasy is the frame that allows one to adopt the

right distance from the chain of violent events in order to not be overwhelmed by their brutality. Outrageous acts occur in *GoT;* spectators' awareness that this universe is, in fact, not their real world, but is something that is constantly recalled through visual signifiers like the settings, the characters' costumes and weapons, and the overall structure of society.

The realism of *GoT* triggers a sense of closeness with the events in characters' lives that brings fans to reflect on their own personal behaviours, on what it means to be determined, loyal, honest, deceptive, smart, desperate, out of control. Nevertheless, watching the series can be anything but a linear experience with reference to the emotions that the show is able generate in its spectators. Feelings of discomfort, of resentment even, have been pointed out by fans during the focus group sessions and with reference to the presence of controversial moments in the development of the storylines that display highly offensive scenes and overwhelmingly violent acts:

> One thing that happened to me with reference to the last season that I have watched is that …Well… Before I was capable of watching the series in a normal way, but now that I am pregnant, some scenes have just become impossible to watch... I have just had a change in my mood and attitude...

> The scene that made me think: 'I do not want to go on watching this series!' is the one in which Arya kills a man in the last season... Too much cruelty... She used to be a defenseless little girl but now has come out all this hate... No, I do not want to watch that scene ever again!

The issue regarding the potential gratuitousness of particular sequences becomes a matter of concern. William Proctor, in his blog post 'The *Game of Thrones* Rape Debate' (http://cstonline.tv/the-game-of-thrones-rape-debate) discusses some of the issues that characterize the debate around specific representations (like violent acts against women) in popular culture texts, and also points out the role played by a popular series like *GoT* in feeding this debate by offering 'a rich and polysemic narrative', therefore open to multiple interpretations. In his post, Proctor also refers to the article by Debra Ferreday, *Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom* (2015), in which the author describes the show as 'a site of struggle over sexual violence, both in reproducing rape culture and in resisting it' (p. 22). In examining the wide spectrum of motivations that justify both the acceptance and the rejection of these specific representations by fans, Ferreday provides an accurate picture of the discourses around the culture of rape[26], of the peculiarities of the fantasy genre, of the relationship between the male figure and the female one. Significantly, some of her considerations coincide with what has emerged from the focus groups with the Italian fans of *GoT,* in particular:

> a) the interest showed by women in the fantastic and their passion for a series that cannot be approached as a text that mainly appeals to men: 'since it is

concerned with power, [fantasy] allows women to imagine possible futures, to dream of 'claiming forms of power that were previously off-limits to them' (Rosenberg 2011). (Ferreday, 2015 p. 24)

b) the set of 'expectations and investment that fans place in fantasy texts, [...] and the potential for debate that emerges when these generic expectations are refused' (Ferreday, 2015 p. 33).

The personal struggles and the public fights and wars that characters have to face in order to survive or accomplish their tasks represent a narrative strategy through which the wide range of human feelings is put under examination; at the same time, troubled figures like Arya Stark, Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen[27] exert a particular fascination on fans who admire their extraordinary determination: characters and stories become reflective surfaces and projections of viewers' real lives:

I love Cersei because she does everything for the love of her children and family... She is one of the best characters!.

Arya Stark is a character built with an interesting evolution...

I am a fan of Arya Stark!

Yes, I am also a fan of Arya.

Daenerys is my favourite character because she starts with having nothing.

I like Daenerys because she always manages to change the situation to her advantage... I wish I were like her sometimes!

The analytical thinking that the practice of self-reflexivity involves propels questions in fans' minds. The majority of fans admitted that the show makes them think of what they would be able to do – or *not* to do – if they were to find themselves in similar situations and conditions as those faced by the characters:

The series makes you think: what would I do in that same situation? Would I be able to act in the same way?...

The series becomes a stimulus to think more, to even watch myself in the mirror...

> The series makes me think about myself, about what my limits could be if I were to face extraordinary situations... I mean, it makes me think: what would I have done? Would I have been that noble? Or coward? And how would have things gone? All this does not happen with the other TV series!

> The fact that we do identify with the characters in such absurd situations... It is something weird, particular!

GoT is a series that positions itself at a superior level than the one labelled as pure entertainment and this becomes an element of strength well acknowledged and appreciated by fans. Indeed, in providing answers to the question: 'Why do you consider yourself a fan of *Game of Thrones*?', Italian fans revealed:

> Because we watch a series that is so engaging and different from all the others... It is a different genre and it captures you in a complete new way... It is a series different from all the others.

> It is a very beautiful story, with a beautiful plot!

> *Game of Thrones* is not mere entertainment, it communicates something to its audience.

> As for me it's the fact that it makes me think… The ways the characters behave and react…

> I think of myself as a fan because I can't wait to watch the episodes and then I want to discuss about them with other people who also watch it… And then, I look for extra information on the show's universe… And this is something that does not happen with the other series.

> For me it's the same… I can't wait to watch the new episodes and to talk about them with someone!

Italian fans' comments pointed out the peculiar fascination that the show manages to exert on its audience: on this short-circuit of fantastic elements and penetrating realism, *GoT* has built a language that Italian fans described as capable of going beyond the potential barriers of national idioms and the specificities of national cultures.

Conclusions

Television texts have been changing in tandem with changes to the rules of the economic market, and hence the logic of monetization, but also by following paths of experimentation

that have created alternative ways of approaching and experiencing media programs. The notion of 'convergence culture' (Jenkins, 2006) has helped to identify and explain these transformations on both the technological side (multiplication of media platforms, digitalization of media content) and the narrative side (transmedia storytelling). In particular, the concept of transmedia calls attention to the *active* role played by consumers in approaching expanded stories assembled in the guise of convoluted, fictional universes.

In the current media environment, the intertwined processes of audience fragmentation and audience autonomy[28] have increased the complex nature of audience practices. Therefore, it has become more difficult to monitor and trace what it is that people are doing with, and around, media in their lives. Despite this, the audience as an object of study remains of key importance to understanding the developments of globalised society with regards to the relevance of mass media as well as more particularised sociocultural practices.

The purpose of this research has been to understand to what extent audience members from a non-dominant media market (Italy) are involved in these complex fictional storyworlds that TV shows like *Game of Thrones* have become.

In this article, I focused on the analysis of the various ways in which Italian fans of the American TV series *Game of Thrones* watch, engage with and discuss about the show. The HBO popular series has been selected as a case study for the exploration of fans' practices because it represents a significant example of a media text conceived in the form of a transmedia universe. As peculiar media products of the convergence era, transmedia narratives constitute complex fictional universes that allow audience members to have an immersive experience (multiple entry points, different audience engagement levels), quite different from the traditional ways of watching TV programs. *Game of Thrones'* transmedia structure shows all the main characteristics of an enhanced world that transcends the practice of television viewing and by providing its audience with multiple venues of consumption.

The methods employed to collect useful data on viewers' consumption habits were both quantitative (an online survey implemented on the website SurveyMonkey) and qualitative (2 focus groups conducted in the city of Milan in June 2015 with fans of the show). Interesting results emerged from the analysis of both the survey responses and the group discussions, in particular with reference to the level of audience's engagement with the transmedia apparatus of *Game of Thrones*, with the nature of the series' appeal and with the reasons why participants consider themselves as fans of the TV show.

The results of the investigation showed that Italian fans are not particularly fond of, or interested in, the extra material that is offered them by the American producers of the series. They revealed a general knowledge of the games, apps and videos that populate the 'beyond-the-tv-screen' world of *Game of Thrones*, as well as of the merchandise that is available on the HBO website, but they identify this extra material with a specific marketing campaign that American producers constantly try to pursue in order to turn viewers into consumers.

In explaining their attitude and motivations, Italian fans pointed out a significant difference between the Italian and the American society: in the United States, people are more accustomed to a consumerism-driven society in which cultural phenomena *eventually* are converted into the source of a consumption circle; in Italy, on the other hand, people tend to show less interest in the purchasing of items and merchandise, and they see themselves as less dependent on what is offered them by the official producers. This way of thinking challenges Matt Hills' concept of fans as 'ideal consumers' (2002) whose 'consumption habits can be very highly predicted by culture industry, and are likely to remain stable' (p. 5). Indeed, for Italian fans it appears to be more correct to speak of an expression of 'anti-commercial beliefs' (p. 5) toward *those* media products, related to the series, that originate from the official producers. This aspect also calls attention to the importance of cultural perception of a society by another society: it is a complex process that affects, among the other things, the forms in which international media products are classified and accepted, hence consumed.

Italian fans prefer to look for extra material regarding the series on websites like Wikipedia and YouTube, and they do appreciate the sites created by other fans that present extra information on the show (i.e.: development of the story, information on the locations, interviews with the actors/actresses, news regarding cast) or reviews of the single episodes. Italian fans' skepticism toward HBO constitutes a limitation to the engagement of fans with the extensions that structure the transmedia apparatus of *Game of Thrones.* Indeed, they prefer to look for alternative venues of consumption that allow them to find videos, games and websites that are *genuinely* thought and built for the entertainment of the community of fans; the absence of an economic objective in the production and distribution of media content makes this type of content more valuable and enjoyable in the eyes of fans.

In the opinion of the author, the fact that Italian fans are interested in the show itself and repudiate items and content that they know derive from the official producers (who are perceived as profit-makers with a clear agenda), emphasizes their growing independence in identifying and selecting both the media content of preference and the different venues through which searching for it. From this standpoint, official and unofficial media extensions related to the series become all part of a convoluted context in which transmedia storytelling turns into a dynamic concept, a spectrum of possibilities, a plurality of routes that may not fully follow production dictates in the modes of consumption and engagement.

The sense of belonging to a community of individuals that share a common passion emerges as a distinctive trait from the words of Italian fans. *Game of Thrones* is a complex media text that requires a special attention during the viewing process, fosters feelings of identification with the characters and is characterized by a distinctive set of production values. Italian fans consider it a TV show different from all the others; the possibility to discuss about it, especially face-to-face with friends and/or relatives, constitutes, at the same time, a necessity and a desire that translate in the recognition of their role as fans. The same can be said of the habit to watch the new episodes as soon as they come out and are

available on the Internet, of the possession of a wide knowledge of the plot and of the ability to critically reflect on what is shown on the screen. The purchase of merchandise, the participation in cosplay performances, the reunion with friends to play role games based on the storylines of *Game of Thrones* are collateral practices known to Italian fans and in which they engage some times, but do not represent the core elements of their 'being-a-fan' status.

This status emerges more as a subjective condition since for all those who spend time performing at the cosplay reunions as Jon Snow or Robb Stark, or write fanfiction based on the series or produce fanart of other kind, the concept of 'being a fan' falls in a different part of the spectrum that summarizes the differences in the level of fans' engagement. Nevertheless, the adoption of 'fan' as a term that defines a role is neither strictly dependent on the production of user-generated content nor on the active participation in online discussions and/or theatrical performances.

This analysis of the consumption practices of Italian fans of *Game of Thrones* will further develop in a comparative investigation with the New Zealand fans of the same TV series. The main goal of this exploration will be to identify similarities and differences in the modes of consumption so as to find significant patterns of behaviour and to draw conclusions on the main elements that affect the reception, as well as the appropriation, of international media texts.

Biographical note:

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Appendix – Survey Questions:

Questions about the TV shows:
1. Have you watched all the episodes of the seasons of the show so far?
2. Do you watch the show's episodes live on television?

3. If you do not watch the episodes live, how do you watch them?
4. What time do you usually prefer watching the show's episodes?
5. On which platform(s) do you tend to watch the show more often?
6. Do you watch three or more episodes of the series in a single sitting?
7. When you watch the show, is it usually the only thing you are doing?(Tick all that apply)
   - I do not do anything else while watching the show
   - I engage in domestic tasks (cooking, cleaning, etc.)
   - I chat with people offline and/or online
   - I chat with people offline and/or online about the episode I am watching
   - I surf the net
   - I play games
   - Other (please specify)
8. When you watch the show, are you usually engaging with others? (Tick all that apply)
   - No, I watch the episodes by myself
   - Yes, I watch the episodes with my family at home
   - Yes, I watch the episodes with my friends at my house
   - Yes, I watch the episodes with my friends at someone else's house
   - Yes, I watch the episodes with my family/friends who are somewhere else through synchronous viewing on one or more technological devices
   - Yes, I post comments on the official Facebook/Twitter pages of the series about the episode I am watching
9. Do you produce media content related to the series?
10. Do you visit the show's official website?
11. Have you ever downloaded some of the show's applications or played the online games?
12. Do you follow the updates and/or post comments on the official Facebook/Twitter pages of the TV series?
13. Have you ever bought any of the following items: books, DVDs and/or other merchandise that is associated with the show's name?
14. Do you participate in forum discussions about the show?
15. In addition to the viewing of the TV series, have you also read any of George Martin's books?
16. If you said yes, did you start reading the books before or after the TV series aired?

General questions about the people:
1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. Which city or town do you live in?
4. As of right now, what is the highest degree or level of education that you have completed?
5. What is your occupation?
6. Would you be willing to participate to focus group discussions about Game of Thrones?

Notes:

[1] See the abstract at http://cmsw.mit.edu/television-2-0-tv-as-an-engagement-medium/

[2] In *Transmedia Storytelling in Television 2.0,* website:
http://sites.middlebury.edu/mediacp/2009/06/17/the-art-of-worldbuilding/

[3] Jones, Sara Gwenllian, 'Virtual reality and cult television' in Gwenllian-Jones, S and Pearson, R E eds. *Cult Television*, University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

[4] See Duffett 2013, Harrison and Bielby 2005, Hills 2002, Gray and Sandvoss 2005, Jenkins 1992, Sandvoss 2005.

[5] Jenkins' work and that of other scholars like Camille Bacon-Smith (1991) advanced a new perspective on fans and their passions and initiated a course of studies - the so-called 'first wave of fan studies' - that shed a new light on these consumers and their relevance to the discourses on media consumption.

[6] As a general tendency, Italian fans of *Game of Thrones* considered themselves as such for the main reasons that they watch the show regularly, the discuss about it and reflect on what they see in a critical way. They also admitted that other fans can be more engaged in the TV series, which means that, for instance, they can be more active online and dedicate some of their time to creative productions, such as original fan-made material related to the series. The aspect that is of relevance, here, is the awareness expressed by Italian fans regarding the existence of different behaviors and habits that falls under the concept of 'being a fan'. Therefore the word, with regards to its use, emerges as an 'umbrella term' for a set of multiple activities and attitudes.

[7] The formulation of the survey questions draws on the work of Katherine Sender presented in Appendix 1, pp. 205-209 of *The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences,* New York: New York University Press, 2012.

[8] In this article, I will discuss mainly the data that emerged from the focus groups since the quantitative analysis is still an ongoing process. A more comprehensive analysis of the results will be presented in the thesis that the researcher has been currently writing as the final work for her PhD in Media Studies at the University of Auckland (New Zealand).

[9] Mark Andrejevic presents an interesting and critical analysis of fan labor in his article: 'Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans', *Television and New Media* 9:24–46, 2008.

[10] The term 'multimedia' refers to the telling of a story in many forms *via* one channel; 'crossmedia' describes the telling of a story in multiple channels and 'transmedia' identifies with the process of telling many stories, that become parts of an entire storyworld, in many forms and *via* multiple channels.

See: https://transmediajournalism.org/2014/04/21/multimedia-crossmedia-transmedia-whats-in-a-name/ by Kevin Moloney, author of *Transmedia Storytelling in Science Communication: One Subject, Multiple Media, Unlimited Stories,* Springer International Publishing, 2014.

[11] See the description of this game in the 'Results and Discussion' section.

[12] It is important to point out that, when a new *GoT* season is broadcast, the episodes are available only through HBO or its affiliates. People who are not willing to pay for a subscription cannot watch the season through other video-on-demand services, unless they decide to stream it or download it illegally.

[13] This description can be found in *Game of Thrones, Transmedia analysis,* a webpage created for the MA course 'Transmedia Storytelling 1' at Tallinn University Baltic Film and Media School (Estonia) taught by Dr. Reina Rampazzo Gambarato in the Fall Semester 2013. Webpage: https://gameofthronestsanalysis.wordpress.com/

[14] See https://transmediajournalism.org/2014/04/21/multimedia-crossmedia-transmedia-whats-in-a-name/ by Kevin Moloney.

[15] For a more detailed description of the concept of world-building, I would recommend the book by Mark J.P. Wolf *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012). At the following blog is possible to find an introduction, in the form of an interview between Henry Jenkins and Mark J. P. Wolf, to the concepts of 'sub-creation' and 'primary' vs 'secondary' worlds:
http://henryjenkins.org/2013/09/building-imaginary-worlds-an-interview-with-mark-j-p-wolf-part-one.html.

[16] In 'Stranger than fiction: Fan identity in cosplay', Nicolle Lamerichs explains the 'cosplay' phenomenon in the following way: 'The term cosplaying was coined in the 1980s by the game designer Takahashi Nobuyuki when he encountered the costuming practices of American fans on a visit to the United States (Bruno 2002; Winge 2006, 66–67). […] When cosplaying, fans of popular culture (e.g., television series, games, movies) produce their own costumes inspired by fictional characters. Fan costumes involve four elements: a narrative, a set of clothing, a play or performance before spectators, and a subject or player. […] Fan costumes are just one example of how fans express their affection for existing stories and rework them through various media. Like fan fiction, fan movies, and fan art, cosplay motivates fans to closely interpret existing texts, perform them, and extend them with their own narratives and ideas'. Lamerichs, Nicolle, 'Stranger than fiction: Fan identity in cosplay', in *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 7, 2011.

[17] All the English translations of the transcriptions are mine. At this stage, the quotes from the focus groups have been selected according to their relevance with reference to the trend under discussion. The analysis presented in this article is based on a first set of categories (i.e.: modes of consumption, identity building process, fan practices) whose elaboration constitutes the result of a methodological approach that refers to the 'grounded theory' (see Glaser, Barney G. and Strauss, Anselm L., *Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 1999, ISBN 1-884156-13-4). A more detailed system of categories, fundamental for re-grouping and analysing the collected data, will be implemented and employed once the ongoing data production with the New Zealand fans of the series is completed.

[18] Quite significantly, this participant turned out to be one of the group leaders during the focus group discussions, a fan capable of thoughtful considerations and critical analysis both on the show's complexity and on his ways of approaching and relating to the series as well.

[19] Almost the totality of participants were up to date with their viewing schedule at the time the research was carried out.

[20] Definition of 'spoiler' from the Oxford Dictionary: 'A description of an important plot development in a television show, film, or book which if previously known may reduce surprise or suspense for a first-time viewer or reader'.

[21] During the focus groups, some participants admitted that they actually enjoy to spoiler online (for instance, on Facebook) on purpose, but this behaviour did not emerge as the general attitude.

[22] It is possible to find a detailed description of the game at the official website:
http://www.seriangolo.it/2015/03/fanta-game-of-thrones-5-come-funziona/

[23] 'As hard-core fans navigate the nuances of a world, casual fans can imagine a vast expanse (hyperdiegesis) without having to explore it further. It is the same logic as many role-playing games: hard-core fans can get the full experience by following every side mission, while casual fans can focus on the main quest and see how the primary story unfolds', in *Transmedia Storytelling in*

Television 2.0 (website: http://sites.middlebury.edu/mediacp/2009/06/17/the-art-of-worldbuilding/).

[24] Two Italian TV series that have received critical acclaim and have been loved by the audience for their remarkable narratives are *Romanzo Criminale – La Seri*e and *Gomorra*, both broadcasted on SKY. They both tell mafia stories and depict controversial characters involved in criminal acts. For the type of production, the storylines, the settings and the visual style, both the series have been compared to the best American TV productions.

[25] In the article '*Game of Thrones:* Quality television and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification' (2014), Dan Hassler-Forest explains the construction of authenticity in the TV series: *'Game of Thrones*' discursive authenticity […] is […] visible in its uncompromising dedication to premium cable's familiar kind of 'most objectionable programming' involving sex and violence. While distancing itself from popular perceptions of the supposedly infantile fantasy genre, *Game of Thrones* offers value to those […] who continuously seek out novel but crucially 'authentic' experiences, and who of course also happen to make up HBO's most desirable audience' https://tvseries.revues.org/323.

[26] During the focus group discussions, some participants expressed their acceptance with regards to all the terrible acts and events that take place in the world of *GoT* since, for them, they are justified by the realistic representation of a Middle Age-ish world where rape, murder and torture are essential attributes of its society.

[27] Among the male figures, two of the most popular characters for the majority of fans are Jon Snow and Tyrion Lannister:

> Jon Snow is one of my favourite characters and... I can't believe it, for me he is not dead, it did not really happen!

> I like Tyrion because he makes me laugh a lot!

> I do like Jon Snow and Tyrion, the second one because he is very straightforward.

[28] See Napoli, Philip, M., *Audience Evolution: New technologies and the transformation of media audiences,* New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011.